Monochrome Duet

by Solid_Shark

Summary

After the brutal 25th Floor Boss Raid, Asuna has left Kirito's side to join the Knights of Blood. With his partner gone, Kirito resigns himself to returning to the life of a solo player—until a familiar face from the lower floors unexpectedly reenters his life. The strangely-human NPC Kizmel, despite her quest being over, has returned to his side...
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The Twenty-Sixth Floor was as close to a literal breath of fresh air as Kirito was going to find in Aincrad's digital environment, he thought. The Twenty-Fifth had largely consisted of cave systems, from the side dungeons to the towns; even the labyrinth had been a very rocky, rough-hewn place. All in all, it had been one of the more oppressive floors the clearing group had fought through so far.

By contrast, the Twenty-Sixth was a mountainous floor, and even with the maximum height of one hundred meters, that was still a fair distance to fall from at the peaks. Most of what Kirito had seen so far was up near those peaks, too; as far as he could tell, very little of import on this floor lay in the narrow, treacherous valleys. The town closest to the entrance from the floor below, for certain, was built on the slope of one of those mountains.

Now, just a day after the floor was first opened, Kirito was perched in a guard tower at the outskirts of the town, Skirloft. Situated near the mountain's peak, about seventy-five meters up by his estimate, it seemed built for a pair of guards; he imagined, in the lore, it was probably to guard against attacks by the wyverns that were said to live in the northern part of the floor. There was even a large torch that looked like it could be lit as a warning signal.

For two, it would've been a little snug. For one tired swordsman, it was more than enough space. He sat on the windowsill, uncaring of the long drop below, and tried to let the spectacular view distract him from everything that had happened the previous day.

It wasn't working as well as Kirito would've liked. The giant spider that had served as the boss of the previous floor had been a surprisingly difficult foe; the increase in difficulty over the one immediately before had been greater than the clearers had expected from prior experience. Kirito had fought in every Floor Boss Raid up to now, but The Adamantine Arachnid had been by far the worst.

Eight dead in the reinforcements, and most of the rest halfway there by the end, he thought wearily, watching as the sun sank into view below the disc of the next floor. And that was after what happened to the Army. No wonder they retreated after that.

Kirito didn't like the cactus-haired leader of the Army, Kibaou. There was too much bad blood between them, dating back to the first Floor Boss and the origin of the term “Beater”. Even still, he had some small measure of respect for the man's courage, and they did tend to work well enough together when it came time for boss raids. With the losses the former Aincrad Liberation Squad had taken, he didn't blame Kibaou at all for pulling back to the lower floors.

Even if it was partly his own fault, none of them deserved that.

That didn't make him any happier about what came after. He had nothing respect for Heathcliff, the powerful, unflappable knight who had joined him in holding the line against The Adamantine Arachnid, and that respect extended to the man's efforts in the wake of the battle. Respect didn't fill the void left after the formation of the Knights of Blood, though. It didn't change the fact that, for the first time in six months, he could only see one HP bar in the corner of his vision.
I should be happy, Kirito thought. It's what I've been saying she should do for months now. I am proud of what she's accomplished. But still...

Other players were out exploring the new floor still, checking every nook and cranny, satisfying themselves that despite the latest boss' difficulty spike, this floor's enemies followed the normal curve. Argo, he was sure, was already hard at work dealing in information for her next guide. Normally, he'd even be one of her sources, hurling himself right into the exploration.

Today, he'd decided to give himself the day off. His heart just wasn't in it.

Kirito wasn't sure how long he spent brooding on that windowsill, looking out over the moments. He vaguely noticed it was nearing dark, but he was too lost in his own thoughts to pay much attention; he didn't particularly expect to be disturbed, anyway. Even if someone else stumbled on this guard post, no one was likely to want to talk to the original Beater, of all—

“I knew you did not like crowds, Kirito, but isn't this a little out of the way, even for you?”

Startled, he nearly tumbled right out the window, doubtless to have his name on the Monument of Life crossed out and underwritten with “Death by Falling”; truly, an ignominious end for the most infamous beta tester. Only his visitor's quick reflexes, catching the collar of his ubiquitous black longcoat in one armored hand and hauling him back, saved his life.

Breathing fast, heart rate high enough he was sure alarms were going off on the medical equipment monitoring his real body, Kirito fell onto the stone bench that ran along the interior walls of the guard post. Then, and only then, did he get a look at who had saved—and nearly ended—his life, and the sight was enough make him start in surprise a second time.

Chuckling, his visitor shook her head. “Honestly, Kirito,” she said, sitting down across from him and resting her elbows on the table in between, “you can find me when I'm invisible, but when I come up in full view, making enough noise to attract every monster on this floor, you don't notice me coming? I thought your senses were sharper than that.”

Kirito stared openly. The dark skin, lilac hair, and pointed ears were features he wasn't likely to forget any time soon; she was even still wearing her distinctive dark metal armor, and the Mistmoon Cloak he knew could hide her completely from view at certain hours.

“K-Kizmel…?”

He knew that face well enough, certainly. He just hadn't expected to see her here, seventeen floors above her kingdom's capital.

Kizmel smiled. “It's been a while, Kirito. I am glad to see you are doing well.”

The Dark Elven Royal Guard, Kizmel. Member of the Pagoda Knights of the Kingdom of Lyusula, she had been a steadfast companion for Kirito and Asuna both, when they were clearing the Elf War quest chain, supporting them with her incredible skill with a sword in battle, and sound advice and moral support outside it.

She was also an NPC, and by far the most confusing one Kirito had ever encountered. Based on his experiences in the beta test, Kizmel shouldn't have even survived the opening event of the quest; not only had she lived this time, but she'd proven to have a stunning degree of intelligence and autonomy for an NPC, to the point where Kirito had once doubted she was truly AI at all.

Subsequent events had reassured him that she wasn't secretly an ally of Kayaba Akihiko controlling
an NPC avatar to toy with players, but even now Kirito was no closer to understanding Kizmel's nature than he had been back when he first met her, six months before.

Eventually, he'd decided it didn't really matter. AI or no, she'd become his friend, and he'd be lying if he claimed he wasn't glad to see her, however strange the circumstances. Besides, by now I should be used to her doing the unexpected, he thought wryly. Right back to the time she followed me clear into a strategy meeting in town…

“‘It's good to see you, too, Kizmel,” Kirito said honestly, relaxing into the bench as his heart rate finally began to slow. “But, um—I didn't expect to see you this far up. I don't remember seeing any spirit trees for a few floors now.” Actually, what he was really wondering was how she'd gotten into town at all. He'd have expected the NPC guards to attack her on sight; it wasn't yet dark enough for her to have hidden under her cloak.

There was a quiet clank of armor as Kizmel shrugged. “The trees may be an easier route, Kirito, but it is not as if we elves cannot use the Pillars of the Heavens. It took me a couple of extra days, that's all. And before you ask, the local guards have no reason to take issue now. They were only ever on guard against my people because of the War, and with that over…”

That made a certain amount of sense, Kirito supposed. It was a little odd, since the Elf War technically began again any time a player attempted the quest, but he realized it was possible Kizmel, as an apparently unique NPC, might have received a unique status when the players involved in her particular instance of the quest completed it. It was certainly no less plausible than several of the other things that had occurred around her.

“So,” Kizmel went on, “I made my way to the current front line, on the assumption that you and Asuna would still be in the lead.” Pausing, she glanced around the guard post's meager interior, looking mildly puzzled. “Speaking of, where is Asuna? Is she off getting supplies?”

Kirito winced, feeling the depression that had led him to that isolated spot come rushing back. “… No, she's… she's not with me now.”

Her brow furrowed in a worried frown. “She isn't? Is she alright?”

“She's fine,” he assured her quickly. “It's just… we're not a party anymore. Not since yesterday's clearing battle. Um… it's kind of a long story…”

Reaching under her cloak, Kizmel pulled out a leather skin that Kirito thought looked familiar. Impulse led him to bring up his menu, skim through the inventory, and materialize a pair of cups, which she then filled from the skin. “Moontear wine,” she said, pushing one of the cups over to him. “I'm sure you remember it. I was hoping to share a drink with you and Asuna… So, what happened?”

Kirito took a long sip of the wine, not surprised this time by the bite of alcohol that accompanied the sweet and sour taste. “Have you heard anything about yesterday's boss fight?” he began, gazing down into his cup.

“Only what I could overhear from some of the Swordsmasters I passed on my way here,” Kizmel replied, nursing her own drink. “Most humans still are not very comfortable around me, though I suppose my people are something of an unusual sight in human towns… I did hear that it was a difficult battle.”

He nodded. “We lost eight people,” he said quietly. “Almost lost a lot more. For awhile, it was down to Asuna, a knight called Heathcliff, and me, while the rest healed up and tried to regroup. And that
wasn't even the worst. You remember Kibaou and his group, right?"

She nodded, her small, rueful smile showing she remembered the cactus-haired clearer's abrasive personality well enough. “Guildmaster Kibaou is a difficult person to forget, yes. A very headstrong man, as I recall.”

“You can say that again.” Kirito sipped at the wine, using it to try and hold back the cold memories of the previous day's battle. “This time, it just about got him killed. He got some advance information on the boss, and he launched a raid without the rest of the clearing group.”

Kizmel grimaced. “That strikes me as… ill-advised. It's been some time since I was last among your people, Kirito, but I do not recall Kibaou's group being large enough to mount such an operation by themselves.”

“They were actually close to it, by then.” His gaze turned to the window, looking out at the setting sun. “Not anymore, though. They went in with forty people, against what they thought was going to be a two-headed giant with simple attacks. What they got was a giant, armored spider, stronger than anything we’d ever run into.” Kirito shivered. “By the time the rest of the clearing group found out Kibaou had even gone, and went after… Well. There weren't even twenty of them left. We lost eight more just finishing the job.”

She listened silently, with a patient stillness that wasn't quite like a normal NPC. “I cannot say I ever had any particular fondness for Guildmaster Kibaou,” the elf said finally, voice soft. “But I would not wish such losses on him, either. Do you know why his information was so flawed?”

“I wish we did, but no.” Kirito sighed, turning his attention back to his drink and companion. “It might've been a rumor from a local that didn't pan out… or it might've been outright false info. All Kibaou said after was that the guild member who got the tip in the first place was one of the casualties in the battle. We may never know for sure.” He took a sip, lifting his free hand palm-up. “They've gone back down to the lower floors, now, to regroup; honestly, I don't know if they'll ever come back up.”

“Heavy losses can do that to a unit,” Kizmel mused. “But that leaves a large hole in your clearing group, right? I don't imagine that Lind's Dragon Knights can carry the load by themselves.”

Kirito snorted at that. Lind and his guild were skilled, no doubt, and he'd never try to downplay their contributions to clearing Aincrad. Even so, he couldn't deny that Lind's attempts at taking Diavel's place as “leader” of the clearing group as a whole had never worked out very well.

“No,” he said now, putting aside memories of Lind and his attempts at dictating to Kirito on the matter of guild membership. “From how that battle turned out, I think Heathcliff is going to be as close to a true leader as we're going to get, and he's forming a new guild to do it with.” He hesitated, and downed the rest of his glass to buy himself a few moments; Kizmel immediately refilled it without comment. “Asuna ended up calling the shots for most of the others in the last part of the battle, and she did it pretty well. So… Heathcliff asked her to be his second-in-command in the Knights of Blood.”

Kizmel nodded, very slowly. “She accepted.”

“Yeah.”

It wasn't a betrayal, by any means. Kirito couldn't even say she was abandoning him. After all, he'd advised her to do exactly that, just after their first boss battle together. He wasn't exactly in a position to complain that she'd finally taken that advice—especially when it was obvious she really would do
a great job helping to lead the KoB. It wasn't like they wouldn't see each other now, either; she might be busy right now with forming the new guild, but at least he knew she'd be up to her neck in the next boss fight.

It still wasn't the same.

When the silence seemed to drag on too long, Kirito coughed into his hand. “Well,” he said, trying to force some cheer into his voice, “it's not like I've never been solo before. Actually, I never was part of any long-term party before I teamed up with Asuna, so this is pretty normal for me.” From the frown that returned to Kizmel's face, he could tell she wasn't buying it, so he hurried on, “So, er, what brings you up here, Kizmel? I thought your Queen said…” He thought back to the last time he'd talked with Kizmel, at the conclusion of the Elf War. “…I thought she said she had other duties for you…?”

“That was four months ago, Kirito,” Kizmel pointed out. She leaned back against the bench, her expression suggesting the previous topic wasn't over yet. “Lyusula's borders have been quiet since the War. It appears that this peace really is going to last—which leaves the Pagoda Knights with little to do. Honestly?” She smiled, looking just a little sheepish. “I was bored, Kirito. Fending off the occasional attack by weak monsters simply wasn't enough for me to keep my edge.”

*Can an AI even get bored?* Kirito managed to choke off the question before he actually said it aloud. In the first place, it wasn't like she'd understand it, and in the second, it would be downright rude.

Instead, he said, “So you came to check on how the clearing was going?”

“I came to check on you,” she corrected, pausing to take a small drink of her wine. Unlike him, she was still on her first glass. “You and Asuna, I mean. More precisely, I asked if the Queen might be able to spare me for a time, given how placid the Kingdom's borders have become, and she granted me leave to pursue my own goals, until and unless I'm needed at home.”

“What goals?” Kirito asked, honestly curious. As strangely lifelike as Kizmel had been, for as long as he'd known her, her actions had still generally been in relation to the quest line he knew from the beta. At the end of it, she'd even stayed in her people's capital, as might be expected of a quest NPC whose role had ended. He'd never once heard her talk of any goals outside that quest.

*Except,* he remembered suddenly, *when she talked about those dreams she had, the ones that sounded like they were from my experiences in the beta…*

“I had intended to join you and Asuna again,” Kizmel said, with a shrug and a smile. “I thought we made a good team, back then, and there's still much I want to talk with you about. As it is… I suppose Asuna has all the support she needs, now. But you, Kirito, look like someone in need of a partner. Will I do?”

Kirito stared blankly at her. “Um… You do know I'm involved in clearing the, er, Pillars, right? I'm not going to be going near Dark Elf territory much anytime soon…” *Stupid question! But she can't actually mean—I know she suggested it before, when I was trying to keep the ALS and DKB from killing each other, but I always thought that was just a bluff she and Asuna were running—and that bit on the Fourth Floor was Viscount Yofilis' way of paying us back for helping his castle, not something they'd do normally—*

“Of course,” she said casually. “I know the risks, Kirito, but it is not as if I have not done anything dangerous before. You do remember how we met, don't you?”

Vividly. Given his experiences in the beta, he'd fully expected her to die there, and *still* didn't fully
understand why she hadn't.

“So,” she continued, “unless you think your human comrades will object, I'd like to offer my help in unifying the Pillars of Heaven.” Kizmel met his gaze, dark eyes serious. “I want to travel with you again, Kirito. Especially now, if you do not even have Asuna's support any longer. You helped my people; it is my turn to help yours.”

Kirito swallowed, thought for a moment, then swallowed again, this time moontear wine. He'd just been psyching himself up to return to being the solo he'd been before Asuna collided with his life. He was used to being alone; he'd never understood other people well, especially girls. Especially NPC girls who didn't act like NPCs.

He'd also never been good with words. The combination, as the various parts of his body that had encountered Asuna's fists, feet, and elbows could attest, could be a very painful one.

Yet… Kirito couldn't deny, on one level, sheer curiosity, having never yet figured out what made Kizmel so different from other NPCs. He couldn't deny, either, that there were a lot of advantages to having even one person to watch his back, from the use of Switching to simply having someone who could heal him. He did still have the fear that had led him to abandon Klein at the very beginning, that had led him to try and push Asuna away, but after months of working together, in which the worst hadn't happened…

More than that, he thought. I… He could hardly bring himself to complete the thought; he couldn't quite force words out, choking up as he all too often did when it really counted.

“If there's something you want to say, now's the time to do it, while you can…”

That voice out of memory jolted Kirito out of his paralysis, and he finally mustered a hesitant but real smile. “I'd like that, Kizmel,” he forced out, past the lump in his throat. “I'd like that a lot.” On reflex, before he could stop himself, he manipulated his menu to send a party invite.

Belatedly, Kirito remembered that as an NPC, it wouldn't work quite that way for Kizmel. To his surprise, though, she smiled, lifted one finger, and pressed an immaterial button in the air; as if it really had been another player, her lifebar promptly appeared beneath his in one corner of his vision.

Smiling wider at the look on his face, she said, “Did you think I have done nothing but guard gates for months, Kirito? I've learned a little of your Mystic Scribing while you were away; I hope to learn more as we journey together.”

Kirito would've really liked to know how she managed to “learn” part of a player's user interface. Right then, right there, though, he decided it wasn't really important. “Let's see what we can do, then,” he said, feeling more cheerful than he had since before people started dying against the The Adamantine Arachnid. “A pleasure working with you again, Kizmel.”

“Likewise, my friend.” Kizmel lifted her glass toward him, still smiling. “Although—what if someone does object? Kibaou may have left the front line, but I seem to remember Lind was not exactly your greatest supporter, either.”

He grinned. “Honestly? I'm kind of looking forward to seeing how people react. I'd like to see them try to complain about this one!”

Two plain glasses clinked together as if they were flagons of ale, and suddenly the deepening twilight didn't feel so unfriendly. Kirito had forgotten—he'd been acquainted with the night before, and he'd never felt better, or safer, than during that time.
Night had truly fallen, by the time Kirito and Kizmel left that guard tower behind, returning to Skirloft proper. Most players had turned in for the night, getting some rest before heading back out again in the morning to map the mountain trails; only a handful wandered Skirloft’s sloped streets, taking care of last-minute preparations for the next day.

Kirito had done most of that the previous night, and hadn’t expended any items today, so he ignored the NPC vendors entirely. Instead he led Kizmel toward the other edge of town, where he’d found a cheap, out of the way inn some distance from where most of the clearers were staying.

Away from the large inn that the KoB was currently organizing itself in, in particular.

Along the way, they did get some odd looks from other players, and Kirito heard more than one mutter about “Beaters” as they passed, but he was long since used to that. The hysteria had mostly died down months before, but being trailed by an obvious NPC—and a strong one, as anyone could tell just by looking at her cursor—was bound to stir up some of the old resentment.

It didn’t matter. Even if anyone had been insane enough to try anything—which Kibaou at his absolute worst wouldn’t have, he was fairly sure, given Kizmel’s elite status—they were still inside the town. Words were the only weapon they had, here.

Kirito was pleasantly surprised when a couple of passing Dragon Knights did a collective double-take, then just waved a cheerful greeting. They had never gotten to know Kirito or his party very well, none of them had, but they remembered Kizmel from the lower floors, and things had turned out reasonably amicable then.

_I wonder what they’ll think when we turn up for the boss strategy meeting, though?_ Kirito thought, giving a polite nod in return. _We did once threaten to take on a Floor Boss all by ourselves, after all._

Maybe it would at least keep Lind from making any snide remarks about joining a guild. The DKB leader hadn’t bothered him about that in some time, but with Asuna having joined the KoB, Kirito had suspected Lind would bring it up again…

“So, Lind is still leading his Dragon Knights?” Kizmel asked, about halfway to the inn.

Kirito nodded. “They’ve gotten bigger lately, though. They call themselves the Divine Dragons Alliance, now.” He shrugged. “Kinda pretentious, if you ask me, but they’re still good fighters. Though Lind had as much trouble as anyone keeping it together when yesterday’s battle went bad…”

“Thus Asuna taking charge.” Kizmel nodded to herself. “I suppose I am not surprised. I always thought he did well enough holding his own guild together, but he didn’t seem up to commanding a coalition. I remember when his Dragon Knights and Kibaou’s ALS almost came to blows, back on the Third Floor.”

“Yeah. I don’t know much about this Heathcliff guy yet, but he’s definitely better at keeping people calm than Lind or Kibaou ever managed.” Admittedly, the situation in question had been deliberately set up by the mysterious Morte, but Lind’s self-righteousness clashing with Kibaou’s over-active sense of fair play had already been a problem. The manipulative player had only taken advantage of problems there were already there.

Kirito was about to say more on the subject, but now they’d reached the inn—and he abruptly realized he hadn’t thought of one little complication. With his depression mostly cleared up by Kizmel’s arrival, fatigue had hit him like a truck, and getting a good night’s sleep had been uppermost in his mind. With Asuna, there had been a simple routine, worked out over the course of several
floors and a few mild cases of domestic violence.

With Kizmel…

“Uh, Kizmel?” he began nervously. “Can you even get a room at a human inn?”

The elf shrugged. “I don’t know that they’d accept my currency,” Kizmel admitted. “My people have free travel through human towns again, but our Queen was still working out some of the details, when I left the capital. It shouldn’t be a problem, though; it is not as if this would be the first time we shared lodgings, Kirito.”

Erk. Well, yes, he and Asuna had shared Kizmel's tent for most of the time they’d spent on the Third Floor, but Asuna had been there as a buffer. Or chaperone, from the way she acted! The one time she wasn’t there to make sure nothing happened, Kizmel actually—

Kirito forced the memory of a case of culture clash away from his mind’s eye, but not in time to prevent a blush. Probably complete with steam coming out of his ears, if he knew Aincrad's emotional expression system. Even with the conditions Kayaba had placed on the players, he dearly loved Aincrad, but the utter inability to conceal emotions could be a real pain sometimes.

Whether there was literal steam or not, Kizmel clearly caught his reaction, even with his face carefully turned away. “It’s all right, Kirito. I know you will be a perfect gentleman. I trust you.”

It’s not my behavior I’m worried about here!

“Oh, relax,” she said, chuckling. “I have learned some things about human culture, Kirito, even if I do still find many of them strange. I won’t do anything… indiscreet.”

Why, exactly, didn’t he find that reassuring? Not that there was anything he could do about it at this stage; they were at the inn, and it was just too late in the day—night, now—for it to be practical to work out any alternative. All he could do was trust that Kizmel really had come to understand human standards of decorum.

And that she cares, Kirito added to himself, leading the way into the unprepossessing stone building. I still think that first bath incident wasn’t just an “accident”. She’s a quick enough study, she knew how Asuna would've taken it even then…

He really didn't understand girls. Human or AI, they strained his already limited social skills to the breaking point. Kizmel’s assurances aside, he had a distinct feeling of impending doom, and he was sure it was connected somehow. There was some critical detail he was forgetting, and it was going to come back and bite him, he was sure of it.

So far, so good. …Why does that make me more nervous?

A lot of the inns Kirito had stayed in over the months he'd been in SAO had only had one bed to a room, which had occasionally caused some awkwardness. This one, to his relief, followed a standard he remembered from old-style offline RPGs, with two beds in an ostensibly single room. When he'd rented the room the previous day, he hadn’t thought anything of it; now, he was grateful. At least he wouldn't have to worry about working out which of them got to sleep comfortably.

So far, Kizmel had also been true to her word, having only removed her cloak and armor, leaving her—relatively—modest tights and tunic. He still hadn't been able to keep himself from glancing curiously in her direction, but at least there hadn't been enough exposed to make things too awkward.
From the small smile on her face, though, he could tell she knew exactly what he was thinking about. Kirito only hoped she wouldn't tease him over it. For a supposed NPC, Kizmel's sense of humor could be dangerously mischievous.

For now, though, she seemed willing to let him off the hook. Stretching out on one of the beds, she rested her head on her hands, looking utterly relaxed. Far more so than Kirito was, certainly. “This town seems a bit rough,” she mused aloud. “At least the buildings. It feels like it was carved, not built.”

“It’s not as nice as the Forest of Wavering Mists,” Kirito agreed, flopping gracelessly onto the other bed. He’d removed his longcoat and boots, but otherwise was no more inclined than Kizmel to go further, under the circumstances. At least, he hoped she wasn't inclined to. “I think it's better than the last floor, though.”

“Too much of it was underground, from what I saw on my way through,” she said, nodding. “I wasn't there for very long, but it did have a very oppressive feeling after a while. Still… This is not the worst place we have ever spent the night. Remember Torania?”

Kirito grimaced. “That was… the Seventh Floor, wasn't it? Yeah. I remember Asuna complaining we'd drown just trying to find the labyrinth.” Their avatars couldn't feel pain, exactly, though strong enough blows could be disorienting enough he thought their minds filled in what they expected to feel. Climate extremes were another matter, and the jungles of the Seventh Floor had been way too humid.

Not to mention the mosquitoes. I think Kayaba was feeling extra-sadistic when he set up that floor. Giant, swarming, hyper-aggressive mosquitoes, they'd been, and they'd made the one night their party had to sleep in the field miserable. It had been in a safe zone, so the oversized bugs hadn't actually been able to reach them, but the noise… Kirito had spent the entire night wishing for bug spray and mosquito netting.

It was also probably the only floor so far that had made him regret his policy of sticking to dark leather armor. Fighting the giant, land-dwelling piranha that had been the Floor Boss had been a relief after the journey just to reach it; even the swarm of dog-sized piranha that had accompanied it had seemed a small price to pay for just getting it over with.

“I have tried to stay away from jungles since, myself,” Kizmel said ruefully. “I enjoy a good bath, but not while wearing armor. I suspect these mountains will be more agreeable for both of us. The air up here is refreshing. Although,” she added, turning head toward him, “the wyverns probably feel the same, and will not take kindly to interlopers.”

Kirito shrugged. “So everything will be trying to eat us. What else is new?”

She chuckled. “There is truth in that. If we can avoid too much conflict with our fellow warriors, I can face dragons well enough. I assume you've kept up your training as well as I have?”

“Of course.” Level-grinding was life for any gamer, much less one in SAO. The only reason Kirito had been willing to risk taking this one day off, gloomy mood or not, was that he was a little ahead of the curve even among clearers. Even without Kizmel's unexpected reappearance, he'd have gone right back to it the next day.

“In that case, we should both get some rest now. Tomorrow will be a busy day, Kirito.”

Watching out of the corner of his eye as Kizmel shifted to get under her blankets, Kirito heaved a discreet sigh of relief. For all his sense of having forgotten something important, it looked like he'd at
least get through the night without anything hideously embarrassing happening. Tomorrow he'd see what could be done about getting more suitable lodgings for the two of them—

A knock at the door interrupted his own efforts at getting ready for sleep, and he froze. *How many people would even know I'm here? Asuna must still be busy, Kibaou never came up to this floor at all, I can't imagine Lind coming to find me, and I barely even talk to anybody else, so who—?* Wait. ...Uh-oh.

The knock repeated, this time in a specific pattern Kirito remembered from arrangements on the very first floor. “Oi, Kii-bou! You still awake? I know you're here!”

*That* was what he'd forgotten. No wonder he'd felt like doom was coming ever closer all evening. *I must have been out of it if I didn't think this would happen... What the hell do I do now?!!*

Another, more emphatic repetition of the knock, and Kizmel looked over at him, one eyebrow lifted. “Are you going to let her in, Kirito? She seems... insistent.”

He considered, very briefly, leaping out the window and taking his chances that way. He'd almost done exactly that once before, and thought in retrospect it would've been a safer choice all around. But no; when he hurried over to check, he realized that to try it here would be suicide. The inn was situated right at the edge of town, and by extension at the edge of a cliff. He could no more survive that drop than the one he'd almost suffered at the guard post.

*I could just ignore it—no, no, if I do, she'll just track me down tomorrow and wonder why I was hiding. Hiding anything from her just doesn't work.*

Swallowing, Kirito went to the door, mentally prepared himself for humiliation—or tried to—and opened it. “Hi, Argo,” he said, trying not to sound too nervous. “What brings you here tonight?”

Face mostly concealed by her trademark hood, he could still make out the ever-present grin and equally-trademark whisker markings of Argo the Rat. “Looking for you, of course, Kii-bou! What, you thought I wouldn't hear about what happened yesterday? I thought you might be lonely, so I—”

Kirito didn't like the way she broke off, but he couldn't claim to be surprised by it. No matter what, Argo was going to realize he wasn't actually alone, so he wasn't even really irritated that Kizmel had slipped out of bed to join him by the door. “Good evening, Argo,” she said, inclining her head. “It has been some time.”

Argo's eyebrows climbed toward her hairline. “Kizmel-chan? Well, well, Kii-bou! Gotta admit, ya surprised me this time. I figured you'd be alone, with Aa-chan off helping start the KoB, but here you've got Kizmel-chan back, sharing your room? How'd you pull *that* off?”

He thought he was going to spontaneously combust, as Argo pushed past him to sit casually on his bed. “Hey, Argo, it's not—”

Kizmel raised a hand, cutting him off. “I do not mind explaining, Argo,” she said, returning to her own bed. “Although if you're hoping to make money off the information, you may be disappointed. I doubt the tale is of much interest to other Swordmasters.”

“Maybe not,” Argo conceded, looking not at all subdued. “But you know me, I can't resist a good story. So c'mon, give! What brings you this far up, Kizmel-chan?” She grinned, an expression Kirito found not at all reassuring. “And more importantly, what brings you to Kii-bou's bedroom?”

In that instant, he knew what the value of the information was. Kizmel's unique nature meant her status was unlikely to be worthwhile to other players—but her presence *here* was excellent blackmail
material, in certain circles.

Yep. I'm dead. Especially if she sells the story to Asuna. I should have just jumped out the window. It'd hurt less…

After Kizmel had finished her story, she stood, stretched, and headed for a door set in the wall a couple of meters offset from the one leading out into the hall. This far above the First Floor of Aincrad, amenities such as bathrooms were becoming more common even for regular inns—if you knew which ones to look for. Kirito had selected one such out of habit, despite Asuna no longer traveling with him.

“Argo's questions reminded me I should wash up before bed,” Kizmel said over her shoulder. “The journey through the labyrinth did work up a sweat. You two can catch up while I'm gone—unless you would rather join me, Kirito? It would be more efficient…”

Kirito was still sputtering, red-faced, when she chuckled and disappeared through the door.

When coherent speech did return to return to him, he covered his face with one hand. “She promised she wouldn't do anything like that this time…”

Argo's eyebrows went up. “Oho? You mean this isn't the first time, Kii-bou?” She grinned; not a pleasant sight, from his point of view. “Ya ever take her up on it?”

“No on purpose,” he said without thinking. Then, realizing what he'd just implied, he buried his face in both hands. “Please, Argo. Don't tell Asuna I said that? I escaped with my life at the time, and it was a near thing then. What she doesn't know, she won't hurt me over.”

“Can't make that promise, Kii-bou. You know me: any information that's worth selling, I'll sell. But,” Argo added, raising one finger, “I only sell if somebody's buying. If she doesn't ask, you're safe.” Before he could feel any relief at that, her grin returned. “Course, Aa-chan is bound to be curious when you turn up with Kizmel-chan for the boss meeting. Who knows what she might ask then?”

Kirito groaned, sliding down the wall he'd been leaning against to sit on the floor, suddenly weary and once again feeling a sense of impending doom. I don't get it. I didn't even really know any girls except Sugu before SAO; now I've got three hanging around, and all of them trying to complicate my life. What did I do to deserve this?

Times like this, it wasn't just guilt that made him regret leaving Klein in the City of Beginnings. He was sure life would be easier if he had more guys to hang around with; as it was, Agil was about the only one among the clearers who wasn't either hostile or condescending, barring the aloof Heathcliff. Among actual players, it seemed people like Asuna and Argo were the only ones crazy enough to want to chat with the infamous “Beater”.

Seeming to take pity on him—not that he trusted the change in attitude for a second—Argo flopped back on Kirito's bed, resting her head on her hands. “Jokes aside, Kii-bou,” she said more seriously, “how are you doing? I was worried when I heard about how that last boss went, y'know. And then when word got around about the Knights of Blood and their fast-as-lightning sub-commander, well… You'd been together for a long time, after all.”

“If you'd asked me a couple hours ago, I'd have said I was fine. And you'd have known I was lying,” he admitted, lifting his head. “I'm still not happy about it, I'll admit, but… I was the one who told her she should join a guild in the first place, back when we defeated Illfang. How could I complain about her taking my advice, especially after she showed the whole clearing group just how good she'd be at it?”
Argo rolled her eyes. “Like it'd be the first time you did something 'cause it was right, not 'cause you were happy about it? I know you didn't want to be 'the' Beater, Kii-bou, but you did it anyway.” Her mouth twitched in a warmer, less teasing smile. “Probably saved a lot of lives, y'know.”

“I hope so.” By the time the First Floor had been cleared, their best estimate was that nearly half of the eight hundred or so beta testers that had entered the full game had died. Kirito's desperate gamble to draw the ire of the likes of Kibaou on himself and away from the other testers had prevented the overt witch hunts he'd been afraid of, but there was no way to be sure there hadn't been more subtle efforts afterward.

So far, he'd only heard of MPKs, with no direct player-killing reported. Those were just as bad, though, and what Morte had once attempted on him proved there were those willing to dirty their hands personally.

“You did, Kii-bou. I know you saved mine. So,” Argo went on, shifting gears, “let me tell you what I think happened: seeing as you didn't bother to ask me for info about the new floor yet—don't think I didn't notice, Kii-bou—I think you found someplace to hide and lick your wounds for a couple days, right? Maybe that guard tower on the other end of town? Thought so. That was the first place I checked, but you were gone by the time I got there.”

Kirito didn't bother to ask how she'd tracked him to this inn after that. If she'd figured out he'd been at the guard tower, it was less than surprising she'd predicted his choice of inn. Not like she didn't know exactly where he'd stayed in every previous town, after all; she probably knew his preferences better than he did.

He had a sudden, chilling thought that she might sell that information. He couldn't imagine who would care, or why, but it was always a risk of knowing the Rat.

“Yeah, I had you figured out pretty well, Kii-bou,” Argo said sagely. “Gotta admit, though, I didn't expect this one. So…” She sat up, and cocked an eyebrow at him. “Gimme the real story, Kii-bou. How the heck did you get Kizmel-chan up here? Don't worry, I probably won't sell the info; unless somebody else figures out how to do your version of the Elf War quest in the first place, it ain't worth selling.”

_Probably_ wouldn't. Kirito found that _so_ reassuring. Still… “I really don't know,” he said, shrugging helplessly. “I don't see any reason to think she couldn't have climbed the labyrinth towers, like she said, and I guess it makes sense that she'd be allowed through by the NPC guards, with the quest line finished… But I don't have any better idea than you do _why_ she did. I haven't seen her in months. Honestly, I didn't even realize she'd still be 'active' without Asuna or me around.”

“She did stuff like that before,” Argo pointed out. “You weren't in the Dark Elf Camp instance when she followed you guys into town that one time, right? But yeah, at least then the quest was still going… Argh, I hate it when there's no info to _get_!”

“You're the one who said it probably wasn't worth selling anyway,” he pointed out.

“Well, sure, but it's the principle of the thing, Kii-bou! …Eh, whatever. You'll keep me updated, right?” When he nodded ruefully, knowing it was futile to try and hide anything from the Rat anyway, she grinned again, then sobered once more. “So. You gonna be okay without Aa-chan, Kii-bou?”

“I think so,” Kirito said quietly. “It's going to be… kind of weird, I guess, without her around all the time. You know, I've actually kind of gotten used to not being a solo all the time? I was wondering what it was going to be like, not being in a party again. Then Kizmel turned up, and, well, I guess
I'm not going to have to worry about that just yet.”

“Good,” Argo said seriously, sitting up. “I worry about you sometimes, Kii-bou. You need somebody to watch your back. And Kizmel-chan's about the best backup you're gonna get without joining the KoB yourself, right? She's good with that saber of hers.”

“I do try, Argo.” Slipping out of the washroom, hair still damp but—to Kirito's considerable relief—her tights and tunic once again in place, Kizmel nodded at the information broker. “And I will certainly watch Kirito's back to the best of my ability, I promise you that. On my honor as a Pagoda Knight—and as a friend.”

“Good,” Argo said again, and jumped to her feet. “You guys'll be going to start exploring tomorrow, right? Want the latest Argo Guide before I go?”

Of course she wouldn't leave without trying to make a little Cor off me, Kirito mused. This is Argo we're talking about. Even with friends, she never forgets the bottom line. Even so, shaking his head, he handed over a hundred Cor in exchange for information Argo had already gotten from the players who had started exploring the new floor ahead of him. She might always be looking to make money, but her information was always good.

Chuckling, Argo headed for the door. “Y'know, I really can't wait to see what happens when you guys turn up for the boss strategy meeting in a couple weeks. I gotta be there, with a recording crystal; those will be some priceless jaw-drops, I bet… Anyway, there's your bed back, Kii-bou. I figure you need your beauty sleep.” Hand on the doorknob, she paused, grinned evilly, and looked back. “Well, unless you're gonna be sharing Kizmel-chan's bed?”

Kirito choked. “H-hey, it's not—”

“That would require Her Majesty's permission, Argo,” Kizmel said calmly—with just a hint of a smile, if Kirito wasn't imagining it.

Argo's grin widened. “Oi, Kii-bou—that didn't sound like an 'I'm not interested' to me. Maybe I should take a trip to the Ninth Floor and make a petition to the Queen…?”

“Argo!”

Chapter End Notes

This fic is what happens when you get a book to research a character you intend to give a minor role in a story, only to get so hooked by said character you decide she needs an entire story where she's the main heroine.

The better part of three years on, and I never have written the fic for which I was doing research.

So. Yeah. Some people may recognize this from Fanfiction.net. For those of you who don't, this was, once upon a time, intended as collection of one-shots covering a few key events of SAO canon with Kizmel as Kirito's partner. Turns out I can't write on such a small scale, so here we are: the story of a social misfit otaku and his AI partner. Almost three hundred thousand words in, and it might be halfway to finishing the Aincrad arc.
Two things to bear in mind if this is the first time you're seeing this fic: first, it's roughly compatible with SAO Progressive canon through Volume 5, though a few discrepancies do exist (inevitable; only the first three volumes had been released when I began, and I'd only read Volume 2 in its entirety at the time). After that, all bets are off, though many familiar events do occur after a fashion.

Second, despite the inevitable changes from bringing Kizmel to the fore, I try to keep gameplay mechanics as close to canon as I can--the light novel canon, that is, which means if you're only familiar with the anime there's going to be a few things you might find odd. I do deliberately stray from the canon timeline, though, as under close inspection a lot of the established timeframes for floor clearing don't make much sense. (Also, the official timeline has been retconned more than once since I began, further muddying the waters.)

That should cover things here. There are currently nineteen chapters to the fic, but I'll be posting them here on AO3 only gradually; Chapter I is only half the size of the story's average, and it took me well over an hour to format it properly here. They'll all get here eventually, I promise. -Solid
Tuesday, June 7th, 2023

Normally, Kirito set the system alarm to wake him quite early in the morning, sometimes well before sunrise. Being late to bed and early to rise was, after all, one of the ways he’d maintained his usual margin above other players—the margin of experience and resources that kept him alive, in a game where one misstep would kill him for real.

This one time, considering the circumstances, he’d allowed himself a couple of extra hours; enough time to make sure he was completely rested before setting out to clear the Twenty-Sixth Floor of Aincrad. After the last couple of days he’d had, he thought he’d earned it.

When the alarm did wake him, at eight in the morning, Kirito wearily swatted the immaterial button to shut it off before he even opened his eyes. He felt like he was missing something important, and that that something was going to be dangerous, embarrassing, or both. Argo was here last night, he thought groggily. *And I think she left with blackmail material…*

“Good morning, Kirito. Did you sleep well?”

Oh. That was what he was forgetting.

Pulling himself to a sitting position, back against the wall, Kirito looked over at the inn room's other bed, occupied by his Dark Elf partner. Still in her sleepwear, Kizmel was already sitting up, watching him with a small smile, leaving him to wonder with some unease just how long she’d been doing so. Had she been watching him sleep? And if so, for how long?

He still wasn’t even sure if she *did* sleep, in any recognizable way. She’d spoken in the past of having dreams, so he suspected she did have some kind of equivalent, but she was still so much a mystery that he wasn’t prepared to draw any conclusions about her programming.

“G’morning, Kizmel,” he replied aloud, yawning. “Yeah, I had an okay night… better than the night before, anyway. You?”

“It was agreeable,” Kizmel said in return. “Indeed, I think I slept better than I have in months. The inactivity in the capital must have been more oppressive than I thought. I’m looking forward to setting out. Shall we have breakfast, and see what information Argo brought?”

“Mm… yeah, good idea.”

Sliding out from under the blankets, Kirito swung his feet down to the floor, shifting so that he was facing her. Stifling another yawn, he swept his hand down to bring up his menu, opened his inventory, and materialized a pair of sandwiches. They were cheap, from an NPC vendor, but one thing he *had* made sure to do after reaching Skirloft two days prior was look into where to find the best food.

Kirito wasn’t exactly a military otaku, but one aphorism he knew and believed wholeheartedly was that an army ran on its stomach. Even—no, especially when he was depressed, he’d make sure his
meals were as good as they could be.

Tossing one of the sandwiches to his partner, he scrolled back through the list, selected the item Argo had sold him the night before, and converted it to an object, as well. Obediently, a small hardbound book, labeled *Don't Worry, It's Argo's Twenty-Sixth Floor Strategy Guide*, dropped into his hands.

Throughout the process, Kizmel watched with obvious interest, a wistful look in her eyes. “I still find the powers of human Mystic Scribing impressive,” she explained, when he looked at her. “I've learned to interact with it, but actually casting the charm is still beyond me.”

“That's too bad. But at least you're making progress, right?” Although Kirito was frankly confused by the whole thing. He still wasn't sure how his party invitation the previous day had even worked; for that matter, he didn't know how she interpreted the very idea. He was pretty sure she didn't think in terms of HP, for one thing.

“Some. I asked Viscount Yofilis about it once, actually. He said that, as far as he was aware, the charm is a particular power of humans—but he also said there were stories of a handful of Dark Elves, before the Great Separation, who were granted use of it as reward for deeds of valor in the assistance of human kingdoms.” Kizmel shrugged, pausing to take a bit of her sandwich. “Of course, with the fall of the Nine Kingdoms since the Great Separation, I don't know who might be capable of granting it now.”

“There's still a way,” Kirito said, convinced despite having no evidence. “We just have to find it, right? Aincrad's a big place, and it's full of surprises.” *Like us sitting here talking at all. If even the floors I thought I knew had twists like this, who knows what else we might find?*

She smiled warmly. “Yes. You're right, of course. It would hardly be the first great achievement we've made together, would it?”

Not by a long shot. Between Kizmel's own off-the-rails nature, Viscount Yofilis leading Dark Elf reinforcements in to bail out the raid group during the Fourth Floor boss fight, and a dozen other incidents along the way, Kirito suspected they'd done quite a few things Kayaba Akihiko himself had never planned on.

If the man hadn't trapped them all under conditions of true death, Kirito would be deeply grateful. *Sword Art Online* was, in some ways, the most unpredictable game he'd ever experienced. It might be trying to kill him every single day, but it certainly wasn't getting stale, even after seven months logged in.

*Good thing the gameplay at least is consistent, though,* he reminded himself. *Otherwise we really would all be dead by now.*

Starting in on his own sandwich, Kirito flipped open the strategy guide with his other hand and began reading. Unsurprisingly, in just a day Argo had tracked down every regular quest with a contact in Skirloft itself, and her guide even gave a suggested priority list based on rewards and tentative risk assessment. *I have to wonder, though, how Kizmel interprets regular quests. Do players like me just come across as workaholic do-gooders? For that matter, how does she rationalize multiple people doing the same things for the same people?*

Maybe she just wrote some of it off as having lost something in translation. He knew that was how she'd viewed some of the gaming terms thrown around in her presence, back when they first met.

*Well, that's not really important just now. We'll work things out... Ah, here's the main quest for this floor.*
There must've been some change in his demeanor when he got to the important part, as Kizmel raised a questioning eyebrow in his direction. “Something interesting, Kirito?”

“Yeah. Just got to the stuff about the main conflict on this floor. Hm… Argo didn't have much as of yesterday, but she does say where we should start looking into things.”

She shook her head. “Before I met you and Asuna, I had no idea just how chaotic the rest of Aincrad had become,” she admitted, when Kirito looked at her questioningly. “It seems as if every floor has some kind of ongoing crisis, on top of your efforts to unify the Castle as a whole.”

Kirito reached back to scratch his head nervously, remembered at the last moment that he was still holding a sandwich in that hand, and compromised by taking a big bite out of it instead. “I underestimated it myself, back when I left the City of Beginnings,” he said honestly. “But so far, we've done all right, one way or another.”

Not just for the sake of becoming stronger, either. For good or ill, Kirito had gotten truly emotionally involved in more than one of the quest lines on the way up Aincrad, and not just those relating to the Elf War. On the one hand, he supposed it wasn't good for his mental health to get so lost in the game; on the other, the more he did exactly that, the less likely he was to forget the stakes were nothing less than life and death.

“You certainly did well by the elves,” Kizmel mused, gaze turning distant for a moment. Remembering the highlights, and low points, of the Elf War, he supposed. Coming back to herself, she continued, “So? What crisis do the residents of Skirloft and its neighboring towns face?”

“Well…” Kirito carefully read over Argo's notes, laced with snark and gameplay tips as they were, and considered how best to translate the information into something his partner would understand. “Well, it looks like it's based off—rather, related to an old human story…”

“Really old-school stuff.” Argo's notes read. “Kayaba's riffing off a game from twenty years ago. Dunno why he even bothered with lawyer-friendly misspellings; not like anybody these days is gonna remember it. It was kinda obscure back when it came out. But eh, whatever. Looks like fun, if ya don't mind death traps.”

“Apparently,” Kirito went on, “this floor contains a gateway of some kind. It's been dormant since the Great Separation, but the residents of Skirloft want to reactivate it. Something to do with making contact with dragons from an old order of knights… Argo thinks that there's more to it, though, that more gates will need to be reclaimed on higher floors.”

To his surprise, Kizmel nodded thoughtfully. “I have heard such tales myself,” she said. “The order's name is lost now, but my people remember that, before the Great Separation, there was a group of dragon-riding knights who served to keep peace between the Nine Kingdoms of Man, Lyusula, and Kales'Oh. Around the time of the Great Separation, though, the order was destroyed by treachery from within…”

That matched up eerily well with Argo's brief synopsis of the apparent source material. Kirito would've been even more unnerved, especially given his long-held suspicions that the backstory Kizmel had given of Aincrad wasn't entirely crafted by Kayaba's hand in the first place, were he not so used to it by now. By this point, his general policy was just to listen carefully and try to connect the dots.

Who knew? Someday the history of Aincrad, as Kizmel told it, might actually be important to a quest.
“It is said that the surviving dragons did, indeed, seal themselves in slumber beyond four gates,” Kizmel was saying now. “If those gates were lifted with Aincrad in the Great Separation, reawakening those dragons could well aid in securing the safety of all, human and elf alike.” She nodded again, more decisively, and smiled. “No doubt other Swordmasters will have already set out on this quest—but we'll catch up to them soon enough, won't we, Kirito?”

He smiled back. Finishing off his sandwich, he snapped Argo’s strategy guide shut and stood. “Of course we will. Besides, the KoB will still be getting set up, and even Lind will have been set back recovering from that last boss fight. Somebody's gotta pick up the slack. You ready to go, partner?”

Kizmel swallowed the last bite of her own breakfast and also stood. “Of course.” Tapping the spot on her shoulder where her insignia as a Royal Guard would normally sit, she summoned her usual armor into being, and with it her shield and saber. Raising her fist in a gesture Kirito had taught her many floors below, she said, “Let us go—partner.”

Grinning, Kirito bumped her fist with his own. “Time to get to work.”

After Kirito had re-equipped himself with his trademark black coat and his current one-handed sword—the Dignitas Sword, a simple but strong blade he’d acquired from a quest two floors below—and Kizmel had donned her usual dark armor and cloak, the pair headed out into the sun. By now, other players were also abroad and hurrying about, some of them clearers, others the usual crowd of lower-level players still exploring the latest town.

With more than just the relatively insular group of the clearers about, Kizmel was already starting to get a fair number of double-takes, and a few outside of the clearers who kept enough of an eye on progression to recognize Kirito himself sent dark mutters his way. Long since used to it, he did his best to ignore it, deliberately keeping his attention on Argo's guidebook instead.

“I suppose it will be some time yet before humans are accustomed to seeing my people,” Kizmel commented, apparently unperturbed. “Our races have kept away from each other for many years now… So, where do we start, Kirito?”

“Well,” he replied, heading off down Skirloft’s streets, “I'm good for supplies and gear repairs; I did take care of that much the day we opened up this floor. You?”

“My journey here was smooth enough,” Kizmel answered, matching his pace. “I will not need to mend my equipment so soon. Barring, of course, unexpected hazards on this floor.”

“Like hungry wyverns?” Kirito shook his head ruefully. Argo didn't yet have a comprehensive list of the enemies on the Twenty-Sixth Floor, but her guide did mention that most of them seemed to be wyverns of varying size, habit, and temperament.

“Watch out for some of the caves,” she'd written. “I know the main quest on this floor is supposed to be about good dragons, but some of the NPCs had some pretty dire warnings about what's in a few of the holes in the ground. Dragon hoards, the kind they keep track of down to the last coin. Now I don't expect Smaug here, but you know what they say: Meddle not in the affairs of dragons, for you are crunchy and go well with ketchup.”

Even for Argo, Kirito thought, that one was a bit weird. He got the reference, at least—or half of it, anyway—but it was still weird.

When he relayed the comment to Kizmel, her eyebrows went up. “Smaug? And what is ketchup? A human spice?”
“Smaug's from… another human story,” Kirito said, flipping back to the quest location section of the guide. “That one's not real… I hope. And ketchup is a sauce humans put on meat… Ah, here we go.” He brought up his menu with his free hand, then the map, and traced a path down Skirloft's streets with one finger. “There's a tower at the other end of town, not far from the guard post I was using yesterday. We need to talk to a Master Soveth, who should tell us where we need to go first.”

Kizmel studied the route herself, nodded, and smiled. “Let us be off, then. I'm eager to see what challenges await us here.”

The trip across Skirloft was an interesting one, Kirito had to admit. With Asuna, he'd long since stopped needing to explain most details of SAO, and they'd passed the floors he had any prior knowledge of months before. She'd also gradually thawed—well, a little, anyway—from the cold front she'd presented to him in the early days, so their conversations while traveling were usually about trivial things like the design choices of the various towns and floors, or battle strategies for the latest enemies they'd encountered.

Anything about their lives outside of SAO, of course, had been forbidden by unspoken agreement. Even after months of traveling with the girl, Kirito still knew practically nothing about Asuna's real-world life, other than the few hints she'd given when Lind's arrogance pushed her buttons on the Third Floor. Likewise, he'd spoken to no one about his own life—not that his life was likely to have been of much interest anyway, he thought.

Kizmel was different. Full of curiosity about how humans lived, openly walking the streets of a human town for the first time, she was looking at Skirloft not from the perspective of a gamer admiring a programmer's work, but someone newly introduced to human society.

Answering the questions her observations prompted gave him pause a couple of times, as he struggled to explain game conventions in a way that Kizmel would understand, but Kirito didn't really mind. It was actually kind of fun, even if it did sometimes require him to dredge up bits of trivia he vaguely remembered reading about online sometime.

Okay, so I don't really know anything about how stone houses are made, he admitted to himself. But that's something she does know, so… fair trade? I bet Asuna would know, though.

He shoved that thought firmly out of mind. It wasn't like Asuna was dead or anything, and dwelling on their former partnership, and the gap in what had become a comfortable routine, wasn't a good idea when they'd be fighting for their lives soon. Depression, in Sword Art Online, could be fatal.

“I think my people are missing out on much,” Kizmel mused, as they passed a large, intricately-carved church building in the central square of Skirloft. “Our own towns and cities are beautiful, but… perhaps we could learn variety from mingling with humans more. To us, a place such as this would be worth fortifying, nothing more. Certainly not a place to build a city.”

Remembering the homes of the Dark Elves, Kirito nodded thoughtfully, forgetting for a moment that the Elves didn't technically “build” any of it. “I could say the same, though,” he said. “So far I haven't seen anything in human towns in Aincrad like Yofel Castle.”

He had very fond memories of Christmas at the hidden Dark Elf fortress on the Fourth Floor. It had also been the site of one of the events that had most easily made him forget he was in a video game at all, when the Forest Elves had attacked and he'd taken the desperate gamble to convince Viscount Yofilis to lead the defense.

It had, really, been exactly the kind of event he'd have been most enthusiastic about if it really had still been just a game. As it was, Kirito couldn't deny he was proud of how the battle had gone.
“You have a point,” Kizmel allowed. “Well, hopefully our peoples can learn from each other, then.” Pausing, she tilted her head thoughtfully. “What about in your own world? Are there no structures in your homeland that resemble the likes of Yofel Castle?”

Kirito started. Kizmel had expressed interest before in learning about where he and Asuna came from, but it was still an unusually direct question, even for her. It was also just about the first thing to make him think much about the real world in several months now.

“Um, well,” he began, fumbling for an answer, “I guess I've heard of some pretty impressive places… but no, I can't say I've seen anything that compares with it. Not quite.”

He supposed the Imperial Palace itself might qualify, but even that wasn't quite the same. Being surrounding by the modern skyscrapers of Tokyo kind of marred the effect, however much the Palace grounds had been kept the same for so many years.

“That's too bad.” Looking ahead, where a tower was just now coming into view, Kizmel's voice took on a wistful tone. “Perhaps when you return, you will have a chance to see your own people's wonders with your own eyes… …I wonder if I might have the opportunity, myself…”

The last sentence was quiet, soft enough that Kirito wasn't even sure he was meant to hear it. Kizmel... seeing the real world...? Something in his chest felt tight at that, knowing—as she didn't—that as an NPC, regardless of what happened when Aincrad was finally conquered, there was no way for her to leave this world.

No. There's a way. The sudden tension loosened at his realization. There's still the question of what happens when SAO is finished—but if we can get past that, there's at least web cams, right? And all sorts of things can be modeled in a VR environment. And maybe someday...

Kirito shook his head rapidly. This wasn't the time to be thinking that far ahead. For right now, he had to keep focused just on surviving SAO itself. Nothing else mattered if he got himself killed. Or Kizmel, for that matter; even if she, being an NPC, was able to respawn, he suspected it wouldn't be his Kizmel that appeared afterward.

Luckily, further conversation and brainstorming alike were put off by their arrival at the tower Master Soveth was supposed to live in: the tallest building in Skirloft, right at the edge of town, made of the same imposing stone as the rest. Unlike Skirloft's other buildings, though, Soveth's Tower looked like one solid piece of stone, as if it had been chiseled out of a single, improbably-huge quarry stone.

The only noticeable seam was around a door, which from the look of it had still been hewed out of the same stone; even its handle was simply a carved recess. Exchanging a look with his partner, Kirito shrugged, grabbed the handhold, and heaved, hoping that the door wasn't as heavy as it looked.

It wasn't quite. From the amount of effort it took to pull, though, Kirito was willing to be that someone with a lesser strength stat wouldn't have been able to open it at all; definitely not a place for low-level players, which he supposed was just as well. Every now and then, even knowing the risks, lower-level players did get ahead of themselves, and pay for it.

Rather than a proper entranceway, the door led directly onto a spiral staircase, which somehow didn't surprise him. It was the kind of thing a place like this would have, in an RPG; no self-respecting denizen of such an imposing tower would deign to live on the ground floor.

Thank goodness our avatars don't get tired, Kirito thought wryly, starting the ascent. That's a lot of stairs.
“Do Argo's notes say anything about what kind of person this 'Master Soveth' is?” Kizmel asked as they climbed.

“Just that he's 'exactly the kind of guy you'd expect to be living in a wizard's tower,’ ” he quoted with a shrug. “Which means he's probably, um… eccentric?”

_I wish she’d been more specific, actually. The kind of “Master” that lives in a place like his is usually either a crazy old man, or else—_

“Ah. More Swordmasters… Dare I hope you're any more competent than the usual glory hounds?”

— _Grumpy_, Kirito finished mentally, eyeing the bearded, grizzled old man waiting for them.

The room at the top of the spiral staircase was absolutely full of books, with a handful of shelves that contained more esoteric items instead. Skulls, jars of preserved biological specimens—some of which Kirito carefully did _not_ look too closely at; anatomy wasn't his strong point, but some of those things looked a little too human for his liking—and a variety of crystals, some of which were recognizable as the same sorts players used.

All of it was lit by candles and the sunlight that reached through the gap between Aincrad's floors, filtered in through a single window each to east and west. Behind a table covered in notes, beakers, and at least two skulls, a man whom Kirito could only describe as a well-groomed but otherwise stereotypical sage or wizard was leafing through a book with a Latin title, looking distinctly unimpressed by his visitors.

He also had the distinctive golden exclamation point of a quest NPC over his head.

_That's my cue._ Kizmel, obviously, wouldn't know exactly how to interact with an NPC outside her own quest line; her human-like AI would actually be a disadvantage in such situations, capable of understanding without the knowledge that other NPCs weren't.

Clearing his throat, Kirito said, “Competent at what, exactly, Master?” That was the trigger phrase for this quest, according to Argo; simple enough to infer from Soveth's words, but likely to trip up players relying on the usual NPC triggers.

As expected, the exclamation point turned to the question mark of a quest in progress, as Soveth sighed and set his book aside. “The ignorant do not seek me out, Swordmaster. I know you'll have been sent for my guidance. A worthy cause, of course, but so far only dullards have undertaken it. The best advice is meaningless to ears unwilling to listen…”

“There have been others before us, Master Soveth?” Kizmel asked curiously.

Of course, she still wouldn't understand the nature of MMO quests. Fortunately, there was an in-universe relevance to the question, and Soveth's _harrumph_ proved Kayaba had anticipated it himself. “Of course. Mostly foolhardy young souls who think to make their fame restoring the Order all by themselves. Never mind that the gate in these mountains is only the start… So far not one has managed to return from the first step.”

Kizmel shot Kirito a concerned look, but he only shook his head slightly, giving her a reassuring smile. Obviously, with any RPG only an actual player would be able to get anything done.

“What needs to be done first, Master Soveth?” he asked.

“The first thing that needs doing is opening a path _to_ the gate,” Soveth replied, turning to the shelf of crystals behind him. “Before the Great Separation, magic opened many doors that remained closed to
the weak and unworthy. With the loss of magic, other routes must be taken, with what lesser powers still remain.” He shook his head irritably. “A thousand years ago, the Master of this Tower could have gone right to the Gateway Chamber, without relying on young fools with sharper steel than wit, but needs must…”

One thing both the absent-minded and grumpy sage archetypes had in common, Kirito decided: they both had a lot of trouble getting to the point. One would keep forgetting what he was doing; this kind knew exactly what he was doing, but felt the need to complain about it first.

A for more moments of rummaging and muttered imprecations, and Soveth turned back to them, multifaceted crystal in hand. “Here,” he said gruffly. “Take this to a cave north of Skirloft, past the first rope bridge. This crystal, pathetic as it may be, is powerful enough to break the first seal on the door to the Gateway Chamber. Just make sure you put it in the right place—and try not to break it in some damned dragon-slaying heroics, will you? Even meager charms such as these are quite troublesome to produce in this era.”

“Quite an impatient man, wasn't he?” Kizmel commented, as they made their way back down the Tower, Soveth having made their dismissal quite clear by sheer indifference to their continued presence. “He rather reminds me of the priests at Yofel Castle, actually.”

Kirito nodded, remembering the frankly useless Dark Elves that had had so much influence in the elven fortress. Complacent nearly to the point of suicide, they'd gone so far as to ban the wearing of armor, simply for the noise it made. In a fortress, they'd banned armor. Kizmel, he recalled, had found the whole thing extremely uncomfortable.

Though personally, he had to admit he'd thought the dress looked pretty good on her…

He shoved the thought out of his head. Even with Asuna elsewhere, it just didn't seem like a safe thing to be remembering. Regardless, it was lucky for all of them that Viscount Yofilis had been so much more reasonable.

“I do have to admit to worrying about the other Swordsmasters he mentioned,” Kizmel continued. “Do you think this task is really so dangerous?”

“He said glory hounds,” Kirito reminded her. “Sharper steel than wit, he said, right? We're more careful than that.” He gave her another smile. “If you ask me, they probably just took one look at the wyverns, panicked, and ran. Probably just dropped the crystals on the way and didn't want to admit it to Soveth.”

“I probably would not, either,” she admitted. “Assuming I was cowardly enough to simply turn and abandon my duty in the first place.” She nodded sharply, looking more confident now. “You're right. Just because some warriors with more self-confidence than sense failed does not mean we will. Together we have overcome greater threats than mere wyverns.”

“We sure have.” Giant spiders, spiders of merely unusual size, Forest Elves, Fallen Elves, a major naval battle… and those were just the incidents in the first two weeks of their acquaintance.

Let's not forget the human drama, either, Kirito thought wryly. Lind, Kibaou, Asuna's unpredictable temper, Argo… I really hope she doesn't tell Asuna too much too soon… Yeah, we can handle this.

Besides, he mused, as they stepped back into the morning sun, how bad can it be? This is just the first quest of this set. Those are never that tough.

Hours later, as his simple Slant took the head off a Clipped-Wing Cave Wyvern, Kirito cursed
himself for tempting fate. The albino, flightless, fire-breathing wyvern now shattering into polygons was the half of the last pair blocking their way out of the cave they'd been sent to.

A cave that turned out to have about one pair of wyverns for every five meters of tunnel. Only a handful had been able to breathe fire, fortunately tending to be in more open areas where there was room to dodge, but that was still an awful lot of hungry, angry reptiles.

Kizmel's Horizontal Square turned his target's companion into blue shards a moment later, the momentum from the Sword Skill carrying her out into the sun ahead of him. She spun in place immediately, checking for more mobs, before her tense shoulders relaxed. “It's clear, Kirito!” she called.

Trotting gratefully out of the cave, he quickly joined her in the fresh air. “Well,” he said, breathing heavily. “I didn't expect that. …I should've known we weren't done with caves just yet.”

“Hopefully the next floor will have more open ground,” she agreed. “But at least we accomplished out task here. We can report to Master Soveth a complete success.” She smiled wryly. “Perhaps he'll raise his estimate from 'foolhardy' to merely 'reckless’.”

Kirito laughed. “Yeah… maybe so. Though personally, I'd settle for the next objective having a little less fire.”

Be fair, he told himself. It still wasn't the worst “first quest” you've done, right? And if you'd remembered that Magnatherium—which, of course, was not a bear—we might've been ready for even worse, and been glad this was so “easy”.

He twitched then, and glanced nervously over his shoulder, back into the cave they'd just escaped. There he was again, tempting fate; hadn't he learned by now just how bad an idea that really was? Certainly there was no question they'd be dealing with something on the level of that fire-breaking ursine sometime during the quest, but there was no sense inviting it early.

“Right,” Kirito said hastily, when he was sure nothing was about to start chasing them. “Back to Soveth's Tower.” He checked the time in his display. “Hm… if we're quick, we might be able to get the next part of the quest done today, depending on how far we have to travel.”

“Then let us hurry,” Kizmel said with a nod. “I'm not averse to a late night if need be, but I would rather not sleep in the field if it can be helped. The lingering ancient magic may keep certain areas safe, but it does nothing for ingrained reflex when creatures pass too close to the thresholds.”

Kirito remembered giant mosquitoes, and shuddered. “Yeah. I'll take a nice, soft bed, thanks.” I do still need to figure out how to get Kizmel a separate room tonight, though… I'll think about that while Soveth is insulting us over the quest rewards.

In the end, Master Soveth gave them a disdainful look that Kirito thought masked a certain degree of surprise, pronounced them “marginally competent”, and sent them on their way to the second seal with another magically-charged crystal. This one, he warned them with a sniff, would explode if used improperly. “Improperly”, apparently, meaning anything that involved more than the bare minimum jostling just of carrying the thing.

All in all, nothing new to Kirito. Any longtime RPG player knew all about the repetitive quests that involved doing the same thing five times over, with minor variations of enemies, puzzles, and other hazards; potentially destructible key items were nothing particular special.

When the moon was rising into view between the floors of Aincrad, casting stark white light over the
pair of adventurers, Kirito cursed himself for yet again tempting fate and underestimating the task. It had taken three times as long as he expected, involved twice as many fire-breathing wyverns as the first leg of the quest, and carried hazards Soveth had apparently known but neglected to mention.

“He knew the sealing ring was in the middle of a wyvern nest, and didn't mention it,” he complained to the world at large, as the two of them trudged back out of Soveth's Tower yet again. “You'd think that might be important to know. Not to mention that the wyvern mothers feed the young ones live Fire Goats…”

“It does seem a careless oversight,” Kizmel agreed sourly, rubbing at her face. “Although personally, I would have been just as interested in knowing that the crystal was going to explode even when used according to his instructions. Had you not realized the significance of the crystal's flashing light, we might not have gotten out of range in time.”

“If you can even call it 'out of range'.” Kirito shrugged, dispersing some of the same ashes that blackened Kizmel's already dusky skin from his shoulders. “I've seen something like that reaction before, that's all… I didn't think a spell would go up like it used black powder, though.”

Succeeding at last in scrubbing some of the soot off her face, she glanced at him curiously. “Black powder?”

“Er, a human explosive powder,” he said, scratching the back of his head. “Ancient stuff; I haven't seen any of it in Aincrad. Breaking that spell did a pretty good imitation of the stuff.” Idly, he brought up his menu and checked the quest status. “Hm… Well, it looks like the next step will take us clear to the next town. I guess this is as good a time as any to call it a day.”

“I agree. Tomorrow, perhaps we can finish the tasks we have left in Skirloft, and head for our next destination.” Kizmel brushed at her face again, grimacing at her lack of substantial success. “Besides, I'd like to wash up before anything else. This soot is being surprisingly stubborn.”

Kirito nodded, and brought out Argo's strategy guide again. If he was right, they were a bit ahead of schedule going by when they started, which should put them about were they'd have expected to be had they begun the quest the day the floor became accessible. Considering that the organized clearing groups were still consolidating their positions, that wasn't half bad progress.

A quick glance confirmed his guess at least matched up with Argo's estimates. Looking further, though, something else caught his eye. “Well, that's great,” he said, disgusted. “I wish I'd noticed this earlier… Looks like one of Argo's contacts already dealt with Soveth for something else, and his 'magic crystals' have a known side effect.”

Kizmel lifted an eyebrow in his direction. “Besides exploding?”

“Well, that, but the point is, when they explode in certain conditions—like, say, around Fire Goats—the combination produces an ash that gradually dissipates over several hours, or with some kind of special soap.” Kirito shook his head. “Exploding crystals, exploding goats, and clingy ash. This floor has a bad sense of humor.”

Privately, he thought it was one of the pettier things Kayaba had arranged. The whole “trapping ten thousand people on threat of death” he could at least grasp, however horrible it was. This? This was pure annoyance for the sake of itself, like any normal game developer might've done.

This once, Kirito would've preferred Kayaba hadn't acted like a normal dev.

Kizmel was grimacing again, and he thought she might actually have glared at one gawking
passerby; not normal behavior for the elf, whom he was used to seeing calm and amiable in almost all circumstances. Then again, I think that was one of the Divine Dragons, somebody who was present when we had to bluff two guilds out of killing each other. Guess even Kizmel's fuse has an end.

“A special soap,” she repeated, turning back to him. “Does Argo's guide provide the details? Ordinarily I wouldn't waste my time on this, but I doubt sleeping while covered in ash will be very comfortable.”

Kirito didn't disagree there. Somehow the stuff had gotten under his coat, and it wasn't a comfortable sensation. “According to Argo,” he said, checking further in the guide's comments, “it can be obtained from adult Fire Goats. We didn't face any today… but I do know someone who probably has some by now. Knowing Agil, he probably has samples of pretty much everything Argo would know about by now.”

“Agil?” Kizmel frowned in obvious thought. “Ah. The large ax-wielder, isn't he? I don't believe I was ever formally introduced, when last I traveled with you.” A short pause as she seemed to consider the idea, then she shrugged. “Not quite the way I would have preferred to meet him, but I suppose there's little choice. Do you know where he is?”

Starting to walk into Skirloft, Kirito consulted his messages, compared with Argo's guide, and finally checked with his map of the town. “If I know him, he'll be in the merchants' part of town. That would be… this way.”

She quickly fell into step with him. “Then by all means, let us hurry. The sooner we can wash up, then sooner we can rest for the morning. There still remains much for us to do on this floor, and I for one don't wish to be distracted from a field guardian by mere dirt.”

They found Agil right about where Kirito had expected to, renting a stall in what passed for Skirloft's merchant quarter. This late, he was dealing with a handful of returning players straggling in from grinding out in the dungeons; from the look of it, though, the big, dark-skinned ax wielder would soon be closing shop for the night.

Privately, Kirito was relieved to see him still doing business at all. Most player merchants weren't, that late; but Agil had apparently realized that the dedicated players who burned the candle at both ends were a potential untapped market.

As he and Kizmel approached down the torchlit street, Kirito suppressed a grin at the sight of one last player walking away from the stall with a glum expression. He'd seen it before: the look of someone who regretted doing business with Agil because of how sharp a bargainer he was, and was doing it anyway because Agil's reputation for honesty was well-earned.

“Thank you, come again!” Agil called after the man with a cheerful wave. “A pleasure doing business with you… Oi, is that you, Kirito?” He turned his grin in the black-clad swordsman's direction, the expression turning less “evil businessman” at the same time. “Wondered when I'd see you. What, did you actually take a day off yesterday or something?”

“Something like that,” Kirito admitted, stepping up to the stall's counter. “I needed a breather after that last boss fight… You know how it was.”

“Yeah. Sure do.” Agil, too, had fought The Adamantine Arachnid, and as a tank had taken more than his share of hits from the giant spider. “You doing okay? I mean with Asuna leaving to join a guild and all… Eh?” He trailed off, finally noticing Kirito's companion. “Excuse me, Miss. I don't believe we've been properly introduced.”
Oh, that's right. I guess they never did actually talk back then, did they? Kirito knew that Agil had at least seen Kizmel a few times, most notably the boss fight against the Hippocampus that had brought in an entire party of Dark Elves, but now that he thought about it they probably hadn't been within close proximity otherwise.

“Ah, right. Agil, this is Kizmel, Royal Guard and member of the Pagoda Knights of the Kingdom of Lyusula,” he said, gesturing grandly at his companion. “Kizmel, this is Agil, merchant extraordinaire and ax-wielding tank of the clearing group.”

Kizmel bowed, then extended a hand in human fashion, as Kirito and Asuna had taught her months before. “A pleasure to meet you, Master Agil,” she said. “A… tank? Ah, yes, one who takes blows so that others can strike while the enemy is distracted. Kirito explained it to me some time ago.”

Agil shook the proffered hand, a strange look on his face. “Yeah, that sums it up pretty well. You can just call me Agil. Buy cheap and sell cheap, that's my motto.” He shot a sharp glance at Kirito. “Uh… is she…?”

“A Dark Elf, not a human Swordmaster,” Kirito said in his best, *Don't ask here, I'll explain later,* tone. “She and I met during the Elf War quest that started on the third floor, and she just came to this floor yesterday, looking for Asuna and me.”

“That's right,” Kizmel confirmed. “I had hoped to fight alongside them again; and if Asuna is no longer by Kirito's side, then it is all the more important that I be here.”

“Huh.” Agil's face was still full of curiosity, but he let the matter drop. “Now that's a story I'd like to hear someday. But if I know you, you're here for some business, and then a nap.” He quirked an eyebrow. “Got anything to do with the fact that you two look like you walked into a cartoon bomb?”

Kirito grimaced. He'd hoped it hadn't been that obvious. He liked to think he didn't worry too much about his appearance, but he couldn't deny a certain liking for looking sharp. After all, if he was going to be “the Beater”, at least he normally looked stylish doing it.

*Smelling like this stuff isn't helping, either. If real black powder smells anything like this, no wonder nobody uses it anymore.*

“We had an encounter with Fire Goats,” Kizmel informed the merchant, looking even less happy than Kirito did. “Along with a magic crystal whose creator failed to inform us was quite as volatile as it proved to be. We were hoping you might have a particular item that is supposed to be able to wash the ash off…?”

Agil nodded. “Fire Goat Fat Soap,” he said, not even bothering to check his inventory. He grinned. “Would you believe you're not the first people who've stopped by asking for that today? Though I don't think the others had any magic crystals involved. For what it's worth, Fire Goats just seem to blow up when you kill 'em.”

Kirito sighed. “So the crystal just acted like a big AOE… Figures. Please tell me you have some? Not sure I believe the whole 'sell cheap' part, but you're the one who's most likely to have it.”

“Kirito, that hurts,” Agil said, touching his chest with exaggerated grief. “Is it my fault not everybody really knows what stuff is worth?” He grinned again. “Ah, forget it. Yeah, I got some. It's been selling pretty well, seems like most of the clearing group is hitting the area where those goats hang out, but I got two bars left.”

The price he cited made Kirito wince a little, but only at Agil's shrewdness. It certainly didn't put that
much of a dent in his Cor; it was just another sign that Agil knew exactly what the real market value was for practically anything conceivably worth selling.

_He must buy the info from Argo_, Kirito thought, handing over the coinage. _ Heck, that's probably half her business, helping the merchants figure out how to price things. And then selling the info about each merchant's prices to all the others... Is there anything the Rat won't sell?_

Actually, he suspected he didn't want to know the answer to that. Knowing Argo, it was entirely too likely he'd ask a question he didn't want the answer to, as a test, and then get it.

Agil handed over two cloth-wrapped bundles in exchange for the Cor. “Two bars of Fire Goat Fat Soap. Use 'em wisely, they're the last ones in stock.” He grinned again, with a more playful edge this time. “I expect to have more in tomorrow, so stop by when you get back from your adventuring. It'll be here when you need it.”

After thanking the big merchant—Kirito sourly, Kizmel with some enthusiasm—the pair headed back toward the edges of Skirloft. By now there were even fewer players on the streets than when they'd headed for the inn the previous night, and Kirito counted that as a small comfort, in the wake of Agil's parting words.

“He's probably right,” Kizmel commented sadly, wiping futilely at her face again. “Today we only encountered Fire Goats in the Wyvern Nest, but we're likely to encounter more on the road to the next town. Hopefully we will find lodgings there with as good bathing facilities as here.”

Nodding glumly, Kirito had gone another twenty meters down the street before the implications registered. _Lodgings—bathing—uh oh. I completely forgot to look into separate inn rooms today! Um... I could ask Argo, if anyone would know, she would—_

No. Bad idea. Then she'd find out about the soap, and then she'd suggest it'd be cheaper if we just shared one, and then Asuna would find out somehow, and—No. Just no.

He didn't know how Argo would find out about the soap just from asking about inn rooms, but he was sure she would. Anything involving Argo and baths would inevitably go horribly wrong. He knew that all too well.

“I'm sure we'll find something that will work out,” Kirito said aloud, trying very hard to banish those dark premonitions. “Even the cheap inns I've seen lately have had decent baths and stuff.”

“Good.” With a sigh, Kizmel abandoned the doomed attempt at wiping off the soot—even without its special clingy properties, the sleeve she was trying to wipe with was just as covered itself. “In the meantime, let us return to our current room, clean off this filth, and rest for the morning's journey.” She glanced sidelong at him. “Do you object if I take the first bath, Kirito? I fear I was somewhat closer to that last goat than you.” Her lips quirked in a teasing expression, one that filled him with instant dread. “Of course, if you'd prefer, it might be easier if we helped each other wash off—”

“No!” Kirito yelped, loud enough to draw curious glances from the few other players still out and about. “No, that's just fine, I can wait—”

Kizmel's soft laughter followed him clear back to the inn.

Kirito never did figure out a proper solution to the dilemma of finding separate lodgings, even when the floor's quest lines took them off to the next town and beyond. He was stymied by the basic problem that Kizmel could interact with menu elements, but couldn't initiate them herself; and while it was possible Argo might've known something he didn't, he just couldn't bring himself to ask her.
Not with the blackmail material she already possessed.

It didn't help that Kizmel herself didn't seem to consider it a problem at all. The one time he brought it up, she just laughed and reminded him that they'd once spent an entire week sharing a tent. So long as there were two beds, as far as she was concerned the simple savings of only renting a single room outweighed any potential issue.

Kirito didn't exactly agree, but there was little else he could think of to say. Without any ideas of how to work out separate rooms from a systems standpoint anyway, he was forced to concede defeat.

He did get used to it, eventually. Somewhat. Fortunately, Kizmel at least was willing to make concessions to human customs of modesty, even if she did still make the odd comment about battlefield standards being different.

Clearing the Twenty-Sixth Floor overall went slower than the past few floors had. Despite their two-day delay, Kirito and Kizmel still ended up blazing a trail ahead of most of the rest of the clearers, most players not even seeming to have noticed the “Beater’s” temporary absence.

It wasn't too surprising. According to his news from Argo, the Army had completely abandoned progression and had withdrawn their total force to the First Floor. Most of the unaligned clearers had been snapped up by the new Knights of Blood, who were still organizing themselves. That left, really, the Divine Dragons Alliance, and the handful of remaining solos and small groups like Kirito's own two-person party.

Progress continued nonetheless. Agil made a tidy profit selling soap during the period players fought their way through Fire Goat territory; Kirito and Kizmel fought through a couple more wyvern nests and succeeded in opening the way to the Gateway before most others were even aware of the quest line's existence.

That part had proven underwhelming. Activating the ancient gate, a stone circle big enough to let through a field boss, had made it glow around the edges, and done basically nothing else; when Kirito reported it sourly to Argo, she'd just laughed at him and told him anticlimactic went with the source material.

All in all, though, the slog through the Twenty-Sixth Floor, no matter how many times he was nearly blown up, set on fire, eaten by wyverns, or some combination of the three, wasn't the worst experience Kirito had had in Aincrad. Kizmel was by his side throughout, and though she no longer seemed to have the overwhelming strength she had as a Quest NPC, she was still as powerful as would be expected from a player at the same level she was.

Powerful, and smart. If Kirito had somehow retained any doubts that she was more than just another NPC, their journey through the Dragon Floor would've cured them. She was just as quick to pick up his cues as ever, no matter how colloquial he got. Even if she didn't understand the exact reference, she usually managed to get the point.

It wasn't quite like traveling with Asuna. That didn't mean that the experience was worth any less, though. By the time they delved into the labyrinth leading up toward the next floor, Kirito was once again fully comfortable trusting his back to his elven companion.

That did, of course, still leave the question of what the rest of the clearing group would think. Having been busy dealing with the ancient gateway when the floor's field boss was fought by the others, their team had yet to have much contact with the DDA or the KoB since Kizmel arrived. Given that even Argo would only sell information that was directly requested, as far as Kirito knew neither of the guilds was aware of the unexpected assistance.
Until, of course, the boss room was found within the labyrinth, and a strategy meeting was called in Craglen, the town closest to the dungeon pillar...

Friday, June 17, 2023

Walking into the large meeting hall in Craglen that the clearers had co-opted for the boss planning meeting, Kirito felt more self-conscious than he had at such a gathering in months. He'd never been comfortable being at the center of attention, and he was pretty sure he was going to be today.

He wasn't concerned about being recognized. Whether any given clearer still thought of him as the “Beater” or not, they all at least were familiar enough with his presence not to make a fuss; even Kibaou's diehards had mostly accepted that Kirito at least pulled his weight in a boss fight too well to object much now. No, it wasn't his own appearance that he was worried would cause a scene.

With the hours they'd been keeping, it was about the first time he and Kizmel had been around a large gathering of players since the Dark Elf had arrived at the frontlines in the first place. With the chaos the last boss fight had left among the clearing group as a whole, the two of them had mostly slipped through the floor's quests unnoticed.

Not so today. Accompanied in broad daylight by a girl with pointed ears, a trait no player avatar had, Kirito got more than a few double-takes as he and Kizmel moved to join the meeting.

I have to admit the look on Hafner's face is pretty funny, though, Kirito thought, walking past the DDA member standing just inside the meeting hall's entrance. The poor guy looked like he'd seen a ghost—probably, Kirito reflected, remembering Kizmel's dramatic introduction to the clearing guilds way back on the Third Floor.

Getting close to the large room where the other clearers were gathering, Kirito heard voices already speaking. From the sound of it, things had started a few minutes ahead of schedule; he hoped they hadn't missed anything important.

“…We've seen a fair few solos come up, now that Kibaou's group has retreated,” he heard as he reached the door. “People who were afraid to get involved, with his influence. And the KoB's recruiting has gone well; helping the Legend Braves get back on their feet looks like it'll pay off.”

Asuna, Kirito realized, feeling a rush of warmth at how confidently his former partner was addressing a roomful of clearers. Sounds like she's doing okay.

He walked into the room, Kizmel by his side, just in time for another to speak up in worried rebuttal.

“There have been reinforcements, certainly,” the blue-haired man sitting at the opposite end of the hall's central table said, frowning. “Even with the solos, your KoB, and the DDA, however, I'm afraid we'll still be one or two short in the boss raid itself. The numbers just clearing the labyrinth have been lower than on past floors.”

“Word of the last boss fight spread,” Asuna acknowledged calmly. “Players are worried. We're back in the same position we were on the very first floor—and the solution is the same as back then, Lind: win this battle, and prove that those casualties were a fluke.”

Lind. The man didn't look as confident as he usually did; Kirito rather thought his demeanor was reminiscent of just after the Illfang battle, when he'd been rattled by Diavel's death.

Kirito wasn't surprised. Lind had tried very hard to fill Diavel's place, but had never quite duplicated the fallen beta tester's confidence or charisma. The rise of the Knights of Blood was proof enough of that.
Asuna, now—her appearance he could make no quarrel with at all. She was wearing an ornate, red-trimmed white uniform now, fancier than the practical garb he was used to seeing her in, but she wore it well, and her face and voice both held the same confidence that had let her take control of the last floor boss raid when it nearly fell to pieces.

Kirito did admit to himself some puzzlement, though. Although he sat at the table with the KoB contingent as well, dressed in white-trimmed red, the guild's actual leader was completely silent. For whatever reason, Heathcliff seemed content to let his second-in-command do all the talking for now.

“That may be true,” Lind conceded now, as Kirito and Kizmel settled quietly against one wall to watch, “but as I'm sure you're recall, even Illfang wasn't defeated without cost. Indeed, I notice even your own former partner has hardly been seen since reaching this floor—”

“What cost us against Illfang was overconfidence,” Asuna interrupted. “We all know better now. As for Kirito-kun, I'm sure he's just been working alone, like he always does. He'll be here for—” She interrupted herself this time, glancing at the back of the room. “Kirito-kun, there you are! Are you… all… right…?”

Asuna’s startled gaze locked on her now, Kizmel raised a hand in greeting. “Hello, Asuna,” she said with a smile. “It’s been some time.”

In an instant, the cool, collected Knight of Blood was forgotten. Asuna pushed to her feet, hesitated for a moment like she was considering leaping clear over the table, then quickly rushed around it and players gathered around to throw herself at the elf. “Kizmel-chan!”

Kizmel returned the embrace readily. “I am glad to see you're well, Asuna,” she said in the fencer's ear. “When I found Kirito without you, I was worried.”

“I'm just fine, Kizmel-chan. It's just… things happened, that's all. I'm sure Kirito-kun has told you about it by now.” Seeming to remember that there were over forty sets of eyes staring at them, Asuna pulled back, but left her hands on the elf girl's shoulders. “But what are you doing here? I thought—you had other duties?”

Kirito coughed, covering a chuckle at Asuna's echo of his own verbal stumbles the previous week. At least he wasn't the only one still having trouble mentally translating things.

“My people are at peace, so I was given leave to rejoin your struggle, Asuna. I hope there is no objection to my joining your upcoming battle?”

Kirito wondered about that, taking the rare chance of no one paying any attention to him to look them all over. Some of them had at least seen Kizmel before, like Lind himself—who, Kirito noticed, was looking at least as poleaxed as Hafner had. Most of those present, though, had no idea who Kizmel was, not having been part of the clearing group when Kirito and Asuna had run their strange variation of the Elf War quest line. Despite the lack of cursor indoors, they could tell she was an NPC, and that just made things even more confusing.

One or two of those players did have the presence of mind to shoot Kirito questioning looks. He just smiled blandly in return, feeling absolutely no need to let them know that, honestly, he was just as confused as they were. He'd built his rep on being nearly as knowledgeable as Argo the Rat, after all.

“Well, I certainly don't mind!” Asuna declared. Turning to her own guildmaster, she gave Heathcliff a look that somehow managed to be both respectful and challenging. “Leader?”

Heathcliff gazed at Kizmel for a long moment, face inscrutable. Kirito thought there was some
measure of curiosity in his steel-gray eyes, but the expression of a man who remained calm in the face of the disaster that was The Adamantine Arachnid wasn't an easy one to read.

“Given that we were just discussing our potential shortage of fighters,” he said at last, “I certainly see no reason to turn down an offer of assistance, however… unorthodox.” He turned to the other guild leader, raising one eyebrow fractionally. “Lind? Do you have any objection?”

Lind stared several seconds longer, then shook himself. “No,” he managed. “No, that's fine with me. I expect Kizmel-san's participation will be of particular benefit to Kirito, given recent changes in organization.”

*Translation, with Asuna finally having come to her senses, I'll have a partner just as strange as me, who probably can't be teamed with anybody else anyway. Kirito shrugged internally. If that's how you have to see it, Lind, fine. I don't know why you still think I really care about your opinion.*

“Then I believe it's settled.” Heathcliff nodded to the elf. “Welcome to the clearing group, Kizmel-kun.”

Kizmel brought her fist to her chest in salute. “Thank you… Guildmaster Heathcliff, I believe Kirito said? I look forward to working with you.”

Kirito wasn't sure that was quite the end of it, since most of the players—DDA, KoB, and solo alike—didn't have the least idea what was going on. Most of them, though, seemed willing enough to defer to Heathcliff for now, and if there were some confused mutters about NPCs and Beaters, Asuna's glare was enough to keep them quiet.

A glare that quickly turned back to a smile, when the KoB sub-commander turned back to the elf girl. “I really am glad to see you, Kizmel-chan,” she said softly. “I have guild duties now, but after the battle, I'd like to talk more.”

“Of course, Asuna,” Kizmel said, with an answering smile. “We have a great deal of catching up to do, don't we? Although I expect my life has been less interesting than yours, since we parted in the capital.”

Asuna reluctantly released Kizmel's shoulders and headed back to her place with the KoB contingent, motioning with a glance for Kizmel and Kirito to sit at the far end of the table. Not, Kirito knew, as an insult, but because Asuna knew him well enough to know he preferred some distance.

He was grateful for that. He might've been getting used to the idea of not being allowed to go completely solo, but large groups were something he still wasn't comfortable with, and figured he probably never would be.

From there, Kirito assumed the meeting would get back on topic. Just as he and Kizmel were sitting down, though, one of the mutters from farther down the table got just loud enough not to be ignored.

“An NPC, in a boss fight, with no quest?” It was Shivata, Kirito thought, another of the original DDA members. “Am I the only one who thinks that's just a little strange?”

Asuna was quick to turn her sharp gaze on him again, but before she could really turn up the intensity of her glare, Heathcliff raised a hand. “I admit to being curious myself,” he said. “Kirito-kun, may I ask just how you gained Kizmel-kun's friendship to begin with? I've not heard of such a close alliance between human and elf before.”

The KoB guildmaster was being careful to use terms that didn't break immersion, too, Kirito noticed curiously. He wondered about that… The only reaction he allowed himself to show, though, was a
small smile and an apologetic shrug. “Sorry, Heathcliff, but I don’t think Argo would appreciate my giving that information away for free.”

That was true enough. More importantly, in Kirito’s mind, was that it delayed Asuna from asking any questions about just how long Kizmel had been traveling with him, and what exactly they’d been doing. It wasn’t like Argo was in a position to answer anything directly just then, anyway.

Heathcliff’s eyebrow went up again. “Is that so? Hm… Fair enough.” He looked over to the farthest corner of the room, and raised his voice. “Argo-kun. How much for that story?”

Kirito started, and whipped his head in that direction. He hadn’t even realized Argo was present, but there she was, leaning so still and quiet against the wall that he’d overlooked her completely. *I shouldn’t have*, he thought, mentally kicking himself. *Argo’s almost never around for a boss fight, but she does turn up for the planning…*

The self-styled Rat grinned. “Three thousand Cor for the grand tale of the Elf War, Master Heathcliff,” she answered, crossing her arms. “Another five hundred for the story behind Kizmel’s arrival here.”

“A fair price,” Heathcliff said with a nod. Briefly manipulating his menu to materialize a pouch of coins, he set it on the table and slid it over toward the info broker.

Argo stepped over to retrieve it, tucked it under her cloak, and slid a slim pamphlet over in return. “Pleasure doing business with you, Master Heathcliff.”

Kirito gulped. Asuna’s gaze was shifting rapidly between him, Kizmel, Heathcliff, and the Rat, growing more suspicious by the moment. Finally, she said, “Argo. A copy of that last, please.”

There was definitely something sharp in Argo’s grin now, as the five-hundred-Cor coin was exchanged for a slimmer collection of pages. One which, Kirito noticed, she’d pulled right from her belt pouch, not having needed to go into her inventory for it.

*I am so doomed. The boss will be the easy part of today…*

Kizmel leaned closer to him. “Argo is certainly a clever bargainer,” she whispered. “Is such a simple tale truly so valuable?”

The rest of the gathered players were finally getting to the business of actually discussing boss battle strategy. Kirito… just laid his head on the table and groaned.

No more mountains, no more caves. The Twenty-Seventh Floor was a place of open fields and green forests, not too different from the areas closest to the City of Beginnings, and much brighter than the last two floors had been. Doubtless there were monsters in the tall grass and hiding among the tree branches, but the atmosphere was still somehow more optimistic.

Part of it, Kirito supposed, might’ve been purely psychological. After all, reaching Skirloft had come on the heels of the most costly battle the players had yet faced, where by contrast the arrival at the town of Florencia was a victory march.

Not that Sharza the Corrupted Dragon had been *easy*, especially since the raid group had been two people short of full, but they’d pulled it off without a single casualty. Naga of the Divine Dragons had gotten himself flung into a wall hard enough to put his HP in the red once, and that was about the worst of it.
“I hate flying mobs,” Asuna sighed, idly swirling her cup of moontear wine. “But at least it couldn’t cling to the ceiling like that spider. Thank goodness for enclosed spaces.”

Under the circumstances, Heathcliff had given her a couple of hours off when the clearing group emerged onto the new floor, allowing her time to catch up with old party members before she got back to organizing the KoB’s share of the spoils. The three of them were gathered now in a cafe a good distance from the town’s entrance, far enough that other players likely wouldn’t be arriving for a little while, at least.

“I heard the field boss, Torza, was pretty tough because of that,” Kirito agreed, between bites of the pastry he’d ordered. “Kizmel and I were busy with about a dozen fire-breathing wyverns in the Gateway Chamber at the time, so we missed it. Lucky us?”

Asuna favored him with a disdainful glance, though there was humor glinting in her eyes. “Yeah, sure, lucky you. You do know you missed out on a pretty good LA Bonus, right?” She thumped the light chestplate she wore over her KoB uniform. “Dragonscale Armor. Argo says I probably won’t find better for a couple floors yet.”

The gamer in Kirito’s soul cried out at the lost opportunity, but he firmly suppressed the reaction. “That’s not the kind of armor I wear anyway,” he said, with as much dignity as he could muster.

“Yeah, of course.” She rolled her eyes. “You even missed the LA on Sharza, though. Good job, Kizmel-chan.”

Kizmel glanced up from her inspection of the blade she’d laid on the table before her. “I only did my part,” she said modestly. “It’s mere coincidence that mine was the final blow. Not,” she admitted, “that I do not appreciate the reward. The blade Her Majesty entrusted to me remains a great honor, but I fear the foes on these higher floors might soon be too much for it.”

The sword that lay between them now was a saber, much like the blade of the Pagoda Knights that Kizmel had used up to that point. It bore a more golden sheen, though, and Kirito’s quick check of its stats had revealed it to be much stronger than its predecessor. The Corrupted Sword of the Order would, he suspected, serve Kizmel for at least the next five floors.

Knowing that his former partner and current one would both be better protected was enough to offset the sting of having missed two consecutive Last Attack Bonuses. No question about it. And he really didn’t use much metal armor, and had never used a saber at all since the beta.

Definitely better that the items went to those two.

“Enough about items and bosses, though.” Asuna sipped at her wine, turning a serious gaze on the elf. “You’re really joining the clearing group, Kizmel-chan?”

Kizmel nodded. “For as long as I’m not needed by my Kingdom, yes. From what Her Majesty said, my presence will likely not be required there for the foreseeable future; with peace made with the Forest Elves, and the Fallen Elves defeated, there simply aren’t any noteworthy threats.”

“Peace, huh… It must be nice,” Asuna said wistfully.

“It does make serve to make all our sacrifices worth it.” Kizmel picked up her own cup of wine, gazing down at the dark liquid. “…I only wish that Tilnel were here to see it…”

Kirito exchanged a quick look with Asuna. To this day, they didn’t know for certain if Kizmel’s sister had existed at all, given the nature of Aincrad and its quests; it was just as likely that Kizmel herself hadn’t existed as such until the moment they got in range to see her confrontation with a Forest Elf.
And yet—Kizmel did have some faint memories of the beta test, even if she didn't understand them. Clearly, there was something about her that had existed before that day, somehow.

Kirito had mulled the whole thing over often, in the days they'd fought beside Kizmel. By now, he'd decided to believe that Tilnel had been real, however briefly. The timing of SAO's launch, over a month before the beginning of that first Elf War quest, made it just barely possible. That was good enough for him.

Kizmel visibly shook off the old memories, and looked up at her companions with a smile. “Well. If I'm to be honest, that really is part of what inspired me to come all this way, Asuna. I was… well, feeling lonely. The two of you were better friends to me than any I'd had before, and aiding your quest seemed a better use of my time than pointlessly patrolling a peaceful kingdom, alone.”

Friend. That was something Kirito wasn't used to being called, as close as he'd always been to being a true hikikomori. He'd had people on his friends lists in various MMOs, of course, but that was just a gameplay mechanic; none of those on it had ever been anything more than occasional allies on virtual battlefields.

She was right, though. Kizmel and Asuna, even that troll of a Rat Argo, they were his friends. Agil was edging close, too, and if he hadn't left the samurai that first day, he supposed Klein could've been one, but these girls were the people who'd gotten closest to him in a long, long time.

It felt strange, but not bad. Kirito wasn't sure he deserved it, after the way he'd abandoned Klein to protect his own skin, yet he couldn't bring himself to push it away. He wanted the warmth it brought him.

Asuna reached across the table to take Kizmel's hand. “You're always welcome here, Kizmel-chan,” she said firmly. “You are our friend.” She smiled warmly. “I'm really glad to see you again. I missed you.”

“Thank you, Asuna.” Kizmel took a sip from her glass, and lifted an eyebrow. “So how are you doing? Now that you've joined a guild, that is. Kirito said you've been involved in setting the organization up?”

“Ah, that.” The fencer leaned back with a sigh. “Well, it hasn't been dangerous… but I admit the field boss was actually kind of a relief. The KoB is still small, but I never realized how much work went into establishing a guild.” She shot a glance at Kirito. “You've been doing this kind of thing for years, you could've warned me!”

He raised his hands. ‘Hey, solo, remember? Like I know anything about being part of a guild? I only knew about the quest to set one up because I was in PUGs with a few people who were in guilds. I sure don't know anything about what's involved in guild leadership.”

“Oh, right… Figures.” Asuna shook her head. “I guess I just got used to you knowing everything else about these situations… Next time I'll ask Argo.”

“She isn't part of a guild, either,” Kizmel pointed out. “I believe she once said it would be a 'conflict of interest’?”

“Sure, but have you ever found anything she didn't know?”

Kizmel hesitated, then shook her head with a chuckle. “Point taken. I sometimes worry she knows more about my own Kingdom's military deployments than I do.”

Kirito wouldn't have been too surprised if that was true. Especially since the Dark Elves'
deployments” were limited to the needs of SAO’s quests, and thus easy enough for a determined player to track down. Good thing she’s not likely to sell to hostile NPCs. She might sell practically anything to other players, but she’s not going to actively sabotage the clearing, no matter how much Cor she’s offered.

Asuna sobered. “So yeah, I’m doing okay, but… I admit I was worried about Kirito-kun.” She shot him quick glance, more open than she usually was with him. “I know, I know, you were the one who always told me I should join a guild if the right person asked, and I know you think I’m strong enough now not to need your help, but I still didn't like the idea of you going back to being solo. Especially not after how bad that spider was.”

“He will not be alone, Asuna,” Kizmel assured her. “My sword will be with his.”

“Thank you, Kizmel-chan. That takes a real load off me.” Asuna downed the last of her Moontear wine, sighed once more, and stood. “Well, I suppose I should be getting back to the guild now. We’ll have to start planning the exploration of this floor soon, after all.”

The other two stood as well. “We’ll probably be going on ahead, then,” Kirito told her. “Last time, we had a late start, then pulled ahead, and still managed to miss an entire boss. We’re not letting that happen again.”

She reached out to touch her fist to his. “Then I’d better be seeing you in the field, Kirito-kun. If I catch you slacking off, you’d better believe I’ll call you on it.” Despite her words, she was smiling. “I know we’re not partners anymore… but I’m looking forward to still working with you on clearing, Kirito-kun.”

“Likewise,” he said, and somewhat to his own surprise meant it. “I may be solo—er, almost solo—but we’re still working toward the same goal. Just don’t let the DDA get too far ahead of you, okay? I'm sick of Lind posturing at being 'Diavel's successor'. “

“Believe me, I hated that even more than you did.” Asuna turned to Kizmel, and pulled the elf into a sisterly hug. “I’m really glad you’re back,” she said into Kizmel's shoulder. “I wish we had more time to talk… Now, I can’t be looking out for Kirito-kun all the time, so take care of him for me, will you, Kizmel-chan? You know how reckless he can be.”

The dusky girl nodded against Asuna's hair. “You have my word, Asuna. As a knight—no, as a sister-in-arms. We will see this journey through to the very end, all of us. To the Ruby Palace itself.”

Chapter End Notes

I admit this chapter was one of the weaker ones. The first chapter was supposed to be longer, but I ended up cutting it short to post it in time for the anniversary of my joining Fanfiction.net. The leftovers became Chapter II--but there wasn't enough for a full chapter, so a lot of filler was hastily created.

That was probably the last time I had too "little" material.

Only other thing of note here is that yes, the spelling "Cor" is used intentionally. Apparently one of the Sword Art Offline specials revealed it's supposed to be an acronym for "Coin of Radius", so the official localization evidently got things wrong. Not having watched the Offline specials, I can't guarantee that information is accurate,
but it seems logical enough to me.
Chapter III: Black Cat Requiem I

It was the dreams that spurred her into action.

Originally, they'd begun the night after she first met the human Swordmaster in black. Dreams of the battle with a Forest Elf, a battle he and his elegant fencer companion had helped her to win—except in the dreams, his companion was not a lady fencer, but a small group of other young swordsmen. Their faces changed, depending on the dream, as did his garb.

One thing that was constant between them was that in the end, she always died, as he looked on sadly.

That was part of what had driven her to join his small party, following even when his aims had little to do with her own people. She wanted to know why he affected her so deeply, and what it meant that she dreamt so consistently of fighting alongside him, only to die in his defense. It meant something, she was sure of it; he'd never explained, but she could see he recognized something from her descriptions of the dreams. They were more than just her mind playing on her own fears.

Across seven floors, though, she'd never found an answer, and when they'd finally parted ways on the Ninth Floor, the dreams had stopped.

For months after, she'd patrolled her people's capital, relieved by the end of the war yet still feeling somehow unfulfilled. In time of peace, her own homeland held none of the excitement of traveling with him, with the black-clad swordsman and the fencer she'd come to regard like her own sister. She was restless, unused to having no battles to fight.

More than that, she felt alone. Somehow, the other Dark Elves in the capital felt flat, utterly lacking the rich warmth, humor, and shared experience that the two humans with whom she'd once traveled possessed. Maybe it was just that, in the heavily-guarded city, none of them had ever seen battle themselves. Maybe it was more than that. She wasn't sure.

She wasn't sure what to do about it, either. There simply were no more battles for her to fight, as a Pagoda Knight. With the coming of peace, it seemed as if the entire Kingdom had lost something.

Then the dreams came again, and she realized what it was she really wanted to do. There were no battles the Kingdom needed her to fight, but there was still something for her personally: a quest, as her human friends might have put it. Dreams she still wanted to know the meaning of, and friends she wanted to help.

She'd seldom felt so relieved as when Her Majesty granted her request to take a leave of absence, and seek out the two humans who had once done so much for the Kingdom of Lyusula. She had taken only enough time to gather her few belongings and inform the commander of her Knighthood, then set off at once for the Pillars of the Heavens that the humans used, which would take her higher in the Steel Castle than her people's trees.

She'd told her Queen the truth: that she felt a debt of honor to the Swordmasters who helped save their Kingdom. More than that, though, she just wanted to be with her friends.
Kizmel wanted to know what the meaning behind the dreams was. What, exactly, the connection was between her and the Swordmaster Kirito, who threw himself into the conquest of Aincrad with greater fervor than any Elf or even human than she'd ever known.

Why did she dream about him, so soon after they met and so often? Why did he look so sad? And why, when she spoke of it, did he seem to be hiding something?

July 10th, 2023

Kizmel had learned a great deal about the Swordmasters, the immensely powerful warriors Aincrad's bastions of human society had summoned to protect them, since first meeting Kirito and Asuna. More than she had about the people the Swordmasters championed, certainly.

Her friends had done much to educate her on the strange dialect most of them borrowed heavily from, though even they often seemed baffled by the speech used by Guildmaster Kibaou—Kirito had once muttered something odd about “Kansai-ben”, but had been too busy to elaborate at the time—and apparently couldn't find equivalents of some terms at all. That had gone far to smooth interaction with the other “clearers”, the group of Swordmasters most active in conquering Aincrad.

Just as much as she'd learned, though, Kizmel still found strange. Such as why, exactly, they had to be so cautious, almost furtive, in their expedition to the Eleventh Floor.

As they made their way down the hallway of a dungeon in an out-of-the-way corner of that floor, hunting Giant Bats, Kizmel gave voice to her confusion. “Tell me, Kirito. I understand that this ruin has more of the monsters needed for tempering your sword—but why is it so important that we be so discreet? I've not known you to be concerned about others being angry over something as simple as improving your own weapons or armor.”

Kirito was silent for a long moment, peering down the hall with a glow in his eyes she'd learned to associate with the heightened senses Swordmasters could invoke. The pause, she suspected, was as much from concentration on his task as it was from trying to decide how to explain yet another human oddity.

“More bats, about twenty meters away,” he announced quietly. “As for why I want to be sneaky… Um. Well, it comes down to this: you know how all Swordmasters arrived in Aincrad with the same strength and equipment, right?”

“So I understand,” she confirmed, taking a position on his left flank as they moved toward their hopefully unsuspecting targets. “The charm that summoned you gave you all equal power and armament on arrival, right?” She hadn't met any Swordmasters until they'd been in Aincrad for over a month, but she knew the stories fairly well. Better, once she'd had incentive to learn more.

“That's close enough… Well, that meant we all began this quest on an equal footing. Theoretically. Practically speaking, some of us took to fighting better than others, and some of us were… let's say better informed on how to find the things we needed to become stronger.” They reached the doorway leading to where Kirito had sensed the Giant Bats. “That led to a gap between groups of Swordmasters. Some of us are simply stronger and more capable than others—and people being people, that got a lot of resentment brewing.”

They positioned themselves to either side of the door, weapons ready. “This is related to why Guildmaster Kibaou hates you?”

“There's more than a few people who think people like me got an unfair advantage,” Kirito acknowledged. “Enough of one that it looked like there might be violence, for a while. …Hang on,
here they come."

They'd been very quiet, after reaching the threshold, but Giant Bats had excellent hearing. From Kizmel's experience, just the sound of two swordsmen breathing would be enough to get their attention, when close enough, and the sudden eruption of enraged squeaking proved her right.

Unluckily for the Giant Bats, they were up against two warriors who had recently descended from killing the Pillar Guardian blocking the way to the Thirtieth Floor. Kizmel launched herself forward, her Corrupted Sword of the Order trailing crimson light in the simple but effective Reaver technique; to her right, Kirito was pulled along by the azure glow of a Sonic Leap.

Two blades that could and did threaten Pillar Guardians from much higher up the Steel Castle tore the bats to pieces, shattering them into glimmering triangles like all the dead of Aincrad.

Kizmel exchanged a human “high-five” with Kirito, then watched with some envy as he examined the plunder from their fallen foes through his Mystic Scribing. She knew he had been envious, a time or two in the past, of the items she'd been gifted as a Pagoda Knight, but in her view that all-purpose human charm was much more impressive.

She'd learned to interact with it herself, when conjured by a human. She still hoped to somehow obtain full use, someday.

“Well, there's the Giant Bat Fangs I needed,” Kirito announced, waving the immaterial writing away. “I think that just leaves the Bony Rat Exoskeletons you need for your chestplate, and then we're done here.”

“I'm glad. It is getting rather late.” No doubt his Mystic Scribing gave him a more accurate estimate, but her own thought was that it was past nine at night. With how remote these ruins were, it would nearing midnight before they returned to town. “You were saying, before the fight?”

“Hm? Oh, right.” Kirito grimaced, shrugging shoulders encased in black leather in a way that seemed to deliberately emphasize the coat. “It never actually came to blows, but it was a close one, right after we defeated Illfang. I managed to head things off, but… I kind of painted a target on my back in the process.”

That much didn't surprise Kizmel. More than once, she'd seen him defuse a conflict between others by deliberately drawing ire onto himself. Once, if she and Asuna hadn't been there, she wasn't sure he wouldn't have been hurt. For someone who always seemed to be alone, Kirito came across as nearly incapable of not helping others, even at great risk to himself.

“I take it Kibaou was there, then,” she said, putting his words together with what she'd seen of Kibaou's behavior toward him in the past.

“When I first got labeled 'Beater’?” Kirito nodded. “Yeah. Kibaou admired the raid leader, Diavel, a lot, and blamed me for Diavel's death. Not that he was alone in that, but Lind, at least, seemed to get over it… Well, even Kibaou had mellowed some by the time the Twenty-Fifth Floor boss finally drove him off the frontlines.” Another shrug, and he turned to head back into the hall. “Anyway, what it boils down to is that there's still a wide gap between clearers and non-clearers, and there's still finite resources for everybody to use.”

The puzzle started to come together in Kizmel's mind. “Lesser warriors are farther behind, still using lesser equipment and hunting on lower floors…”

“And they don't exactly like it when people who 'don't need it' poach their hunting grounds.” He
nodded again, giving her a smile that looked strangely surprised by—proud of?—her insight. “Now, what we're doing is pretty harmless, really. The gear that uses these items can't even be used by the kind of Swordmasters that are still on this floor. But they won't have any reason to believe that that's all we're after, so things could get a bit sticky if anybody catches us here.”

Now it all made sense. Kizmel still had some questions, especially as to why the Swordmasters seemed to be such a divided group in the first place—weren't they all supposed to be fighting toward the same goal, after all?—but within the framework of such divisions, Kirito's concerns were perfectly understandable. Humans and Dark Elves were very different people, but plain envy was a sin Elves were just as prone to.

She did notice, though, that he left unsaid that he was probably in more danger than almost anyone else. Kizmel suspected the initial stigma of being the “Beater”—whatever that meant—had worn off by now, if only because of how few people had been present for the incident, and because of how solitary Kirito's own habits were; but she could read between the lines well enough to know there was something about him that would label him as a strong Swordmaster on sight.

Herself. As far as she was aware, no other elf, be they Dark, Forest, or Fallen, had entered such a close partnership with any human. Even those who had not seen the Swordmaster Diavel die, had never laid eyes on Kirito himself before, would recognize their partnership as unusual the moment they saw her ears.

“I see,” Kizmel said finally, accompanying her friend back into the dungeon's labyrinthine corridors. “Then by all means, let us be quick, and quiet. Of course,” she reminded him with a reassuring smile, “if need be, we can hide quite well.”

Kirito looked at her in momentary confusion, blinked, and then gave her a relieved grin in return. “Right, the cloak. How could I forget? Well, then, as long as we don't get into a fight when others are nearby, we should be fine.”

A sound plan, and one that kept both their spirits' up as they resumed their hunt for Bony Rats. With Kirito's uncanny ability to sense anything that wasn't outright invisible, and a few things that were, they were unlikely to be caught unawares. They'd have plenty of time to conceal themselves, if other Swordmasters wandered by.

Of course, neither of them counted on hearing an entire party of them yelling for help.

A pack of goblins. That was the first thing Kizmel noticed, as she and her partner rushed toward the sounds of battle. Though quite weak, especially compared to her own strength, they tended to travel in greater numbers than other foes of this dungeon, and it appeared someone had managed to attract more than one group of them.

She and Kirito could easily have dispatched even that number of them, or at the least cut a path of retreat. To a group of Swordmasters of the skill level that would normally be fighting on this floor, though, it was very possibly a lethal situation.

Desire to avoid trouble or no, she wasn't surprised when Kirito rushed right into the rear of the goblin pack. “Hang on!” he called out to the besieged party, and launched a Horizontal Square at the first goblin to get within reach. A slash from right to left caught it in the back, then his sword reversed, with the second blow leading right into a spinning third, culminating in a final forehand slice.

Flawless, as always. Far more than was necessary to kill one goblin, really—and it left him overextended for a moment, delayed by the backlash of his own technique.
They both knew exactly what to do in that kind of situation, though. By the time Kirito called “Switch!”, Kizmel had already leveled the point of her saber at a knot of goblins trying to gut a black-haired girl with a spear, who flailed ineffectually in defense.

Kizmel didn’t slow as she approached. Instead, as white light began to gather around the tip of her blade, she accelerated, feet blurring as she pushed her body to its limits. Letting out a shout, when the light reached its brightest she surrendered herself to the Sword Skill’s pull.

Propelled by the power of the charm, her feet left the floor entirely, and she crashed right through three of the goblins, the shockwave of her passage scattering two more to either side. Strewn about like they’d been caught in a storm, the malformed mockeries of civilized kind shattered into glittering azure shards.

She made a mental note to thank Viscount Yofilis for teaching her that technique, when she could. Mastering it had been difficult, and its use was somewhat situational, but it had served her very well indeed.

“Stay back!” Kirito instructed the apparent leader of the group, spinning to face another of the goblins. “We’ll handle this!”

The staff-wielding young man nodded jerkily, eyes wide. “Thank you! We’ll be counting on you, then!”

“Don’t worry,” Kizmel told the girl she’d rescued, recovering from the position her Flashing Penetrator had left her in. “You’re safe now.”

She didn’t wait for a reply, instead tearing into another goblin with a Reaver, taking the weak monster’s head off with a single blow. In the recoil from the strike, before she could attack again, one more roared at her and tried to lop off her sword arm, but her bracer held off the blow easily enough; a mace wielder from the party they were rescuing then ventured a quavering yell and bashed the back of its skull.

Not enough to kill the abomination, but easily enough to knock it off-balance long enough for Kizmel to recover hers and skewer it.

Against a party of appropriate strength to the Eleventh Floor, a dozen or so goblins was a terrifying threat. To a pair of clearers, who routinely scouted areas guilds would normally take entire parties into, they were more of a warmup, a welcome change from the monotony of hunting individual monsters—Swordmasters called them mobs, Kizmel reminded herself—for hides and teeth.

With the occasional aid from the rescued party, Kirito and Kizmel made quick work of the goblins. A short period of bright flashes and shattering noises, and the only occupants of the hallway were five humans and one Dark Elf.

After cutting down the last of the pack, Kirito swept his gaze up and down the corridor, eyes glowing a vivid green. A few moments of intense concentration later, he nodded sharply and relaxed his stance. He swept his sword up to his left, back down to his right, and then sheathed it, a pattern Kizmel had frequently noticed him following after a fight but had never gotten around to asking about.

“That’s all of them in this part of the dungeon,” he announced, turning back to the group they’d just saved. “Still, you should probably head back to town, for now…” Kirito trailed off, noticing they didn’t seem to be listening. “Um. Guys?”
The leader shook himself, but didn’t quite take his eyes off what had distracted him. “Oh! Ah, thank you, er…?”

“I’m Kirito,” her partner said, bowing. “This is my partner, Kizmel.”

Kizmel bowed in turn, then saluted in the manner of her own people. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” she said. “I hope we were in time?”

That was something she was concerned about. In addition to the staff-wielding leader, the lancer girl, and the youth with the mace, there was another spearman and a boy with a dagger—five Swordmasters, and one short of the maximum that could be bound in a party by Mystic Scribing. Kizmel hoped they were simply a party of five to begin with, and that she and Kirito hadn’t arrived too late for someone.

“Er, yes, Kizmel-san,” the lancer girl said, bowing deeply. “Thank you very much for your help!”

Kizmel relaxed. All five of them were clearly hurt—Kirito, she knew, would be able to tell more accurately, with his full use of Mystic Scribing—but among the Swordmasters, any wound that wasn’t fatal could always be mended well enough.

If they’d suffered no casualties, then she could guess easily enough why they seemed to startled. Their leader’s stare was proof enough.

“Thank you for the help, Kirito-san,” that leader said again. “But, ah, if you don’t mind me asking… isn’t that an NPC? How…”

NPC. Kizmel had heard Swordmasters use the term many times, in the months she’d traveled among them. It didn’t seem to refer strictly to non-humans, as she’d known Kirito and Asuna to use it in reference to humans who weren’t Swordmasters; conversely, they’d seemed quite uncertain whether the expression applied to her.

She’d asked, once, what exactly it meant, but after some thought Kirito had shrugged helplessly and said he couldn’t think of a precise translation. In general, it seemed to refer to any denizen of Aincrad that was neither Swordmaster nor hostile; the fact that she seemed an exception to that made defining it any more clearly apparently difficult.

From the look of things, Kirito was just as much at a loss to explain the distinction to these Swordmasters as to Kizmel. “That’s… kind of a long story,” he said finally, scratching the back of his head. “For now, just take my word for it that Kizmel’s not much different from any player, in a fight or out.”

Player. Another word they can’t seem to translate for me. Certainly Kizmel knew one definition of the word, but it didn’t seem to make sense in the context Swordmasters used it. Kirito had told her, once, that he hoped to be able explain it someday, but for now she lacked the proper frame of reference. Something to do with the world they were called from, I suppose…

For now, Kizmel filed the thought away, and stepped into the conversational gap the confusion had left. “Perhaps we can talk more about it in town,” she suggested. “For now, may we escort you out of the dungeon?” She shot a quick glance at Kirito, but as she expected, he only nodded in agreement. For all his attempts at staying out of the spotlight, he never could seem to turn down a chance to help someone.

The party conversed among themselves only briefly, before their leader turned back and bowed. “We’ll be in your care then, thank you. I was starting to become concerned about our supply of
potions.” He hesitated. “Could we talk more in town? At the least, we should treat you two, in thanks for your help.”

It was Kirito's turn to hesitate, and Kizmel's to nod encouragingly. She hadn't dealt much with Swordmasters outside of battle, other than the two friends who had helped her so much, and she was genuinely interested in meeting more of them. For one thing, she was beginning to notice something curious about the summoned warriors in general…

“Okay, then,” Kirito said, offering a smile that might have been just a little nervous. “But first, let's get out of this place. Kizmel and I were just finished here, anyway, so we can head straight for the exit.”

“Cheers!”

Taft was the “central” town of the Eleventh Floor, but for all that it was fairly small. It was also fairly sparsely populated by Swordmasters, the frontlines having long since been pushed far above; finding a tavern that was unoccupied save by local townspeople hadn't been difficult.

That left plenty of room for Kirito, Kizmel, and the party they'd rescued to gather around a table and finish proper introductions. That had led into a toast, and if the drinks available at this human tavern weren't up to the standards of elven Moontear wine, it was still more than acceptable to Kizmel's tastes.

Even if she did find it a little strange to be toasted for her efforts. She was used to dealing with the clearers, among whom a rescue such as the one she and Kirito had pulled off would've been a reason for a quick thanks and little more; on the frontlines, after all, any such debt was likely enough to be repaid in kind soon enough.

These weren't clearers, though, she reminded herself as she sipped her wine. If she'd understood Kirito's explanation well enough, they were more akin to a training cadre, apprentice knights holding rear guard positions.

“Thanks again for your help,” the party's leader, Keita, said, lifting his flagon in salute. “Honestly, we bit off a bit more than we could chew there. I was starting to think we weren't going to make it, and then you two showed up.” He smiled, looking a bit sheepish. “Truth is, our party arrangement isn't the best. We're working on it, but…”

Privately, Kizmel agreed with the assessment. Humans in general and Swordmasters in particular used very different deployments than her own people did, but she'd had months to get a feel for their tactics. The Moonlit Black Cats, as they called themselves, had an eclectic, inefficient collection of styles, being led by a staff-wielder, backed by the lancers Sasamaru and Sachi, macer Tetsuo, and knife-wielding self-proclaimed thief Ducker.

None of them had bad setups individually, from what Kizmel had seen, but only Tetsuo was really suited to take the fight directly to the enemy.

“If you don't mind me saying,” she began diffidently, “you might be better off with at least one more close-in fighter. Someone with a sword and shield, perhaps? I mean no offense to Ducker, but his style is better suited to flanking attacks.”

“Thieves are kind of supposed to take the enemy by surprise, yeah,” Ducker agreed, scratching the back of his head ruefully. “We're not supposed to get in the thick of it.”

“I don't disagree,” Keita said, nodding. He gave her a strange look for a moment, the same Kizmel
had gotten used to seeing on clearers before she became well-known on the frontlines, but continued, “Actually, I was thinking that we should switch Sachi here to exactly that, but… She's kind of nervous about trying something new.”

“Can you blame me?” Sachi said plaintively. “It's scary enough just holding monsters off with a spear. If I get close enough to use a sword, when I haven't even used one before, who knows what would happen!”

A black-haired girl that Kizmel judged to be a little older than Kirito—always harder to judge with humans, with their shorter lives but quick climb to maturity, compared to Dark Elves—Sachi seemed the most aware of the Black Cats, other than Keita. The others didn't look very subdued by their near-death experience, while those two appeared acutely aware of the close call.

“It can be unnerving at first,” Kirito said to Sachi, nodding. “But once you get used to it, it's not so bad. Especially if you've got a full party with you.”

“You guys seem to manage with just two,” Sasamaru pointed out. “Can't be that bad.”

“Says the guy who hasn't volunteered to swap out his spear for a sword,” Tetsuo shot back, rolling his eyes. “I really could use a little help up front, y'know.”

“Some people take to it more easily than others, Sasamaru,” Keita told him. “Still…” He turned his attention back to Kirito, started to speak again, then hesitated. “Ah, Kirito-san… I know it's rude to ask, but I can tell you must be stronger than we are. I mean, you've got an NPC with you and all…”

“You don't need to be so formal with me, Keita,” Kirito said, giving a slightly bitter smile. “I don't think you'd be feeling so polite if you knew more.”

He paused there, looking at Kizmel. After a moment, she understood, and once more gave him an encouraging nod. At this point, there seemed little point in concealing anything. If the Black Cats knew the truth of Kirito's strength, they would either hate him, or not; but it wasn't something that could be hidden forever. Lying about it wouldn't do anyone any good at all.

Kirito grimaced, but looked back to Keita. “The truth is, I'm a bit over Level Forty,” he said, describing his own strength according to the odd numerical shorthand Swordmasters used for such things. “Kizmel and I were only here because we needed a few items to enhance our equipment; after that we were going to go right back to the higher floors. You may not believe me, but we really weren't going to try and edge out any of the lower-level players.”

He tensed visibly when he was finished, waiting for their reactions. And, as he'd suggested to Kizmel not three hours earlier, the air in the tavern did seem to get colder as his words sank in. Like he'd said, he could claim not to be competing for resources, but actions spoke louder than words, and preconceptions were louder still.

Sachi doesn't look bothered, Kizmel thought, glancing at the anxious girl. At least, not by Kirito. But Tetsuo and Sasamaru—

Just as Keita started to open his mouth, a conflicted expression on his face, Ducker suddenly snapped his fingers. “Wait a second!” he said, cutting through the tension. “Black coat, sword and no shield, teamed up with a Dark Elf… Are you the Black Swordsman?”

Tension vanished, replaced by surprise and no little confusion. Surprise from the Black Cats, who collectively turned to look at Ducker, confusion from Kirito and Kizmel both, who glanced at each other and then joined in the group stare. “Er… 'Black Swordsman'?” Kirito repeated.
“Yeah! Really strong fighter, usually seen just with an NPC outside of boss raids. Is that you?”

“That would seem to be us, yes,” Kizmel ventured uncertainly. “At least, I’ve not seen any Swordmasters working with, ah, ‘NPCs’ since the war between my people and the Forest Elves ended. Were there any on the frontlines, I’m sure we would’ve noticed.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.” Kirito set his drink aside. “I hadn’t heard the ‘Black Swordsman’ thing before, but…”

“It might not be the kind of thing people say to your face.” Keita turned back to him, visibly relaxing. “This is the first I’ve even heard of you being on a floor this far down. That doesn’t sound like someone who’d be out to hog all the good drops.”

“I’ve heard a few stories,” Sachi put in cautiously, a smile edging its way back onto her face. “Something about being the first ‘Beater’? But someone who works that hard on the frontline couldn’t be that kind of person.”

The festive atmosphere was quickly returning now, to Kizmel’s relief. It probably didn’t matter much if one small guild took a dislike to them; Kirito had endured the Aincrad Liberation Squad’s scorn and the DDA’s condescension well enough. Even so, she didn't want her partner burdened by yet more of that, when she knew well he did truly want nothing more than to help.

Still, she couldn’t help but chuckle. “Actually,” she said, when the Black Cats looked at her askance, “that one is… somewhat true. The full story is a bit more complicated than you’d likely hear from the Army, though.”

Eyes turned to Kirito, who coughed uncomfortably. “It had to do with the first boss raid, and a riot in the making and, well… It’s a long story.”

“I’d like to hear it sometime,” Sachi said. “Most of what we hear from the frontlines is rumors,” she explained, when attention shifted to her. “Everybody knows about the KoB, and how they're trying to keep casualties down in the clearing group, but I’d never heard about any clearers who’d go out of their way to help a low-level guild like us. What else don’t we know?”

“Probably a lot,” Keita admitted. He turned back to Kirito. “Which brings me back to my original point, when I asked about how strong you were. I know this is a little unreasonable, if you're so busy with the clearing group, but… Could you two stick around, just for a little while? We could really use a little help getting on our feet—little things, like what Kizmel-san said about our formation. I think we really could start making a difference for other players, if we just had a bit of a boost.”

“Yeah!” Ducker put in. “And we could put out the word that not all clearers are Beaters! Hey,” he said, when Kirito looked over at him, “it sounds to me like you could use some help there. If you hadn't saved our hides earlier, I wouldn't have thought the Black Swordsman was such a nice guy.”

Kirito hesitated, looking conflicted. Kizmel could guess easily enough why. On the one hand, he’d made a policy, ever since arriving in this world, of being right at the front of the clearers, to the extent of probably having struck the final blow to more Field and Pillar Guardians than every other Swordmaster combined. Keeping his strength up, she knew, was how he’d survived so long with just Asuna—and later, herself—by his side.

More than that, there was something that had always kept him out of guilds, for as long as Kizmel had known him. The Army would never have taken him, and Lind had only ever seemed to offer out of a desire to “put him in his place”, as Asuna had acidly put it, but the KoB had once made a serious overture to him, and he'd turned it down cold. He'd said it was because beta testers like himself—
whatever they were—didn't mesh well with others, and that he didn't want to potentially bind Kizmel to anything, but she was sure there was something else going on.

On the other hand, Kizmel suspected it was the first time a group had offered a friendly invitation to him. The KoB had been all business, and other Swordmaster guilds had ranged from indifferent to hostile; her own Dark Elves had been more welcoming to him than any group of humans.

Kirito may have been a loner, but she'd seen that it got to even him, now and then.

When the silence stretched on, Keita coughed, looking away. “Sorry. I guess that was a bit presumptuous of me. I know you’ve got a lot to do up at the frontlines—”

“I think it’s a good idea, actually,” Kizmel interrupted, finally deciding to cut through the stalemate herself. “You need aid—and the fact of the matter is, the clearing group is too small.” She glanced between Keita and Kirito both. “We have enough for battles with the Pillar Guardians, but we really do need more Swordmasters who can help clear the way to their chambers.

“More than that, you're right: Kirito could use a few more people around who see him as more than just the Black Swordsman, or the Beater. None among my own people regard him as such, but the other clearers…”

Asuna, Argo, and Agil. Besides herself, those were the only Swordmasters Kizmel knew of that Kirito could really turn to on a personal level. Well, there was potentially another, but for whatever reason Kirito himself didn't seem to regard the “Klein” he'd occasionally mentioned as an option.

She just hoped he didn't mind too much that she'd more or less committed them to this.

After a few moments of surprised silence, Kirito gave her a crooked smile. “You really think this could work, Kizmel?”

“It might set back floor exploration slightly,” she answered seriously. “But in the long term, helping another guild become strong enough to contribute to that will more than offset it, and in the short term it will be easy enough for us to return to the front when Pillar Guardians are located, and still contribute to those battles.”

“…That's true enough.” Turning back to Keita, Kirito stood, and tentatively held out a hand. “I can't promise you won't regret having us along, but… I'll do what I can, Keita. Thank you.”

“We should be thanking you,” Keita replied, smiling in relief as he shook Kirito's hand. “Any help you guys can give us will be great.”

Kizmel reached over to lay her hand over theirs. “We will do our best, Keita,” she promised. “I'm looking forward to working with you, myself. I've had little chance to talk with Swordmasters other than Kirito and our friend Asuna, so I welcome this opportunity.”

This was how an alliance was supposed to be, she thought, as the group fell into animated conversation. Nothing at all like the atmosphere that always settled in when the disparate members of the clearing group met for strategy meetings, two large groups and a handful of smaller interests who often seemed only nominally united by a single goal.

The Moonlit Black Cats might be lacking in strength, might need some serious advice on how to use the strength they did have, but one thing they definitely already had that was missing from the frontlines was cheerful camaraderie. It was like what Kirito had with Asuna, Argo, or Agil, but with an entire group.
This is what's missing from the clearing group: true unity. Perhaps we can train the Black Cats well enough to reach even the front, and finally change that.

In the meantime... maybe I can discover what it is that feels so off about the Swordmasters. They're so skilled, yet so few of them have the feel of true warriors... Why?

July 12th, 2023

After a day of working out exactly how the alliance of a duo of clearers and a small guild of low-level Swordmasters would function, Kirito led them to a forest clearing on the Fifteenth Floor for some training. A good grinding spot, he'd said, adding, “Probably the best place right now is up on the Twentieth, but I don't think you're quite ready for that yet.”

Given that he and Kizmel had found them on the verge of being overwhelmed in a dungeon on the Eleventh Floor, Keita had ruefully agreed to that. The presence of two clearers would, at least, make a jump of a few floors survivable, with care.

As she waited with the Black Cats for Kirito to lure Spike Boars to the clearing, Kizmel reflected that it probably was as good a location as they were going to get. The mobs would be powerful enough to give the Black Cats a good workout, while the openness of the clearing would allow them to run well enough if it came down to it.

She herself was sitting this battle out, barring emergency. With five Black Cats, that left only one spot in the mystical cooperative arrangement Mystic Scribing allowed for, so it had been decided that she and Kirito would trade off helping directly.

Not that Kizmel was idle. Her role, today, was to look after Sachi, who was visibly uncomfortable with the sword and shield to which she'd finally been convinced to switch. “You'll be fine,” Kizmel assured her, noticing the tremble in the girl's stance. “It may be more frightening not to have the spear's length between you and the enemy, but with a shield you'll actually be safer than you were before.”

“I know that intellectually,” Sachi replied, watching anxiously for any sign of Kirito's return with their quarry. “It's just... I wasn't very good with a spear as it was, and I've never used a sword or shield at all.”

“It is not as difficult as you might think. A shield has no Sword Skills associated with it, and the first Skills of the one-handed sword are very simple. My own style uses some of them, and Kirito can show you others.”

“Is a shield even that good?” Tetsuo wondered, positioned a little ways to Sachi's right as the other forward. “I mean, Kirito doesn't bother with one, and he's a clearer!”

“I do,” Kizmel pointed out dryly, hefting her kite shield for emphasis. “Kirito's style is pure offense, and the only reason it works is because he has faster reflexes than anyone I've ever seen, even among the greatest swordsmen of my own people. He can show Sachi techniques, but I certainly don't advocate imitating his style as a whole.”

There was a loud rustling in the undergrowth at the edge of the clearing. “Hey!” came Kirito's indignant voice, over a series of loud, bestial grunts. “Are you saying I'm reckless, Kizmel?!”

“Asuna does!” she called back. “And speaking of reckless—how many boars did you attract?”

The plan had been for him to kite one or two at a time, enough to challenge the Black Cats without
overwhelming them. Kizmel was fairly sure she was hearing enough noise for at least double that. 
And—are those wings I hear?

“So we get a little extra practice,” Kirito panted, dashing into view. “Don't worry, we can handle it. Try and keep those Rage Crows off us, though, okay?”

Rage Crows? As her partner spun to face the way he’d come, sword held low and to one side, Kizmel had only a moment to absorb the comment. Then three boars, covered in spikes, charged out of the trees, with as many black birds flying just above them. About three times the size of the more inoffensive variety she knew from the forests of home, their eyes blazed with a murderous crimson light.

Sachi eepeed in fright, and even the more enthusiastic Ducker audibly swallowed. “Uh,” the self-proclaimed thief began. “I don't think this was part of the plan…”

“We can do it.” Keita didn't sound as confident as his words suggested, but he leveled his staff anyway, holding position with Sasamaru. “Kirito?”

“Sachi, Tetsuo,” Kirito said at once, not even looking back. “Focus on the boar on the right. Ducker, we've got the one on the left. Keita, Sasamaru, keep the one in the middle back until we've taken out the others, and if the Crows get in reach, hit them, too. Kizmel—”

“I'll be ready,” she promised. Stepping out of the way of Sachi's sword, Kizmel drew her saber, prepared to counter anything that got through. The idea was to train up the Black Cats, so she wouldn't intervene if she could avoid it, but training wouldn't help if they were killed.

Kirito made the first move, bashing one of the boars in the nose with his blade; a fast, hard move, but without the supernatural power or speed of a Sword Skill. It disoriented the beast without doing causing much injury, allowing Ducker to circle around to its less-pointed hindquarters and launch a simple skill of his own with a flash of red.

At the other flank, Tetsuo let out a yell and brought his mace down in a streak of blue. Like Kirito, he went for his foe's snout, but much more powerfully; the mystically-enhanced strike drove the boar's face down into the dirt with a squeal that was half pain, half rage.

Sachi took that as her cue to dart forward on wobbly legs, delivering a simple Vertical to the top of the boar's head. Still recovering from Tetsuo's blow, it made no effort to dodge, and its chin hit the ground once again.

This time, though, it didn't stay that way for long, and in the gap the Skill's recoil left in Sachi's movements, it reared back up, snorted in rage, and lunged tusks-first at the nervous girl. Unable to move her legs, she did manage to bring her shield up in time, but the impact threw her off-balance, vulnerable to further attack.

The Spike Boar in the center looked ready to do just that, and a screech announced the intent of one of the Rage Crows. Sachi fell back, yelping in fear, only barely keeping her shield lifted in her own defense—an insufficient defense, against an attack from multiple angles.

A thrust of a spear and downward slam of staff discouraged the boar, a one-two to the face that sent it reeling back with a squeal. At the same time, Kizmel leapt into the air, saber glowing with the bright trail of a Slant that sent the Crow hurtling back into the trunk of a tree, feathers flying in all directions.

Landing lightly, she took Sachi's shield hand and gently pulled the girl to her feet. “It's all right,”
Kizmel said, giving her a reassuring smile. “You're not alone, Sachi.”

“Just watch your timing, and you'll be fine!” Kirito called, easily dancing around his own foe's attempt to gut him. “It's not too hard, once you know what you're doing!”

Swallowing, shaking, Sachi set herself, shield in front and sword lifting hesitantly into position again. “I'll try,” she said, voice trembling.

Tetsuo flashed her a quick grin. “Hey, we already got it down by almost half. These things aren't that tough!”

The two of them had, in fact, hurt their boar worse than the other actively-engaged mob, Kizmel noticed as she fended off another of the crows. Much of it was from the raw power of Tetsuo's mace, of course, but even with Sachi's hesitance, her weapon was still inflicting heavier injury than Ducker's simple knife.

_Ducker is more confident_, she thought, using the quick diagonal slash of a Streak to force the ravenous bird back. _But Sachi's sword is the stronger weapon—and her technique is better than I'd realized. Her real problem isn't knowing how to fight._

With a shout, Tetsuo brought his mace around to hit the Spike Boar in the flank, the heavy weapon unhindered by the spines. It grunted, the blow having knocked it off-balance, and fell to the ground with a heavy thud. “Sachi, Switch!”

“R-right!” Stance still wobbly, Sachi's face took on a determined expression and she darted forward, bringing another Vertical down right between the boar's eyes. Throughout, her footwork was shaky, but her grip on her sword had firmed up this time, and she drove the blade down with her own muscles as much as the charms of the Sword Skill.

With a final, plaintive squeal, the Spike Boar shattered into blue fragments and vanished.

“I… I did it?” Sachi whispered, frozen in the posture the Sword Skill had released her in.

Tetsuo clapped her on the shoulder, grinning. “You did, Sachi! Nice one!”

“Very!” Kirito called, casually dodging to one side as the boar Keita and Sasamaru were holding back tried to gore him. “Okay, finish off the second one, and then we can take this guy out—hopefully before he gets me!”

Sachi’s moment of personal vindication was unfortunately spoiled a moment after that by the third Rage Crow attacking her from behind, having slipped past Kizmel's guard while she was distracted by the first two. Crying out in surprise and renewed fear, she quickly fell back again, leaving Tetsuo to flail at the bird with his mace.

At that point, Kizmel decided it was time to thin the opposition, and launched the heaviest blow she knew at the Rage Crow. Taught to her by her instructor in the Lyusula capital, the Fell Crescent let her cover four meters in an instant of blurred crimson light, delivering a powerful downward stroke that ripped the crow clean in half before it shattered; and, just incidentally, leaving Kizmel well-positioned to guard Sachi's back while she recovered.

The girl held back while her comrades went after the boar Ducker had been slowly bleeding, panting and shaking. Waiting for her to regain some of her courage, Kizmel kept her own shield up, fending off further diving attacks by the remaining crows.

Remembering Sachi's technique in that one moment of confidence, Kizmel didn't begrudge the
effort. She knows how to fight—she just doesn't know she can. That, more than technique, is what we need to teach her. Her problem is her own lack of confidence.

“It's all right,” she murmured to the girl behind her. “Focus on what's in front of you, Sachi—I have your back.”

Sachi didn't reply, but gradually her breathing evened out. Eventually, the faint clanking of armor from her trembling quieted, as well, and by the time Tetsuo and Ducker finally felled the second boar, Kizmel heard the girl take up her sword and shield again.

The question, Kizmel thought as Sachi hesitantly moved in to help take down the final Spike Boar, is why she was allowed onto the battlefield in the first place without being taught that. What was involved with the spell that called the Swordmasters, that some were thrown into war with barely any training at all?

Perhaps there was some obscure human tradition she simply wasn't aware of. Perhaps they thought the best training was in the field, where it was learn or die. Survival of the fittest, where the truly strong survived to be the protectors of the “NPCs”, and the weakest either found strong protectors, or died.

Shivering, Kizmel took out her dark thoughts on another of the Rage Crows, her superior strength rending it with a single blow. She hoped she was wrong about that. Certainly it was an attitude that Kirito would've disagreed with; he devoted all his strength to fighting where others could not, for all that others often thought he was only out for himself.

No. She was almost certainly wrong about that. Even Kibaou at his worst would never have espoused such a philosophy; indeed, his entire enmity toward Kirito had apparently been based on rage against those who shun the weak.

But if that isn't it, Kizmel thought, beheading the final Rage Crow, what is it? By what logic does someone cast a spell to summon warriors, and call for such a disparate group? Kirito, the Knights of Blood, even the Divine Dragons and the Army, they are the sort one might expect to be summoned as protectors.

Why would that same spell call the Black Cats?

July 20th, 2023

They'd been training with the Black Cats for a bit over a week when they received word that the boss room on the Thirtieth Floor had been found. In that time the untrained warriors had begun to grow in strength, according to the strange numerical values Swordmasters used to estimate their own abilities, and Kirito left them with a few suggestions for safe places to train while he and Kizmel were gone.

After a relatively uneventful battle with a Pillar Guardian, they rested on the newly-opened Thirty-First Floor, then descended to the Fifteenth to meet up with the Black Cats in the field.

The duo of clearers found them resting in a monster-free, grassy hill a kilometer or so outside the floor's biggest town, having apparently just finished a round of training. “Oi, Kirito, Kizmel!” Tetsuo called, when they came into view. “Over here, guys!”

“I'm glad to see you're both alright,” Keita said, when they'd joined the group on the grass. “I know you're clearers and all, but I've heard some of the boss fights can be pretty bad. Even the Army retreated last month, I heard…”
Kirito flopped inelegantly on his back. “You could've just checked your Friends List, couldn't you? Besides, Argo's newsletter should've told you there were no casualties.” He pointed at the item Keita was holding at that very moment, a sheet of paper labeled *The Weekly Argo*, put out by none other than the Rat herself.

For a small fee, of course. Kizmel doubted Argo ever did anything without monetizing it somehow, as nice as the info broker was otherwise.

“We could check on you,” Sachi pointed out, sitting a couple of meters away with sword and shield set neatly on the ground beside her. “Kizmel still isn't in the system like that, and who knows if Argo would've mentioned her. The article did just say no player casualties—ah, no offense, Kizmel,” she added quickly. “I didn't mean—”

“It's fine, Sachi,” Kizmel assured her. “We are different, even if we're fighting for the same cause. Many Swordmasters probably would not make any note, it's true—but I believe Argo would have.” She smiled reassuringly. “But no, we're both fine. The battle was intense, but routine.”

“We figure that big spider a few floors ago, the one that nearly wiped out the Army, was a special case,” Kirito added, resting his head on his hands. “It marked the one-quarter point of the clearing, after all. Now, the Fiftieth Floor kinda scares me, but until then…”

That wasn't entirely true, Kizmel knew. Even on “regular” floors, the clearing group had occasionally lost one or two members to bosses. Still, by all accounts *The Adamantine Arachnid* had indeed been unusual in its strength and its death toll.

Deciding to change the subject before anyone thought too deeply on that, Kizmel glanced over the resting but not, apparently, completely worn-out Black Cats. “So, how did your training go while we were gone? I trust things went smoothly enough.”

Sasamaru laughed. “You were only gone a day, Kizmel, it's not like there was time for much to happen. Yeah, we were fine. Well, except for that time we got chased by a bunch of goblins yesterday afternoon, but eh. We managed.”

Kirito lifted his eyebrows in the lancer's direction. “Goblins? Again? Were you back in the same place Kizmel and I—?”

“We had a bit better idea of what we were doing this time, Kirito,” Keita said. He scratched the back of his head, looking sheepish. “We did have to retreat, but weren't exactly on the edge of being wiped out this time. And Sachi was paying enough attention that we knew there was a problem in time to kill a couple of them and get out.”

Attention turned to the fledgling swordswoman, and Sachi blushed. “I was only looking so close because I was nervous,” she muttered. “It's not that big a deal.”

Over a week into working with the Black Cats, and Sachi's nerve was still uncertain. Kizmel hadn't expected that to change overnight, though, and for now she'd been focusing on helping the girl hone her basic technique, figuring that just realizing she could fight would help the confidence problem. Besides…

“Only a fool is completely confident, Sachi,” Kizmel said, reaching over to rest a hand on the girl's shoulder. “As you said, you were watching because you were afraid. It shouldn't control you—but you should not forget it, either. An edge of tension is good for a knight.”

Sachi looked away. “I'm not cut out to be a knight, though. I... I tried, once…”
That was just odd enough a comment to pique Kizmel's curiosity; soft as it was, she didn't think Sachi had even meant for her to hear it.

Kizmel, with her elven hearing, was apparently the only one who did hear it, as before she could try and pursue the thought Ducker loudly rummaged in a pouch at his belt. “Something else that's good for a knight—or a thief?” he said with a grin. “Lunch!”

Kirito instantly went from looking ready to nap to rapt attention, and he eagerly took one of the wrapped bars of oats, honey, and nuts that Swordmasters often favored for field rations. Not that Kizmel disagreed, being rather fond of them herself; they were much better than the hard bread and tough jerky her own people resorted to, when far from home.

Granola bars, she thought they were called. An ingenious concept, and one she intended to introduce to her own people on her next visit home.

Much as she liked them herself, though, she couldn't help but chuckle at Kirito's enthusiasm. It was amazing, sometimes, the way her partner could go from deadly serious in the middle of a fight to cheery and carefree outside it. She'd almost thought, sometimes, that he hadn't been brought up as the swordsman his sheer skill proved him to be.

That evening, after another round of training—Ducker joking that this time they had “expert supervision”—they gathered in the tavern in Taft they'd visited the night they first met for dinner. In Kizmel's estimation, things had gone well; the Black Cats still weren't up to the standards of a proper clearing party, but they were definitely shaping up.

A month, perhaps, and they might actually be ready to start helping with exploration on the frontlines, though it would probably be somewhat longer before the Black Cats could handle being part of a Pillar Guardian raid.

In terms of skill, at least, Kizmel thought, quietly nursing a flagon of ale as the others went over the day's training again. Attitude… Keita is doing well enough, but one or two of them are still a bit impulsive for my liking. And Sachi… I wonder why she still cannot believe in her own skills?

She shrugged inwardly. Even if she didn't want to see them fighting a boss any time soon, with only a little more tempering they'd be a welcome addition to the teams mapping the floors and their attendant labyrinths. That alone would be valuable—maybe even more than having extra hands for the raids, at least as long as the casualty rate remained as low as it had been lately.

“Hey, Kirito, Kizmel,” Tetsuo said suddenly, setting down his flagon with a muted thump. “What's it like, up at the frontlines?”

“I've been wondering that, too,” Keita admitted, leaning his elbows on the table they all sat around. “I certainly don't begrudge the help—I did ask you guys, after all—but… it's got to be kind of boring hanging around low-level players like us, right? I'd like to think we're getting better, but it must be tiring, babysitting us all the time.”

“You might be surprised,” Kizmel said, putting aside her own ale. “Remember, Kirito and I mostly travel just by ourselves; we don't 'hang around' with other clearers very often.”

“She's right,” Kirito agreed, around the last mouthful of a sandwich. He took a moment to swallow, chased it down with the water he was limiting himself to tonight, and continued, “Actually, it's… kinda nice be around you guys. We may all be working toward the same goal in the clearing group, but people don't really socialize much when we're not in the field. Not just us, either; guild members stick with their own, mostly. Especially the DDA, and the Army when they were still on the
frontlines.”

“I'd heard those two guilds could be pretty high-handed,” Keita conceded. “To be honest, that kind of attitude is why I was a little suspicious when you first admitted you were clearers, until Ducker realized who you were. What about the solos, though? Or the Knights of Blood? I've heard they've got a good guy leading them. And the stories I've heard about their second-in-command…”

Kizmel hid a smile at that last. She, too, had heard some of the rumors that had been spreading about Asuna lately, and she had to wonder if her friend had any idea just how much she was starting to be idolized. Before, only clearers had any real idea who she was; in the short time since the KoB had been formed, word had spread fast.

Kirito’s reaction was more sober, though, focusing on Keita's real point. “The KoB are pretty nice, so far as it goes,” he said, nodding. “But they're the smallest of the high-level guilds. And the other solos… The truth is, Keita, you don't make it as a solo, especially not on the frontlines, if you don't put your own survival above everyone else. I've got Kizmel keeping me on the straight and narrow, but… All too many others don't do much to help their case against Kibaou's complaints about the beta testers, back when we killed Illfang.”

“What did happen then?” Sachi asked, entering the conversation with a very intent expression on her face. “I've only ever heard rumors. I remember the anti-beta tester talk died down a lot after that, but then everybody started complaining about 'Beaters' instead.”

Kirito hesitated, obviously debating how much to say. He shot a glance at Kizmel, as if looking for support; in this case, though, she knew little more than the Black Cats. And, if she was going to be completely honest, she was as curious as Sachi, only having heard his very bare-bones explanation a week before.

“Some of it is… kind of private,” he said at last, leaning back in his chair with a pensive look. “Not everybody who was there is still alive, and I don't want to speak ill of the dead.” He grimaced, then shrugged. “Basically, we went into that with a strategy based on information from the beta test about Illfang’s attack patterns. Only it turned out, when Illfang switched to his second weapon, things had changed from what we knew.”

“Beta test?” Kizmel interjected, leaning forward. She'd heard the term used before, but this was the first opportunity she'd really had to question it.

From the look on her partner's face, it was another of those “difficult to translate” concepts. Apparently he'd realized this point would come up at some point, though, because he didn't hesitate long before answering. “Um… call it a kind of practice run, set in a partial copy of Aincrad, according to information we had about the real thing. ‘Beta testers' were the people who went through that before coming here; somewhere around eight hundred of the original ten thousand Swordmasters.”

“I see.” She leaned back again, frowning thoughtfully. That did at least explain his prior comments about those who had more information about when they were getting into than others.

Yet it raises another question. Why only eight hundred? Ten thousand warriors summoned to fight, and less than a tenth were given any kind of briefing at all?

And a “partial copy” of the Steel Castle... What a strange, and amazing, place Kirito must come from. To have such wonders, and yet to send people into a war with so little knowledge. If they knew of Aincrad, the spell could not have caught them completely unaware… perhaps they knew of it, but didn't know exactly who would be called?
Come to think of it, that actually made a certain degree of sense. Clearly, the Swordmasters weren't in Aincrad entirely of their own free will; she'd heard them speak of trying to free themselves often enough. It was entirely possible that communication with the world they came from was at least as fractured as between the floors of Aincrad itself.

Even as Kizmel pondered the conundrum, Kirito was continuing his explanation to the Black Cats. “Anyway, we expected Illfang to have a tulwar. Instead, he had a nodachi.” He winced. “I recognized the weapon from higher floors, but Diavel, the raid leader, didn't notice in time. He acted on the old information, and... he was killed when Illfang used techniques the strategy guide hadn't mentioned.”

“And everybody just assumed the beta testers lied about it?” Keita shook his head. “That sounds like an honest mistake to me.”

“You weren't there,” Kirito pointed out. “Tensions were running high, and Kibaou was anti-tester to begin with. Worse than that, though, I did recognize the katana techniques Illfang used, and told the rest of the raid how to avoid them. So, obviously, I'd 'let' Diavel die, and Argo the Rat was in on it.” He shrugged. “Maybe if it hadn't been the very first boss, it wouldn't have mattered so much. But we needed that victory, and we couldn't afford a witch hunt.”

“There wasn't one, either,” Sachi said, looking troubled. “Some people still don't like the testers, but it died down right after that.”

“Kibaou wanted one, though. He wasn't the only one. So...” Another shrug from Kirito, with a casual air Kizmel could tell was feigned. “They looked about ready to PK me anyway, so I did my best evil laugh, called Argo and the other testers amateurs, and claimed I got higher in the beta than anybody else. That got people mad at me specifically, but also kinda scared, 'beta tester' and 'cheater' got thrown around enough to get combined into 'Beater', and... here we are.”

He took the hatred eight thousand people directed at eight hundred, all on his own shoulders, Kizmel realized. He allowed himself to be ostracized for their sake...

No wonder he went to such lengths to help my people. What was a war, next to being hated by so many of his own?

“It's not as bad as it used to be,” Kirito noted, seeing the looks on the Black Cats' faces. “There were only forty-four people in that boss raid, one of them died, and two of them realized what I was doing from the start. Not many people knew who I was back then. These days? Not even Kibaou's crowd thought us testers knew anything above the Tenth Floor or so. Maybe we got an 'unfair' head start, but there's nothing we can be hiding anymore.”

“Except for the stuff the other solos find first and keep to themselves,” Sasamaru remarked, eyes narrow. “That's what you meant about not helping their case, right?”

“Well, yeah,” Kirito conceded. “Not that some of the guilds have much room to talk. Lind isn't too bad on that, but the rest of the DDA... well, they've got a bit of a reputation for a reason.” He reached for his glass again. “Honestly? That's part of why I think Kizmel was right to talk me into helping you guys this much. You guys are like a family.”

“We all go to school together, actually,” Keita said, smiling at the comment. “The Black Cats go way back. This isn't our first adventure—though it's probably our worst.” He laughed a little at that; then coughed, rubbing at the ribs Sachi had just dug an elbow into.

“Well, it's a feeling we could really use more of on the frontlines,” Kizmel said, lifting her flagon
toward them. “You humans don't have quite the organization my people do, even with your guilds, but I'm beginning to think that isn't such a bad thing—if you can work together better than we see all too often among the clearers.”

“Then we’d better work harder to catch up.” Keita raised his flagon to hers. “Right, guys? There is something we can do, and I say we do it!”

The loud expression of group agreement might've sounded just a bit weak from Sachi's direction, as the others brought their drinks together in a united toast, but it was a strong one regardless. There was more energy and determination among these humans than Kizmel was used to from her own Pagoda Knights, certainly.

“Just one thing,” Tetsuo said, when the ale had been drained. “If we're gonna get stronger, we need tougher fights. I know, I know, we don't want to fight anything too tough for training, but if we've got you two backing us up for grinding, we can build levels a bit faster than this, right?”

Kizmel didn't miss the way Sachi's face paled, nor the way Kirito glanced in her direction. She held the latter's gaze for a moment, both of them silently weighing the potential risks. “It… might be possible,” she said at length. “If we're careful…”

“Argo,” Kirito said, looking not much happier than she felt. “I'll see about getting in touch with Argo. She'll know if there's any quests with good experience that a party like ours can handle.”

Ducker pumped a fist. “Yes! Something more than just more boars, birds, and goblins!”

Even Keita, mostly the voice of reason in the Black Cats, nodded cheerfully at the idea. Sachi, though, didn't join in the chatter that followed, and seemed to lose interest in the remains of her dinner.

July 22nd, 2023

After some discussion, they did agree to wait a few days more to try their blades against stronger foes. Sachi and Ducker, with the former's hesitance and the latter's weaker weapon, had fallen slightly behind the others in “levels”, and Kirito wanted to try and even that up before attempting battles which would, under the proposed conditions, leave one of the Black Cats on the sidelines at any given time.

For two days, they rotated the party to accomplish just that, and made good progress toward their goal. Then on the second night, as Kirito and Kizmel returned from a brief foray to a higher floor to have their equipment touched up by frontline merchants, Kirito received an unexpected message.

They'd just materialized at the teleportation device in Taft's central square when he frowned, tilting his head at a sound Kizmel didn't hear. “That's odd,” he murmured, swiping a hand to bring up his Mystic Scribing.

Kizmel raised an eyebrow in his direction. “Is something wrong, Kirito?”

“A message from Keita,” he answered, eyes flickering over the text hanging in the air before him. “We're heading for the inn anyway, what could be so urgent…? Oh. That's… not good.” Kirito glanced up from the message, gaze dark with concern. “Keita says Sachi disappeared right after we left. As soon as they got back to the inn, she said she had something she needed to take care of… Now she isn't answering messages, and her location isn't showing up on the guild member list.”

That wasn't like the nervous girl at all, and Kizmel felt a chill spread through her body. Amazing as it
was, human Mystic Scribing did have some limitations, so there were several possible explanations for Sachi’s disappearance; at least two of them, however, were bad ones.

“The other Black Cats have gone to look in the dungeon where we first met. If Sachi were… gone… she wouldn’t still be showing up on the guild list at all,” Kirito reminded her. “She pretty much has to be somewhere the Mystic Scribing doesn’t cover.”

Some of the tension eased out of her shoulders even before it could really take hold, but Kizmel was still concerned. “She won't be in the dungeon,” she said quietly. “Sachi can barely stand going there with the whole group; I can't see her having gone alone. Are there safer locations the Scribing does not reach?”

Kirito frowned pensively. “…About all I can think of would be places like the Dark Elf camp on the Third Floor, or Yofel Castle. Unless…” He snapped his fingers. “Try putting on your cloak for a second, Kizmel. I want to check something.”

*My cloak? Ah, of course!* Nodding in understanding, Kizmel pulled the hood of her Mistmoon Cloak up over her head, then drew the rest of it securely around herself.

To her own eyes, there was no change in world, but she knew Kirito would no longer be able to see her. Once he’d confirmed the conditions had been met for the special property of her cloak, though, he focused his gaze instead on the ephemeral page he’d brought up.

After a second, he nodded to himself, letting out a relieved breath. “Invisibility effects do block location tracking. And since I seem to remember that cloak Sachi found in that hidden room in the dungeon this morning has that… She's probably somewhere in town.” He frowned again. “But why would she…?”

“I'll ask her,” Kizmel said, opening her cloak again. “Kirito, you go make sure Keita and the others make it back safe. I'll find Sachi.”

Kirito bit his lip, but nodded. “Okay. I wish there was some way you could tell me when you find her… Well, I'll just make sure we hurry back. I'll see you soon.”

After exchanging a quick hand clasp, they went their separate ways, Kirito taking off at a run for the town entrance, Kizmel making her way to the inn the Black Cats called home.

*I wish I could, too,* she reflected, hurrying down the nearly deserted street. *Sending messages across such distances, locating each other at a glance, carrying so much more than they could by hand… With Mystic Scribing, it's no wonder the Swordmasters have accomplished the feats they have.*

At least her own skills as a tracker were not inferior to her partner's. From what he had said, Kirito could discern distinct sets of footprints when trying to find a specific individual, but while she might not have that ability, it was more a matter of how she perceived the world. Her senses as a Dark Elf provided her much the same information, just more subtly.

At the front entrance of the inn, Kizmel found traces of the passage of a number of people. Though Taft was far below the front line, an increasing number of lesser Swordmasters had gathered in recent days, trying to reach just a little higher; signs of their presence made picking out just one trail difficult.

Kizmel knew, though, that Sachi wouldn’t have stayed around crowds. If she had gone to such lengths to hide herself, her own trail would lead somewhere else, away from the paths of other Swordmasters. With that in mind, she spread her search wider, edging away from the inn itself.
There, she thought, a few minutes into her quest. An indefinable trail leading away from the areas most people gathered, the mark of just one person's passage disappearing down a disused alley. Following it farther away from the inn, Kizmel quickly identified it as Sachi's path, as surely as if she could see glowing footprints on the cobblestones.

In the end, the trail led her down to a bridge over a stream running through the east end of Taft. Or rather, off to one side, down, and then under the bridge, out of sight of prying eyes.

There, back against the stone foundations of the bridge, black hair obscuring her face and new cloak wrapped around her body, sat the girl Kizmel was looking for. “Sachi?” she called softly, slipping into the shadows herself.

Sachi started, bringing her head up to look. “Oh… Kizmel. What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” Kizmel said patiently. “You didn't make it easy. The others thought you might be in a dungeon, so Kirito had to go get them.”

The other girl winced. “I didn't mean to worry them like that. I just… needed some time alone.”

Kizmel moved to sit a careful handful of paces away, leaning back against the stone. “I thought as much, if you came to a place like this.” She glanced over, watching as Sachi's head sank back down into her arms. “What's wrong, Sachi?”

Though after the last week, I suspect I can guess…

The answer, when Sachi did finally bring herself to speak, didn't surprise Kizmel as much as she suspected it would have the other Black Cats. “…I'm scared,” the girl whispered. “…I want to run away. From the monsters, from the Black Cats… from this whole crazy world.”

There were two ways Kizmel could think of to take that statement, and one of them chilled her to the bone. “You don't mean… suicide?” Oh, she hoped that wasn't what Sachi meant. She'd heard the stories, now, of how the population of Swordmasters had been when the spell pulled them to Aincrad. Those whispered tales of despair had contributed to her own disturbed confusion about the exact nature of their summoning.

Sachi actually smiled at that; a weak smile, one almost totally devoid of humor. Though there was, Kizmel thought, just the faintest trace of dark amusement in the expression. “That might be nice, actually,” she said, in a voice that sounded almost whimsical. A moment later, though, she shook her head. “No, sorry, I'm kidding… If I was really ready to do that, I would have gone to the dungeon.”

The chill eased, though it still didn't go away. Just because she didn't want to die didn't mean Sachi was anything close to “all right”. If she were, she wouldn't have come here, either.

After a long moment of silence, Sachi whispered, “I want to go home, Kizmel. I'm so scared of dying, I've hardly slept since I came to this place. I want to go home, and I don't understand why I can't…”

She doesn't understand the summoning spell, either, then. But… Kirito obviously wants to go home just as badly, yet he does seem to understand why he's here. None of the clearers I've met have ever questioned this, at least not in my hearing.

It's another contradiction. None of this makes any sense.

“Sachi,” Kizmel began gently, “what do you mean?”
“…I don't know if I can explain it,” Sachi said slowly, hugging her knees. “The world I come from is so different, and you're different…” She shook her head. “I'm sorry, I know I'm babbling. Kizmel, I… this wasn't supposed to be like this. We weren't supposed to be trapped in this world. It wasn't supposed to be able to kill us…”

Cold creeped back into Kizmel's veins. Not fear this time, not exactly—more like a presentiment of horror, as the pieces finally began to fall into place. *They expected to be able to return to their world at will… of course they would expect to be safe from harm, if they believed they could simply leave the bodies the spell gave them here.*

*And if they believed themselves safe, then even those who lacked proper training would see no reason not to volunteer to come here.*

The picture was starting to come together, Kizmel was sure of it. There were pieces missing, gaps in their different societies and languages left, but she was beginning to see one unifying truth that resolved the seeming contradictions that had been bothering her. “Sachi, could you tell me what happened? What went wrong, when you came here?”

Sachi was quiet for a long while; the same kind of silence, Kizmel thought, that would grip Kirito or Asuna when they sought to explain things beyond a Dark Elf's experience. “It was supposed to be like the beta test,” she said finally, gazing into the dark. “We'd come here, and fight, and clear the way to the top floor. In between, we could leave the bodies we have here, and return to our own homes. If these bodies were… killed… we could just make them again.

“The day we came here for real, Kayaba Akihiko—the man who made the—the spell—turned on us. Made it so that we were trapped in these bodies, so if these bodies died, so would we. And if anyone from our world tried to disrupt the spell, we'd die. And the only way out was to make it all the way to the top floor, and defeat the last boss.

“And he wouldn't even tell us why…”

She was shaking enough to be seen through the dark and the layer of cloak covering her, and Kizmel didn't blame her a bit. Suddenly, it all made a frightening sense, the way some of the Swordmasters were more prepared than others, how unfairly knowledge was distributed before their arrival.

The very fact that they had come to a world not their own to save it, yet were as determined to simply escape as to be rescuers.

*They were told it was something they could treat almost like a game, for all its seriousness for the people of Aincrad, and that no matter what happened, they wouldn't die. That they could fight against the greatest odds without fear.*

*And then they were betrayed, and thousands of them have died for it.*

Kizmel felt a confusing whirl of emotions, seeing so much more of the picture than she had before. Horror, that ten thousand people had been deceived into being trapped away from their homes and families, risking their very lives. Fury at the man who had done it to them, without even telling them why.

A fierce rush of warmth and pride toward Kirito and Asuna, for working so hard for her people, when they had every right and reason to focus on nothing but their own survival and escape.

“I don't understand,” Sachi whispered again. “Why we were trapped, why we can die… I can't understand why Kayaba would've done this to us.”
Kizmel couldn't either. Whoever this “Kayaba” was, he must've been a sorcerer of immense power, such that the abrasive Master Soveth she and Kirito had once dealt with would've bitterly envied. What would a man with such power gain from throwing ten thousand people into a war, one he very likely could've ended with his own arcane strength?

“I can hardly sleep at night, I'm so scared. I… I don't want to die…”

Hearing Sachi's anxious whisper, Kizmel decided the motivations of some distant figure were a conundrum that could wait. If Kayaba had been right there, where she could face him with steel in hand, she would have; he wasn't, she couldn't, so there was a different battle she needed to fight, and with a different weapon.

She slid over to Sachi's side, wrapping an arm around the girl like she would have her own sister Tilnel, once upon a time. “You are not going to die, Sachi,” she said, pulling Sachi against her shoulder. “You'll see your home again.”

Sachi looked up, eyes watery. “How can you be so sure?” she whispered.

“The Black Cats are getting stronger by the day,” Kizmel pointed out. “Kirito and I will stay long enough to make certain you're strong enough—much as Kirito once did for Asuna. And,” she said, giving the other girl her best reassuring smile, “you are stronger than you think you are, Sachi.”

“I'm not strong,” Sachi said at once, lowering her eyes. “…Anytime it really matters, I mess up…”

There was a story behind that, Kizmel was sure. There was too much emotion in that to just be about her still-shaky contributions to the Black Cats' training. It wasn't one she was going to push tonight, though; not when Sachi had already recounted such a tale of terror and betrayal.

“Your technique is excellent, and getting better every day,” she said firmly. “Your problem isn't skill, Sachi, but confidence. You can fight with the best—if you only realize it.”

Sachi shook her head stubbornly. “I'm just a nobody who barely ever picked up a weapon before,” she muttered into Kizmel's shoulder.

“Before the day the Swordmasters were called to Aincrad,” Kizmel began, “my friend Asuna had never so much as touched a sword. She was no 'beta tester' like Kirito, and until very recently she was part of no group larger than three, outside of battling Field and Pillar Guardians. Now? She's the second-in-command of the Knights of Blood, and I assure you, Sachi, the Knights do not recruit just anyone.”

Indeed, with what she'd hard from Sachi, Kizmel herself was beginning to understand just how remarkable her surrogate sister really was. If the world the Swordmasters came from was so different, and they had been called under such false pretenses, Asuna's ascent to one of the strongest warriors of Aincrad was like a tale out of legend.

Sachi certainly seemed to take it as such. “Asuna the Flash was just a beginner?” she said, looking up again with wide eyes. “But she's—she's supposed to be the greatest swordswoman in Aincrad!”

*The Flash? Well… if Kirito's most noteworthy feature is his black coat, Asuna's is certainly her speed... Of course, to all appearances, there was little competition among the Swordmasters for the title of greatest swordswoman, given their gender ratio.*

Not that Kizmel thought Sachi was wrong, by any means. “She was. Someday, perhaps you can meet her, and ask her how frightened she was when she came to Aincrad.”
Sachi shuddered; this time, though, Kizmel thought she felt some of the tension easing out of the girl. “If I can just live on,” she whispered, pressing her face into Kizmel's cloak. “If I can just… believe that I can go home…”

Kizmel didn't comment as she felt tears begin to soak her cloak. She just held the girl close, and made a promise to herself.

I'd already pledged myself to aid Kirito, in return for his help in restoring peace to my kingdom. Now, knowing the truth… This is something I could never stand aside from. This Kayaba Akihiko has done something unforgivable, betraying so many of his own people.

I will help the Black Cats—help Sachi—become strong enough to survive. And Kirito and I are going to climb all the way to the Ruby Palace at Aincrad's peak—and before we strike down whatever waits us there, I will know the reason this was done.

By the time Kizmel and Sachi returned to the inn, Kirito had also gotten back from the dungeon with the rest of the Black Cats. In deference to the girl's privacy, Kizmel simply backed up Sachi's story of having needed some time to think by herself, though she did concede Keita's point that Sachi should at least have warned them first.

The elf kept her own counsel about her own realizations, not wanting to burden the Black Cats with anything more. When they'd all split up for the night, though, and she and Kirito retired to the room they shared, it didn't take long for her partner to notice something was off.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, changed into the simply short-sleeved shirt and shorts he used as sleepwear, Kirito cast a serious look in Kizmel's direction. “Is Sachi really all right, Kizmel?” he asked. “Or is something else bothering you?”

In the middle of getting ready for bed herself, Kizmel felt a flicker of amusement at the way he reddened slightly when her armor disappeared. A month of traveling together, on top of the time they'd spent during the Elf War, and he was still shy around her at times like this. Though in all fairness, he probably still remembers Asuna's usual reaction. I suppose he has more reason to be uncomfortable than merely human taboos.

The amusement was fleeting, though, and gone by the time the last traces of her battle gear vanished and she, too, sat down. “She's afraid,” Kizmel said honestly. “But I believe she'll be alright, once she realizes she's not as weak as she believes herself to be.”

“That's good. I was worried, and the other Black Cats were really scared.” Kirito shook his head. “They've come a long way in just a couple of weeks, though. They pretty much tore through everything in their way into that dungeon, before I caught up with them.”

“You've trained them well,” she told him. “Even Sachi's learned a lot; she just doesn't know it.”

He shrugged awkwardly. “You mean, we've trained them. It's not like I've done all this by myself… Anyway, I've just had a little practice, that's all. The first day I was here, I helped a guy get started, and, well, you were there for a lot of the early days with Asuna. Though she had speed and technique down before I even met her…”

That story, Kizmel had heard. How Kirito had met Asuna in a labyrinth, and first witnessed her unbelievable speed, honed at the cost of anything resembling sufficient rest. By the time I met her, she at least had the rest part down. She's only gotten even faster since…

“Maybe you did have help, but I'm impressed anyway,” Kizmel said, lying back on her bed. Turning
on her side to look at him, she added, “Not so many people, among your kind or mine, would go so far out of their way to help others. Taking the time to teach lesser warriors, going to such lengths for my people… For someone thrown into risking his life without warning, you really are incredibly generous.”

Whether it was from the compliment or simply the movement of her own body, she thought for a moment that Kirito's face was going to actually light on fire. “I'm not _that_ nice a guy,” he mumbled, turning away in a vain attempt at hiding the blush. “I just… can't turn away from things that are right in front of me.” He seemed to realize, a moment late, how that last could be taken, and reddened further. “Uh… anyway. …Wait. Did you say…?”

“Sachi told me,” she said soberly. “That real death was not a danger you expected to face here… among other things.” She paused. “I believe I would like to meet this 'Kayaba Akihiko'. Preferably armed.”

Kirito’s blush faded with the change in subject. “You and about eight thousand players,” he said, shaking his head. “You might get a chance, too. I've always figured the guy will probably be waiting for us at the Ruby Palace.”

Kizmel raised an eyebrow. “This sorcerer is the one who caused the Great Separation, as well as calling you here? That certainly explains the treachery, though it leaves the question of why he would allow his foes as much power as you do have.” She thought for a moment. “It would also make him far older than I thought humans could live to be.”

“That's… complicated,” Kirito said slowly, finally letting himself fall back on his bed. “He's definitely the one pulling the strings, but whether he caused the Great Separation, exactly… I never heard exactly how Aincrad came about until you told us, so I couldn't say for sure.”

Something about that statement seemed oddly evasive to her, but as far as she could tell he meant what he said. _It's more like… there's something he isn't saying that I'm missing…_

Well, that could wait for another time. It was enough, tonight, just taking in the truth of how horribly the Swordmasters had been betrayed. Any other unpleasant or awkward tales could wait.

“If he is there,” she said instead, “let us do our best to be among those who confront him. I want to know, Kirito, what would possess someone to do such a thing. Although,” she added, almost to herself, “I cannot quite bring myself to condemn him entirely. Your arrival gave Aincrad's people hope… and allowed us to meet.”

Kirito was spared the necessity of deciding whether to respond or pretend he didn't hear it—for all she knew he might not have, though she was reasonably sure his hearing was sharp enough—by a hesitant knock at the door.

Whether he heard it or not, he was quick to answer the knock, darting over to the door before she could even move. _I wonder if that's Argo?_ Kizmel mused, in the moment before the door opened. _It would be typical of her sense of timing… But no, her knock is more distinctive than that._

When Kirito pulled open the door, it proved to be Sachi on the other side, wearing a nightgown and a sheepish expression, pillow tucked under one arm. “Um, sorry to intrude,” she said softly. “But… I still couldn't sleep. Do you two mind one more, just for tonight…?”

From the look on his face, Kirito couldn't decide whether to be relieved Sachi hadn't jumped to conclusions about himself and Kizmel, or utterly, helplessly confused about what to do next. “Uh, well, I don't really mind,” he stuttered, “but—”
You would think he hadn't shared a tent with Asuna and me, more than once, Kizmel thought, amused. “It’s no problem at all, Sachi,” she said, shifting closer to the wall. “There’s plenty of room.”

Sachi smiled, relieved. “Thanks, Kizmel,” she said, brushing past the still-petrified Kirito. “I think I really will be better now, but… just for now…”

“I understand.”

Kizmel had never had the paralyzing fear that Sachi was only beginning to break out of, but she’d had nights where she couldn’t stand to be alone. She’d never told either of them, but the truth was that she’d been deeply grateful when Kirito and Asuna joined her in her tent, which had been so empty after her sister fell to the Forest Elves. Without them, she didn’t know what she might’ve done.

_Died_, she reminded herself, adjusting her position to make room for Sachi to lie down. _Before anything else, I owed them my life._

As the two girls started to settle in, Kirito finally shook himself, muttered something about never letting Asuna hear about this, and took a single step back toward the still-open door. Only a single step, because a loud, cheerful voice stopped him right in his tracks.

“Oi, Kii-bou! You must be psychic, ya even left the door open for me!”

Kizmel looked past a startled Sachi at a suddenly-petrified Kirito. “Did you send a message to Argo about training sites already?”

“…I am so dead…”

No time to close the door now, and no time to warn the unprepared Sachi. Argo breezed right in, wearing her typical hooded cloak and equally typical sly grin. “I was hoping to catch ya by surprise, especially after the way you’ve been keepin’ me in the dark lately about where ya been, but—eh?”

“Um. Hello?” Sachi said weakly, smiling cautiously.

Argo stared at her for a beat, then grinned even wider, turning the expression on the hapless Kirito. “Well, somebody's been busy! First you had Kizmel-chan turn up outta nowhere, now this? Ya branching out into harems now, Kii-bou?”

Doing her very best to keep a straight face, Kizmel said somberly, “That would require Her Majesty's permission, Argo.”

“Argo!”

Chapter End Notes

Nope, not a harem fic; Argo is just a troll.

This arc would be the point where I realized this fic would not be content as a "one-shot collection". I’ll also be the first to admit it suffers somewhat from arc fatigue; the middle chapter in particular is more setup for the third than anything. And yes, I know there are some people who just don’t care for the Black Cats in general. That being said, I ask that you bear with it: the conclusion to the Black Cat arc is very much crucial to the development of the fic in general.
Ah, one other thing I should've noted earlier: the term "Swordmaster" of course does not appear in canon. My reasoning for using it was to give characters like Kizmel a convenient handle by which to refer to the players, much like Log Horizon's "Adventurers". The circumlocutions that would otherwise have been necessary would've swiftly driven me insane.
There were a lot of things about the past year that Kirito could understand well enough, however great the changes were from the life he'd lived before *Sword Art Online*. He didn't fully grasp Kayaba Akihiko's intentions, but he could at least generally grasp the idea of a megalomaniac. He could see why the death conditions had been instated, however horrible they were.

He could even understand, though he railed against it as much as anyone, why things had been changed from the beta.

Kirito could understand those things, and roll with the punches well enough. What he *didn't* get was how his position in society had changed so much. Being reviled by some as a “Beater”? He could get that; it was because of faulty logic at best, but the logic was there. The situation he was in now? Not so much.

That Kizmel more or less had to share his room, he could get, but not her casual—sometimes, he occasionally thought, just this side of outright flirtatious—reaction to the necessity. Sachi turning up made some sense, given her explanation, but it still left him wondering what kind of cosmic “perfect storm” of coincidences led to two girls sharing his bedroom.

Argo wandering in at *exactly* the perfect moment to troll him about his supposed luck with girls? Kirito was about ready to pack it in and declare the universe completely insane. If Asuna had suddenly appeared to complete the “set”, he'd have been strongly tempted to jump out the window. It would've been an insane act, but he was already starting to doubt his own sanity anyway.

*I'm a gamer otaku who can barely speak with his own sister these days. Why is it I have only one guy on my friends list, in a game where the gender ratio is skewed away from girls?*

At least he wasn't alone in his embarrassment for once. Kizmel might've taken Argo's teasing completely in stride, but Sachi had been reduced to sputtering, hiding her face behind the pillow she'd brought with her.

The Rat herself cackled unrepentantly, flopping herself inelegantly into the chair by the room's desk. “Found yourself another Aa-chan, have you, Kii-bou?” she said, flipping back her hood and grinning. “I wondered what you'd been up to lately; hardly saw you when the Thirty-First was being cleared. Then outta nowhere you ask me about quests fifteen floors below the front?” That grin, Kirito thought, was showing fangs now. “Got a story for me, Kii-bou?”

Groaning, Kirito dropped back on his bed and covered his face with both hands. “Nothing exciting, Argo. Kizmel and I were just looking for mats for upgrades a couple weeks back when we ran into another party having trouble. They asked us for help, so we've been giving them a hand with leveling since then.”

“Given the need for additional clearers, at least for mapping the labyrinths, it seemed worth the delay,” Kizmel put in, propping herself up on one elbow to better look past the girl sharing her bed.
“As Kirito says, though, not a particularly noteworthy tale.”

“Uh-huh. Not quite sure Aa-chan would believe that, but I guess we'll only find out if she thinks to ask.” Definitely teeth showing now, if they hadn't been earlier. “So, you gonna introduce me?”

Giving a resigned sigh, Kirito lowered his hands. “Right… Argo, this is Sachi, of the Moonlit Black Cats; Kizmel and I are training her up to be one of their forwards. Sachi, this is Argo. They call her the Rat, and it's not just because she's the best info broker in Aincrad.”

Reluctantly, Sachi lowered the pillow, revealing a bright blush. “U-um, nice to meet you, Argo,” she managed. “Er… I think we actually met before, once? You were asking some questions a week or so before the first boss fight…?”

That was possibly only the second time Kirito had ever seen Argo puzzled by something. The satisfying experience didn't last, though, as the Rat's expression quickly turned from a thoughtful frown to raised-eyebrows recognition. “Ah, that's right, I remember now. Back when I was… Never mind, I'd have to charge Kii-bou and Kizmel-chan for that one, and I don't think they could afford it.”

Eh? Kirito exchanged a confused look with Kizmel. The only other time he could remember not being able to afford Argo's prices—as opposed to not finding it worth it—had been the question of why she had whiskers, which he'd gotten out of her anyway as a favor. What on earth had Argo been researching that far back that would be as expensive as she was implying?

“Never mind that, anyway,” Argo said, waving a hand dismissively. “Good to see you're doing well, Sachi-chan. Your guild's in good hands; whatever some idiots may say about Kii-bou, he and Kii-chan are real softies, and almost as good at what they do as I am at what I do.”

Almost? And “Kii-chan”? Somehow I get the feeling Asuna would either laugh at that one, or hit me. For some reason.

“So.” Suddenly, the Rat was all business, propping right leg on left knee. “You're looking for quests that a group of low- to mid-level players can do, if they've got a couple of clearers for backup? I can think of a few. Though first you might wanna do a little more regular grinding; I know one place on the Twentieth that's good for that…”

“I know, Asuna and I sold you the info in the first place, remember?” Kirito said dryly. “Big praying mantises, easy to dodge if you know what you're doing, that's what you're thinking of, right?”

“Darn, that's right. How'd I forget that?” From the grin, Kirito suspected Argo hadn't; after all, it wasn't her fault if somebody bought info they'd just forgotten they already had. “Okay, then. Three thousand Cor for Argo's Midlevel Quest Guide, Floors Twenty to Twenty-Five; sound fair?”

Sachi blinked. “You… already have something like that?”

“It's Argo,” Kirito told her, shaking his head. “The Black Cats probably aren't the first mid-level players to ask her about that.” Pulling up his menu, he materialized a small pouch of Cor.

“Besides which, she was undoubtedly taking notes when the clearing group went through,” Kizmel agreed. “Be careful, Sachi: the fact that you're here is now something she can sell, if she finds the right buyer.”

The other girl looked, if anything, even more confused. “Why would anyone want to buy information like that?”
“Remind Kirito to tell you later what happened the last time I said that.” The elf smiled, apparently amused by the memory. “Suffice to say Argo made a profit off the leaders of the Knights of Blood for a story I thought of no particular value.”

“Yep! You just gotta know your clients.” Still grinning, Argo hopped out of her chair, exchanged a small book for the coinage Kirito offered up, and headed for the door. “Get through those, then talk to me again when you're ready for more of a challenge, eh? And Kii-bou—don't get too carried away tonight; gotta save some strength for the mobs!”

A full minute after the Rat had swept out the door with a cackle, Sachi still looked like her face could double as a furnace; thanks to SAO's emotional expression system, there was quite literally steam coming out of her ears. “Is... is she always like that...?” she got out, hiding her face in her pillow again.

“Pretty much, yeah.” Kirito strongly suspected the only reason he wasn't steaming himself was a measure of resistance from frequency of exposure. “Like I said, she's not called the Rat just because she's so good at getting information. Don't even ask what happened the first time she met Asuna...”

He shuddered. It had taken some time for him to even remember exactly what happened; he thought his mind had probably blocked it out for his own sanity. When some glimpses of the truth had returned to him, he'd made very, very sure not to betray even a hint of recollection to Asuna.

“Interesting... That's a story I haven't heard before, Kirito.” When he looked up again, it was to see Kizmel looking back at him, obviously intrigued. “Knowing Argo, it must have been quite—”

“Don't ask,” he repeated, more forcefully. “Really, don't. Asuna will kill me if she gets any suspicion anybody else knows what happened.”

To Kirito's surprise, the next sound to break the silence was a quiet giggle, from Sachi. The girl was still blushing, but the steam at least had subsided, and she was even smiling now.

“Sorry,” she said, when she realized he was looking at her. “It's just... that's one way to take my mind off everything else. Even if it is embarrassing, it's... It feels kind of normal, you know? Like schoolgirl gossip. Well,” Sachi amended, giggling again, “schoolgirl in a dating sim, anyway.”

“'Dating sim'?”

“Don't ask about that either,” Kirito said hastily, not liking the look on his partner's face. “Or if you have to, ask Sachi later. Or Asuna. Just—sometime when I'm not here.” Abruptly, he flung himself down on the bed, turning determinedly to face the wall. “Anyway, Argo's right. Let's get some sleep.”

He tried very, very hard not to pay any attention to the rest of the world after that. He even managed to convince himself he did not hear a chuckle from Kizmel.

Kirito did, however, resort to ever-so-inconspicuously grabbing his pillow and putting it over his ears, when the whispering started. He did not, by any means, want to risk overhearing “girl talk”. It was an experience he was sure he was less likely to survive with his dignity intact than even the first hours of exploring the Fourth Floor.

*I'm a socially-hopeless solo. How the hell did this happen to me?!?*

July 25th, 2023
Kirito wasn't sure what, exactly, had changed, but when they got back to leveling the morning after Sachi’s crisis of confidence—and Argo's trolling visit—the Black Cats' coordination seemed just a little bit better than it had been before. Or rather, he knew what had changed, he just didn't know why.

Kizmel, he figured, did have some notion of why Sachi was just a bit more willing to go on the offensive with her sword and shield combination, but if so the elf didn't seem inclined to explain. When Kirito asked, she just smiled, shook her head, and said something about “girl talk”.

Those were the magic words to get him to drop the subject. Even still, he was intensely curious.

They'd spent one more day in their usual hunting grounds, Keita being unsure that Sachi really was recovered from her depression. After that, they’d gone up to the Twentieth Floor and the clearing Kirito remembered well from when he and Asuna had originally helped clear the floor. A small patch of open ground between a forest and a cliff pockmarked with caves, it was home to Venom Mantises, whose combination of spawn rate, EXP reward, and simple attack patterns made them ideal for careful grinding.

For this, Kirito and Kizmel mostly stood back, only intervening if it looked like the Black Cats were about to be surrounded. In contrast to when they'd been farming Spike Boars and Rage Crows, the small guild was more coordinated, and Sachi's slowly-growing confidence was a helpful change from her earlier timidity.

Watching with a clinical eye as the Black Cats split up to take on a pair of mantises—Tetsuo and Keita handling one, Sasamaru and Sachi the other, Ducker using his knife to strike wherever there was an opening—Kirito reflected that the biggest issue now was purely logistical. The mantis' claw swipes weren't too hard to deal with, once you got the pattern down, but they were called *Venom* Mantises for a reason.

The poison they spat was also pretty easy for Kirito to dodge, but he was used to mobs with projectile-based attacks. The way Sachi had to take one such noxious glob on her buckler, causing the metal-rimmed wood to sizzle audibly, showed that the Black Cats had little experience with the threat themselves. More to the point, the corrosive poison was rough on the equipment durability; Kirito estimated they'd need to have their gear repaired at least twice as often, until they got the timing memorized.

“They're getting there, though,” he thought. Sachi flinched at the sizzle, but struck back gamely with a Slant that took one of the mantis' claws off at the elbow. After waiting out the Skill Delay, during which Sasamaru held it off with a Straight Thrust at the giant bug's thorax, she braced herself, let out a yell, and put her whole body into a Horizontal that took its head clean off.

_Huh. She already knows the trick of “helping” the System Assist... y'know, when her skill level gets high enough to get some of the longer combo skills, she's going to be pretty good._

Not that the other Black Cats were slouches, for all that Kirito still thought they tended to be a bit overenthusiastic. It was just that Sachi seemed to know a little bit more than they did, and had just needed a push to realize she did. Not just in terms of fighting skill, either; sometimes he thought he saw a depth in her gaze, an understanding of the real gravity of the situation, that even the cautious Keita didn't quite seem to match.

Or maybe he was just imagining it. It could, Kirito realized, just have been that he saw more of Sachi than he did the rest of the guild. Contrary to her own words that one night, she'd been turning up at the room he and Kizmel shared every night since; only three nights so far, to be sure, but enough that it was starting to feel like a routine.
He wasn't sure how to feel about that. Kizmel didn't seem to mind, though, and it was the elf's bed that Sachi was sharing, so Kirito had decided it wasn't something he should speak out against.

No matter how weird it feels. If there's anything about SAO that still feels unreal, it's how many girls keep showing up.

With a shout of triumph, Tetsuo bashed the remaining mantis' head in with his mace. With the bug dispersing into blue polygons, Ducker and Sasamaru exchanged a high-five, and Keita clapped in approval. “Nice work, everybody!” he called. “Now, it'll be about fifteen minutes before the next respawn, and we don't want to hog the EXP, so let's break for lunch.”

Those were two reasons for a break that Kirito would never question. He didn't need any more problems with his reputation—however welcoming the Black Cats had ended up being, he had no illusions that they were the norm for their level—and food was one of the few real luxuries he had in Aincrad.

Asuna would say it's the baths, he thought, as the group made their way to the field safe zone they were using as a rest area. Me? Give me a good sandwich any day.

Kizmel, Kirito suspected, would split the difference and say both were about equally worthwhile out in the field. Of course, he also suspected a lot of her apparent fondness for baths stemmed from the opportunities to mess with his head—maybe she really was as unconcerned by human standards of modesty as she appeared, but she did know mixed bathing wasn't normal among the Swordmasters.

He really wanted to blame Argo for that. Unfortunately, Kizmel had shown signs of that particular brand of mischief as far back as the time he'd ended up scrubbing her back, long before she ever met the Rat. Worse, Argo was really all talk; Kizmel might've liked his reactions, but that very incident proved she'd take the assistance as readily as she would the laughs.

As they all trooped into a clearing distinguished from the rest of the forest only by map icon and a faint visual distortion around its edges, though, it was food that had her attention for now. While Kirito contented himself with a sandwich, and the Black Cats pulled out similarly simple rations, Kizmel withdrew from a belt pouch a carefully-wrapped slice of apple pie.

It was only NPC-vendor food, nowhere close to what a player could make if they got their Cooking skill high enough—though why anyone would waste a valuable skill slot and the time needed to raise it on a non-combat-related skill like that, he had no idea—but it seemed to be good enough for her. Human food in general was something she'd been experimenting with a lot lately.

Most of it, Kizmel seemed to find at least interesting. One dish they'd come across on the Twentieth-Eighth Floor, though, had had her looking as disgusted as she had back when they were dealing with messily-explosive Fire Goats.

Not that I blame her. If anybody needed any more proof Kayaba's crazy, including haggis as a menu item at NPC restaurants would be it.

Kirito's thoughts were interrupted by Keita flopping down next to him, resting his back against a tree. “You know, I never would've guessed there was a place this good for leveling on this floor,” he said, around a bite of plain bread. “We'd actually been up here a couple of times before we met you and Kizmel, but everything we encountered was a lot harder to deal with.”

“You just have to know where to look,” Kirito replied with a shrug. “It's like any RPG, really. Places that can be exploited like this to give an early advantage can be found on a lot of floors. You just have to search carefully, that's all.”
“With a full party, I might have risked doing just that,” Keita said, shaking his head. “A full party, and a few more levels. With just one other player, like you and Asuna-san did? Not a chance.”

“We did have Argo's info on a lot of the rest of the floor,” Kirito reminded him, and paused to take another bite out of his sandwich. “Otherwise, though… Yeah, it's safer to go around in a full party, but if you know what you're doing, you'd be surprised what kind of places you can reach by yourself.”

“I'll take your word for it.” Keita chuckled. “Me, if I was all by myself, I'd probably run back to the City of Beginnings and never come out again… But I'm not, and we're doing a little better every day.” He glanced at the beta tester sidelong. “So, this… Argo… She gave you some suggestions for some tougher quests we can tackle?”

More like sold at top market value, Kirito thought ruefully. “A few,” he acknowledged. “There's one on this floor that we can try tomorrow; before that, I think you guys can probably reach the next level by the end of today.”

He still wasn't happy about moving on to more challenging battles. With Asuna or Kizmel, he wouldn't have been too worried—from first meeting with both, he'd known they could handle themselves well enough, even if Asuna had started out frighteningly fatalistic—but the Black Cats still seemed a bit too carefree about fighting for his liking.

They'd push it with or without us, though, Kirito reminded himself. Besides, I'm probably selling them short… And if anything does go wrong, Kizmel and I should be more than strong enough to handle anything this floor has to offer. Asuna and I already managed it once, after all...

“There you are, Kirito-kun!”

Kirito was so startled he almost dropped his sandwich. Fumbling frantically for it, only when he secured his grip did he glance up to look at the source of the voice that had almost cost him his lunch. “What the—Asuna?”

Just now walking into the safe zone clearing, it was unmistakably his former partner, wearing the fancy guild uniform he still hadn't fully adjusted to. She had a slightly fancier rapier than when he'd last seen, too; though if he knew her, it had been crafted using her previous weapon for raw materials.

Asuna was just sheathing said rapier as she approached, having presumably just fought her way through the local forest mobs. “I've been wondering where you and Kizmel-chan kept disappearing to,” she said, coming to a stop a mere meter or so away. “We've been so busy lately that I didn't have time to check into it, though.”

Uncomfortably aware of the stares the Black Cats were favoring the both of them with now, Kirito cleared his throat awkwardly. “That's, uh, kind of a long story, Asuna,” he said, hurriedly tucking the remains of his sandwich into his item storage. “Um. I'm surprised to see you down here,” he went on, groping for a topic. “If you're still so busy—”

“I need some mats to upgrade my armor, and when I asked Argo, she said I should talk to you before I went farming. Something about how it'd be easier if you vouched for me.” Asuna glanced around, only then seeming to notice there were people other than her target and his partner present. “Oh. Could someone introduce me, please?”

Kizmel smoothly drew herself to her feet. “Of course. Asuna, these are the Moonlit Black Cats, the guild Kirito and I have been helping for the last few weeks. Guildmaster Keita, Macer Tetsuo,
Lancer Sasamaru, self-proclaimed Thief Ducker, and Swordmaster Sachi.”

Kirito stifled a chuckle at the way she referred to Ducker; and wondered, inwardly, why Sachi was the only one his partner explicitly referred to as a Swordmaster. *Might just be because Sachi's the only one who actually uses a sword*, he mused. *We don't hang around other players enough for her to really make a distinction most of the time, I guess.*

“Keita, everyone,” Kizmel went on, “this is Vice-Commander Asuna, of the Knights of Blood. Kirito and I traveled with her extensively some months ago, and still fight together against Field and Pillar Guardians. I can assure you that she won't monopolize resources or hunting grounds here on the lower floors.”

Asuna's eyebrows went up for a moment, then she nodded in understanding. She, of course, would know as well as any clearer—with how long she'd traveled with Kirito, actually, better than most—the tensions between low- and mid-level players and those who blazed the trail ever higher through the Steel Castle.

“That's right,” she said, bowing politely to Keita. “We're expecting to fight a Field Boss up on the Thirty-Second Floor soon, and my armor could use a little work first. I'll be out of your way after that.”

“I see,” Keita said, looking more than a little off-balance at meeting one of the most famous people in Aincrad. He was still doing better than his guildmates, though; Tetsuo and Sasamaru were trying not to stare, while Ducker and Sachi were openly fixated on Asuna. Not, Kirito suspected, for the same reasons, but still. “Ah, pardon me! It's a pleasure to meet you, Asuna-san.”

“Likewise, Keita-san. Now… hopefully, we'll have a chance to speak more later, but I'm afraid I'm on something of a tight schedule.” Asuna turned to Kizmel. “Can we talk for a minute, Kizmel-chan? I want to know how you and Kirito got into this in the first place, and I trust you to give me more details than him.”

As was all too common when Asuna called him out on something like that, Kirito could only manage incoherent sputtering in reply, which served to confuse the Black Cats and provoke a quiet laugh from Kizmel.

“There, you see?” Asuna turned back to the elf once more. “Now c'mon, Kizmel-chan, give it to me straight…”

The two of them drifted off to the other end of the clearing, leaving a shell-shocked Kirito with an equally-unbalanced Keita. “That is Asuna the Flash?” the Black Cat guild leader muttered. “She's…”

“Impossible to say no to?” Kirito finished, leaning heavily against his chosen tree. “Hard on a guy's ego?”

“I was going to say, just like anyone else,” Keita replied, shaking his head. “I mean, she's a legend, and yet she's… And she talks to Kizmel the way you do. That's not something I expected out of the second-in-command of an up-and-coming clearing guild.”
“She and Kizmel hit it off pretty well, back when we all first met,” Kirito said, raising an unsteady hand to bring his sandwich back into physical form. “Asuna didn't start out as a major figure in guild politics, y'know… And after Tilnel died around a month before that, she's been the closest Kizmel has to a sister.”

It took him a moment to realize he'd said anything that might be considered odd, and even then only did because he noticed Keita directing a very strange look at him. The Black Cat was, actually, giving him the kind of look Kirito thought would be reserved for someone who'd just claimed to be Napoleon.

“…What?” he asked, when the silence began to drag on.

“Nothing,” Keita said slowly. “It's just… You do know she's just an NPC, right? I mean, yeah, she's got better response algorithms than I've ever seen, but… Considering the nature of her quest line, Tilnel probably didn't even exist, Kirito. It's just flavor text.”

Kirito blinked. It had been so long since he and Kizmel had dealt with anyone but other clearers on a regular basis—people who knew them well by this point—that he'd forgotten the usual reaction to her wasn't blasé acceptance. I don't even think about it very much anymore myself. I mean, after the sixth or so time an “AI” trolls me Argo-style, not to mention she handles even vague comments just fine…

“Kizmel isn't 'just' an NPC, Keita,” he said at length, watching as the elf in question carried on her animated discussion with Asuna. “Maybe you're still using the kind of keywords and phrases you would with any quest NPC, so you haven't noticed, but Asuna and I both talk to her just like we would any player. I've never seen Kizmel fall back on any kind of 'I don't understand the question' line.”

Keita shook his head. “I've seen you explaining things to her before, Kirito.”

“And half the time, she figures out the answer before I'm halfway done, even with things I'm positive aren't in the Cardinal System's database.” Kirito took a few moments to finish off his sandwich while he had the chance, and continued, “Sure, sometimes I have to explain, but with ordinary NPCs that wouldn't even work. Sooner or later, I'd get the stock response, and with Kizmel I never have.”

The Black Cat guildmaster stared at him a heartbeat longer. “If you say so,” he said finally. He was obviously unconvinced, but he turned his attention back to the remnants of his own lunch after that.

Kirito didn't entirely blame him. All this time, and he still didn't understand Kizmel's nature. He knew pretty much everything that had been publicly released about SAO's core systems, and kept up with the literature about research into artificial intelligence, and as far as he knew true, bottom-up, fully-sapient AI was considered to be decades away at best.

Still. After all this time, I haven't found anything that she couldn't handle. At some point, even SAO's AI roulette should've hit a roadblock, especially in casual conversation—but she never has. Either Kayaba managed to account for an insane number of possible topics—way more than it would be worth it for just a regular quest NPC—or she's being directly controlled by some human accomplice of Kayaba's, or…

Or there's something else going on. And given her “dreams” about our meetings in the beta, unless Kayaba somehow singled me out of a thousand players to specifically mess with, I don't think there's a human behind her.

He didn't know of any way to explain all of that, though, so he kept silent. All he had to go on was
speculation and gut feeling, nothing really concrete.

It was enough, though. He and Asuna knew there was more to Kizmel than what met the eye, and he was getting the impression Sachi didn't see her as just a program, either. As far as Kirito was concerned, what everyone else thought didn't really matter.

_The worst that will happen, Kirito thought, is people will think I'm a bit strange. That's not exactly the worst anybody's ever thought about me. So long as we keep up our end of things in boss fights, nobody is going to care enough to make much of an issue of it._

His musings were interrupted one more time by Asuna and Kizmel rejoining the group. “I'm sorry to interrupt your training,” she said, with another formal bow. “But I'd like to borrow Kirito-kun and Kizmel-chan for a couple of hours. I just need some mats from this floor's labyrinth, and it would be more efficient if I had their help.”

“That's fine,” Keita said quickly, obviously still struck by being spoken to by a virtual idol of Aincrad. “We're close to the point we're trying to reach just now anyway… Actually,” he added hesitantly, glancing at his guildmates as if to ask their input, “if you'd like, we could help, too. It would be a change from fighting Venom Mantises all the time…”

From the back-slaps Tetsuo and Sasamaru exchanged, Ducker's cheerful “Yeah!”, and Sachi's tentative nod, Kirito didn't think he'd face much opposition to the idea.

Asuna hesitated herself for a moment, but when Kirito gave her a reassuring nod, she smiled. “All right, then, we'll all go. I'll be in your care, everyone.”

_Just don't let Argo show up_, Kirito prayed silently, as they shifted party arrangements around to put himself, Asuna, and Kizmel into a separate group. _I can't imagine how she might make things worse here, but that's actually even scarier—no, wait. I do know exactly what she'd do, and it is that bad._

Doubtless Kizmel had explained what was up with Sachi, in a conspiratorial, sisterly way. Even she, though, obviously hadn't mentioned Argo's crack about harems. Kirito knew that, because Asuna wasn't breathing fire.

Within moments, the two parties were on their way toward the tower leading up to the next floor. Every step of the way, Kirito kept an eye out for whiskers in the shadows.

Sachi had learned a lot over the weeks since meeting Kirito and Kizmel. About how much bigger and deeper SAO itself was than she'd ever imagined, about how to use the sword Keita had urged her to take up, and how to _really_ fight within the rules the game enforced. She'd even been given a glimpse into the world of the clearers, even if Kirito was always quick to point out he and Kizmel weren't really representative.

Seeing how the twoclearers she knew fought when they were working with a third, instead of the inexperienced Black Cats, was an educational experience by itself.

Normally, it would've taken around two hours for the Black Cats to reach the labyrinth from the Twentieth Floor's central town, slowed as they were by looking out for and actually fighting mobs across the intervening distance. Even lately that hadn't changed, with their “seniors” letting them do most of the work; their teamwork was improving, but they still had a ways to go, and their levels were still fairly low.

Today, Sachi found herself forced out of her own usual hesitance simply from trying to keep up. The party of clearers maintained a steady pace that she could tell was actually slower than what they were
truly capable of, allowing the Black Cats to keep up, and any mob that got in the way was summarily shredded with a degree of coordination that to Sachi's eyes seemed nearly psychic.

Kizmel had said that Vice-Commander Asuna had started the death game as a complete amateur, and Kirito had privately told her afterwards that “the Flash” not only had no experience with VR games, but had never played more than a mobile game prior to being trapped. If that was true, then Sachi was deeply impressed; Asuna was the first player she'd ever seen who approached Kirito's own insane speed.

A couple of hundred meters from the entrance to the labyrinth, Tetsuo whistled. “No wonder they call her the Flash,” he said, as Asuna ran a stray Lizard Knight through with blinding speed. “I don't think I've even seen Kirito move that fast… Just how high is her level?”

“I don't think it's just her level,” Sachi replied, jogging to try and catch up. “She's not just letting the system handle it; she really knows how to perform the skills.” That, Kizmel had explained to her one night, was one of the keys to using Sword Skills to their fullest: deliberately moving with the attack, instead of just being pulled along by the System Assist.

Of course, if you messed up, it left you stuck and vulnerable to counterattack, but the elf girl shrugged that off as a risk of any improperly-performed act on the battlefield.

Not that she'd phrased it in terms of System Assist, framing it instead as one of the simple but effective charms left to the people of Aincrad. Still, it got the point across well enough, as with most things Kizmel had told her since they'd started to get to know each other.

Watching as Kizmel sped into the gap Asuna created to casually lop the head off a second sword-wielding reptile, Sachi wondered again what was really going on. Keita, she knew, wrote it off as just highly-advanced AI, no different from any other NPC in Aincrad; if Kizmel was any better at combat than most, well, she'd been intended to fight with players, not against.

Ordinarily, Sachi might've agreed; the Black Cats were a computer club in the real world, she knew the current state of AI development as well as her friend and guildmaster. Maybe Kayaba was ahead of the rest of the world, but this was the man who'd invented the NerveGear and done the vast majority of SAO's programming. It wouldn't be odd if his AI coding was equally groundbreaking.

She had something Keita didn't, though: in the earliest days, before the Black Cats as a whole adjusted to the conditions of the death game, Sachi had gone on quests without them. Tragedy had driven her back into a shell with her friends, but before that happened, she had gone on quests that included NPC allies.

They were never this smooth. You had to give specific commands, and they still didn't always do exactly what you needed them to. Try and give vague directions like Kirito and Asuna-san do, and they'd freeze. Gamer-invented slang? Forget it. Even SAO's bots just aren't that good.

Never mind having late-night girl talk. Sachi had been so delighted to have another girl to talk to again, even with Kizmel's elven worldview, that it had taken her two nights to realize it shouldn't have even been possible.

They were clear into the dungeon before anything broke her train of thought. So thoroughly had the party of clearers demolished everything in the way that she'd allowed herself to lose track of her surroundings, right up until Asuna shouted a warning. “There's something coming from the side passage—Sachi-san, look out!”

Adrenaline flooded Sachi's veins with ice water, and she spun just in time to see a trio of Skeleton
Knights blundering through the doorway immediately to her left. In the frozen clarity of the moment, she recognized that their cursors were a red dark enough to be worrying—and that Kirito's party was a crucial few meters ahead, facing an even tougher Skeleton Knight Commander.

“Tetsuo, take the one on the left!” someone shouted. “I've got the right!”

It was only when her buckler came up to smoothly block the right-hand skeleton's opening Vertical that Sachi realized it was her own voice.

Acting on pure, startled reflex, she shoved back against the attack, forcing the Skeleton Knight off-balance. Then her right leg swung forward, bringing her closer, and her sword arm flashed out with a blinding red flash; first a backhand across the skeleton's empty eye sockets, then a forehand back across its neck.

Its HP dropped in the yellow from the two-hit Horizontal Arc she'd learned just two days before, but it was still alive, and she was trapped for a few crucial heartbeats in the recovery frame. Again without conscious thought, though, she called out, “Sasamaru, Switch!”

Her guildmate's spear drove past in a simple Straight Thrust on the heels of her yell, catching the Skeleton Knight right in the ribs. Had it been a living mob, it would've been a critical hit to the heart; as it was, it bounced off the rear of the ribcage, doing minimal actual damage and merely knocking it back half a step.

Half a step, half a breath. Long enough for Sachi to be released from the recovery frame, and launch another Horizontal Arc to take the skeleton's HP down to zero, sending the white-boned skull flying off its bony neck to shatter in brilliant blue.

Two paces to her left, Tetsuo's heavier mace—generally a superior weapon for dealing with skeletal enemies—smashed his target out of existence with a blow to the top of the skull; he'd been slower off the mark, and had a good five percent knocked off his own HP for his troubles, but he hadn't required Sasamaru's assistance.

One to go, Sachi thought, heart pounding. She thought she heard another shattering sound somewhere behind her, a distant, calmer part of her mind noting it wasn't the pitch of a player's death, but paid it no mind, instead raising her shield to defend against the Sharp Nail the last Skeleton Knight tried to deliver to her head.

Up to one side, across to the other, then down in a blow that by rights should've left her arm numb from the impact. Even so, Sachi's shield held, and she gathered herself to take advantage of the mob's recovery time. Her brain was still lagging behind her reflexes, and she began the pre-motion for another skill she'd just recently learned—

The sound of rapid footsteps, a flash of white and red. A brilliant blue light, like a meteor in the dark. Aimed precisely at the Skeleton Knight's left eye socket, a thin blade drove forward with impossible speed, and with one thrust sent its lifebar plummeting from blue to yellow, then to red and gone in a fraction of a second.

Pulling her rapier out of scattering polygons, Asuna flourished the blade, then sheathed it; a motion that looked as smooth and practiced as any Jidai Geki samurai flicking blood off a katana. Turning to face Sachi, her face smoothed from intense concentration to a friendly smile. “Made it,” she said, sounding distinctly satisfied. “GJ, Sachi-san,” she added, uttering the gaming shorthand as casually as if she really were a long-time gamer.

Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, Sachi slowly straightened from the crouch her defense had left
her in. “GJ, Asuna-san,” she said in return, trying to match the other girl's casual demeanor.

*I did it,* she thought, trying to quell the shaking in her limbs as the adrenaline high left her. *I didn't even think about it. I just—acted. I... I haven't done that since before that day...*

Sachi abruptly noticed Asuna was studying her intently. She wondered if something in her thoughts had shown after all, and if so, what the Vice-Commander of the Knights of Blood thought of it. This strong, incredibly fast girl who'd risen from the newest of “noobs” to de facto leader of boss raids in just a few months.

Whatever Asuna saw, she apparently liked it, because she suddenly smiled again. “Kirito-kun always did have a good eye for talent,” she said. “Keep it up, Sachi-chan. Kirito-kun and Kizmel-chan will make a clearer of you yet.”

With that pronouncement, the fencer turned and headed back to her own small party. Sachi was still staring after her, full of conflicting emotions, when a hand clapped her on the shoulder and about sent her straight into the labyrinth's stone ceiling.

“Oh?” Keita said with a grin, when she spun to face him. “We're getting there, Sachi. Someday the Black Cats will be right on the frontlines with the KoB and the DDA!”

For just a moment, remembering that stark clarity as her body did exactly what she needed it to, Sachi almost believed it. She started to wonder if, just maybe, she could become strong, despite the dismal failure that had driven her back to the City of Beginnings, before Keita pushed them all back out again.

She was still frightened. From the damage Tetsuo had taken from only a single unblocked hit, she knew Death lurked even within the range of floors the Black Cats considered “safe”. For the first time in months, though, the fear was back to what it had been in the days following Kayaba's chilling “tutorial”, not the paralyzing terror that had been her captor since the middle of December.

*A clearer, me? No... I can't quite believe that. But... maybe, just maybe... I won't have to die here after all. Maybe... I can at least live to see the reason this all happened.*

“So hurry up, everyone!” Kizmel called back then, interrupting Sachi's thoughts and Tetsuo's ribbing of Sasamaru and Ducker for being “useless”. “We still haven't even found the Iron Beetles Asuna needs, and we're running low on daylight.”

“We're coming!” Sachi called back, and led the Black Cats in trying to catch up with the well-practiced team of clearers.

It was dark by the time the two groups returned to town and teleported back to Taft. Apparently that was pushing Asuna's schedule more than she'd intended, so she quickly said her goodbyes and departed for the KoB's current headquarters on a higher floor; likewise, Kirito and Kizmel retired to their room at their usual inn, citing a need to rest while they had the chance, wanting to be fresh for when they took on the first of the quests Argo had recommended.

That left the Black Cats to themselves, gathered for the moment in Keita's room. They were tired, too, and Sachi intended to quietly slip away to join the two clearers soon, but they were also still coming down off the adrenaline from the day's trip to the dungeon.

“So that was one of the leaders of the clearers, huh,” Ducker commented, sitting with his back against one wall. “I knew she had to be good, but wow, a couple of times she made Kirito look slow!”
“They say the KoB only takes the best,” Keita said. He sat on the bed, his menu open to organize his share of the drops from the day’s hunting. “I’ve heard their leader, Heathcliff, held the line against the Twenty-Fifth Floor boss while Asuna-san reorganized the rest… But like you said, we knew she was good. That wasn't what really interested me.”

Sasamaru glanced up from the table he and Tetsuo were using to sort their own loot. “Yeah? What was, then? I was too busy trying to keep those three in sight; they sure do move fast when they're in a hurry.”

“The way they coordinated was impressive,” Sachi offered, remembering her own observations during the dungeon run. “We're doing better, but we still have to think about it. It doesn't help,” she added dryly, rolling her eyes in a certain guildmate's direction, “that someone insisted that I switch weapons not that long ago. They don't have that problem.”

Although if pressed, she’d have been forced to admit the sword and shield combination did have its advantages. It forced her to stay closer to the mobs than her old spear, but it also left her a good deal more mobile, and the shield meant she could actually block when she couldn't dodge.

The tradeoff, she was starting to think, might actually be worthwhile. If she could get her skill level high enough to get the kind of multi-hit Sword Skills really needed to take down the mobs on the higher floors they'd been hitting lately.

*Which is why I've been spending my nights the way I have been lately. Getting advice from Kizmel, and…*

“You're doing a lot better with it the last few days,” Keita pointed out in response to Sachi's jibe. “You may not have noticed, but you did better against those Skeleton Knights than the rest of us. Well, except Tetsuo, but his weapon is the recommended one for mobs like that. Your sword was certainly better than my staff, or Sasamaru's spear.”

“Or Ducker's knife,” Tetsuo said, shaking his head. “Come to think of it… how many enemies did you actually hit when we got to the dungeon? 'Cause I can't really remember…”

“I got some hits in on those beetles Asuna-san was hunting,” the thief fired back. “Like it's my fault knives are even worse than rapiers usually are against skeleton-type mobs?”

“That actually goes back to Sachi's point about coordination,” Keita said, intervening before it could reach even mock-argument levels. “Of course, Kizmel had AI scripting on her side, but it really does say something that Kirito and Asuna-san could take out that Knight Commander so fast. Of course, we don't have their skill or experience yet to use any weapon on any mob yet, so we need to get better at using the right Swordmaster for the right enemy.”

Sachi found herself nodding at that. Kirito and Asuna were both good enough that they could use their preferred weapons against basically anything—particularly impressive that Asuna did so well with a thrusting weapon against enemies with such narrowly-defined hitboxes—but none of the Black Cats could make that claim.

*Really, Tetsuo should've been the one to take out both of the Skeleton Knights, with me Switching in to keep them distracted while he recovered. Hm… actually, I should've been backing up Keita; his staff isn't as heavy as a mace, but it's still a blunt-force weapon…*

“Anyway,” Keita continued, closing his menu with a wave of his hand, “those are all important points; but what really got my attention wasn't the skill, but the attitude.” He swung his legs up to recline on the bed, allowing him a clear view of his entire guild. “I know what Kirito's said, but this
makes two clearers we've met—three if you count the way Kizmel's AI seems to have adjusted to them—and really, they don't seem any different from us.”

“Two or three, out of a raid group of forty-eight, and who knows how many people mapping and filling in for raids, Keita,” Tetsuo pointed out. “Not exactly a representative sample, Leader.”

“Normally I'd agree with you,” Keita admitted. “But she's the second-in-command of what's shaping up to be the lead guild in the clearing group. To hear Kirito tell it, she's also effectively the field leader, who does a lot of the raid planning. She's not exactly low-profile.”

“The kind of girl you expect to be an honor's student telling everybody else to quit goofing off and study,” Ducker said, nodding in agreement. “Like, the class rep of the KoB.”

“Exactly.” The guildmaster shook his head. “But if she'd walked into that clearing without somebody telling me who she was, I never would've guessed that was who she was. She just started in on Kirito—you know, the 'Beater' who's supposed to be an outcast—like it was perfectly normal. She was even doing the same kind of role play with Kizmel that he does.”

Sachi frowned, but kept her peace. Whatever Keita thought about Kizmel, he at least treated her as normal when they actually interacted, and really, without her own experiences it was the natural assumption to make.

*It still bothers me, though.*

“My point is,” he went on, “I'm starting to think Kirito's been overly pessimistic about clearers in general. Not that I blame him, if half of what he said about the first boss fight is true—which it probably is, I remember the rumors from back then—but I think we should maybe keep the context in mind. As it is, it looks like we might fit in up there just fine.”

“Yeah, once we're strong enough to go through a dungeon ten floors below the frontline without help,” Sasamaru said. Despite his words, though, he was grinning. “But hey, that's just levels. Remember, guys, this ain't our first RPG; just 'cause it's VR doesn't mean the old rules about level-grinding don't still apply!”

Keita nodded firmly. “I don't want to tell Kirito this yet,” he said quietly. “I don't want him thinking we're overreaching; not until we really are strong enough to back it up. But I want us to be with the clearing group, at least for mapping, by the end of next month.”

Sachi didn't quite share the enthusiasm that sparked in her guildmates. She was still afraid, even if her confidence was slowly starting to build, and she wasn't at all sure that would be possible, let alone practical. Even so, the idea stirred something in her.

*I don't think we can do it that fast... but we might get there by the end of the year. It's still a scary thought, too. If we can become that strong, though, and help clear the game... It's too late for—for too many of us, but there's still over seven thousand people to save.*

*I want to be a part of that.*

July 26th, 2023

Gathering with the others in the Taft tavern that was now more or less their unofficial meeting place, Kizmel took the opportunity to look over the Black Cats as they arrived. This meeting was, after all, leading up to the first serious quest they'd taken on since she and Kirito had started working with them; their skill, and their attitude, would be critical.
So far, she was reasonably satisfied with their progress. Tetsuo was proving to be a solid forward; his mace was an inelegant but solid weapon, and he had the confidence to go with a fighting style focusing on close-range blunt impact. Sasamaru, she had less of a defined impression of—perhaps unfair, but in many ways he just seemed the least memorable of the guild, to her eyes—but so far he'd been consistent, reliable backup for Sachi. If nothing else, Kizmel thought, his timing tended to be excellent.

Ducker she was somewhat more concerned about. He seemed a bit overeager to her sensibilities—particular when treasure was involved; he did live up to his self-granted title—and his knife, while quick, was a far more situational weapon than she would've preferred. Still, he was fleet enough of foot that she and Kirito, consulting with Keita, had begun discussing how he might best be employed in hit-and-run attacks on mobs the others pinned down.

“All right, everyone, listen close,” Keita said into her musing, sitting at the head of the table they'd taken. “Today is going to be a little different from usual, and I want to make sure we're all on the same page. We're going to be attempting a quest on the Twenty-Third Floor, higher than we usually go.”

Kizmel nodded in silent approval. In actual battle, Keita's staff made him more of a support fighter, like Sasamaru, but he also had the caution and attention to detail that a leader needed. So far, he'd always been ready to rein in Ducker or Tetsuo when they got too enthusiastic.

“According to the information Kirito bought from Argo-san, the quest is 'Dwarven Bandit Extermination',” Keita continued, laying out the small book Argo had provided. “It should be a fairly simple quest, just clearing a small cave system of minor mobs, but there is supposed to be an elite 'Dwarf Bandit Lord' in there somewhere.”

“If you get far enough into the caves, you start running into more of those,” Kirito said, frowning in concentration. “Asuna and I went through there once for a different quest, and had to take a detour when we bumped into a whole party of them. According to another clearer I know, there's a 'King Under the Mountain' way in thedeepest cavern; I've never gotten that far, but I don't think we want to risk that.”

“Right,” Keita agreed. “So don't get lost, guys, Sachi doesn't have Orcrist yet.”

Amid the laughter that sparked, redoubled when Sachi stuck her tongue out at the guildmaster, Kizmel leaned closer to Kirito. “'Orcrist'?” she whispered.

“Legendary sword, from the same story as Smaug,” he murmured back. “Actually used by a dwarf, though… which the King Under the Mountain might have, actually, so let's try not to find out for sure.”

“Fair enough.” She made a mental note, though, to ask some of the elders of her own people about it sometime. For all that the Swordmasters often seemed ignorant of Aincrad, it was always a pleasant surprise to find things they did mutually recognize. That they at least knew what dwarves were, even if no Swordmaster had ever personally seen one, made her obscurely happy.

Maybe it was just that that was something with which she could connect with Kirito, specifically. She always had liked finding more things she had in common with her partner.

“Anyway!” Keita said loudly, quieting the banter. “It's simple, but that doesn't mean we can let our guards down. It's still a higher-level quest than we've ever tried, and I don't want to have to rely on Kirito and Kizmel too much for it. Also.” His gaze was serious as he swept it over his guild. “They're dwarves, not human, but they're still closer than anything we've ever faced. I don't want
anyone slipping up because of that.”

Kizmel found herself nodding again. She was a long-time veteran of the conflicts between her Dark Elves and the Forest Elves, to say nothing of the Fallen, and she knew Kirito had a fair degree of experience fighting them, as well. To the two of them, battling intelligent foes, ones that bore a resemblance to their own peoples, was unpleasant but not something they were likely to shy from when the moment came.

The Black Cats, so far as she knew, had fought only beasts and corpses long since rotted to mere skeletons. Facing dwarves, so like in appearance to humans, might not come so easily to them.

“That said, we should still have something of an advantage, so long as we stay sharp.” Keita brought up his Mystic Scribing—his “menu”, Kizmel remembered—long enough to conjure up several pieces of paper, which he slid over to his guildmates. “Here's the map data for the area we're going to. As long as we keep to the upper levels, and make straight for the cavern marked on here, we'll be fine.”

“I'll second that,” she heard Kirito mutter, as she watched the Black Cats expand their ethereal maps with some envy. “I hope the next quest we do doesn't involve more caves…”

Remembering some of the more notable cave battles they'd fought together—ranging from spiders to wyverns, clear to some very irritating goats—Kizmel couldn't help but chuckle. Not that she disagreed, by any means. Between the tactical concern of having little room to maneuver and the personal concern of caves just being closed in and uncomfortable, they really weren't her favorite environment.

Once the others had finished compiling their maps, Keita brought up his again. “According to Argo-san's information, we'll be going around half a kilometer into the tunnels. Fortunately, they're apparently at least as wide as the dungeon corridors we were in yesterday, so we should have plenty of room to maneuver. Now, the average enemy level is supposed to be around Twenty-Eight; that's a bit higher than our average still, but if we do things right we'll outnumber any group we encounter. Skill and teamwork will make up for the difference.”

_Hm… Yes, I think it will work_, Kizmel thought, considering the matter. _It is a risk, but if you never take a risk, you never gain a victory. And if all else fails, Kirito and I will be more than a match for anything they can't handle._

“One more thing, guys,” Keita said, sounding as serious as she'd ever heard him. “It's very likely that we'll take more damage doing this than we ever have before. I think we can take it, though—and if we're aiming to be clearers, we have to learn to take calculated risks. Right, Kirito?”

_drawn into the conversation for the first time, Kirito looked conflicted, but he nodded anyway._

“Most clearers have been in the red one time or another,” he acknowledged. “You have to be able to see that and not panic, if you want to fight on the frontlines. If you actually go into boss fights, anyway; if you're just mapping, you can usually run away from anything you can't beat.”

_Usually._ Ducker didn't seem subdued by the caveat, but Kizmel was gratified to see the others took it seriously. She was even more gratified, though, to see that Sachi didn't go as pale as she once would have. There was definite tension in her expression, but it wasn't the sheer terror it would've been not so long ago.

“We can handle it,” she said, and if her voice was a little higher pitched than usual, it didn't quaver. “If we keep up the tactics we've been using lately, we can do it.”
“We certainly can.” Keita banished his map with a swipe of his hand, and stood. “So. A bunch of regular Dwarf Bandits, one Bandit Lord, and a cave system. Sachi, you and Tetsuo will be forwards as usual, Sasamaru and I will back you up, and Ducker will look out for traps. Kirito…?”

“Kizmel and I will watch the flanks,” Kirito said at once. “We’ll make sure nothing ambushes you. And if things do get bad enough—”

“Don't even say it, Kirito,” Sasamaru interrupted, waving a hand dismissively. “You're just along to make Sachi feel better; we won't need the help!” Despite the bravado, though, he added in a more serious tone, “Assuming the information is right, anyway. You said you've never been there yourself, so we've just got this information broker's word…”

“Argo’s information is good,” he said firmly. “She makes her living on accurate info. If word got out of her selling false information, it'd kill her. Maybe literally.”

Not an exaggeration, Kizmel feared. So far as she knew, there still hadn't been any reported cases of direct murder between Swordmasters, but he'd once admitted to her that someone had tried to kill him via mobs on the very first day they'd been in Aincrad.

And “reported” is an important word...

“Enough with the doom and gloom, guys,” Keita said, waving a hand as if to physically dispel the incipient dark mood. “Kirito's right—and he has been in the caves for other quests, so he'd know if the info was wrong about the usual enemies. Now, I'd like to get there and back early, just in case we do take a wrong turn or something, so let's get going. The sooner we get this done, the faster we'll level up.”

As the group got up and filed out the door, Kirito held back with Kizmel. “Do you think this really will go as planned?” he whispered.

“It is a simple mission, Kirito,” she replied, just as softly. “The—level gap, I think you'd say?—isn't that great, and they really have been learning quickly. A series of weak foes and one skilled opponent won't be too much for them now. And even if they do reach 'red' status… like you said, everyone does eventually. You're an exception, not the rule.”

Kizmel didn't have the Swordmasters' ability to see the life force of others, or themselves, in tangible form, but she did at least have a vague understanding of it. Just as she knew that Kirito, despite his blanket statement, had never actually been injured to the point of “red”, and that he was, for whatever reason, deathly afraid of others risking it on his watch.

She suspected that last was related to the strange, twisted circumstances of the Swordmasters' summoning—though given his skill and attitude otherwise, she couldn't help but believe he was one of the few who'd been somewhat prepared, especially with his status as a “beta tester”—but he'd never explained it, and so far she hadn't wanted to pry. Especially not after her late-night conversations with Sachi. If Kirito had anything in his past like what Sachi had once suffered, Kizmel had no intention of bringing the memories of it to the fore unnecessarily.

Watching the girl in question now, walking at the front of the guild as they passed out of the tavern and into the midday light, Kizmel marveled at the strength some humans from the Swordmasters' world possessed. Someday, I want to meet more women among the Swordmasters, if only to see if they are all like that. Asuna has gone from completely untrained to the very forefront of battlefield leadership, and if Sachi isn't there yet herself, she is still making remarkable progress.
Is that the norm for their world? Did the spell that brought them here select for those who have strength, even if some need help to see it? Or have I simply been blessed to meet exceptional humans?

“They will be fine, Kirito,” she reiterated quietly, watching light dance from the edges of the buckler Sachi adjusted on her back with unconscious ease. “All we need to do is guide them a little longer, and I think they'll do just fine.”

Chapter End Notes

Probably the closest this fic has to pure filler, I'll admit. In hindsight, about all this chapter really did was flesh out the Black Cats a little more before... Well.

The next chapter is not filler, I can say that much.
Chapter V: Black Cat Dirge

July 28th, 2023

“Just a few more, guys! Just hang in there a little longer!”

Taking an axe blow on her shield, Sachi spared a glance around the cavern to confirm her guildmaster's words. The camp of Dwarf Bandits they'd assaulted had started out with at least fifteen of the half-sized warriors; from the look of it, they'd managed to cut things down to about even over the past twenty minutes.

Very harrowing minutes, as far as Sachi was concerned. After the successful defeat of the first batch of Dwarf Bandits a couple of days before, the Black Cats having come out with less damage than expected, they'd taken on a quest to foil a raiding party the following day—and now, with those victories buoying them, Keita had consented to Ducker and Sasamaru's request for something a little tougher.

I could wish they hadn't been so eager, she thought, lashing out with a Horizontal at the dwarf who'd just tried to lop off her arm. A small patrol, one raiding party out in the open—those were easier than I thought. Actually clearing out a base camp? I didn't think we were ready for this!

Against her expectations, though, it was starting to look like they were actually going to pull it off. Kizmel was barricading the entrance to the cavern now, while Kirito lightly sparred with the pair of Dwarf Bandit Lords at the other end; their assistance had allowed the Black Cats to thin out the mobs on their own.

It was still the most difficult battle they'd fought together. Ducker, with his weak defense and offense alike, had actually been forced to retreat behind Kizmel earlier to drink a potion; just now, Sachi's HP had ticked a little closer to the yellow than she was at all comfortable with. Just blocking that axe had let through some damage, and it was far from the first hit she'd been forced to take on her shield.

Her Horizontal did the trick this time, though, cutting through the dwarf's neck—but just before its HP drained out completely, its death throes slammed the axe blade into her left shoulder. It didn't actually hurt, of course, nothing in SAO did, but the impact made her stumble back and cry out just the same.

“Sachi, pull back and heal!” Keita ordered, stepping in front of her. His staff caught the next dwarf in line at the wrist, forcing its Overhand Skill to crash harmlessly into the rocky floor. “Tetsuo, Sasamaru, let's finish the adds, quick!”

Four Bandits left, Sachi saw, fighting to focus against the tension her own HP status brought. Even as she dropped back toward Kizmel's rear-guard position, fumbling with her shield arm for a potion, she watched her friends try and reduce that number; Tetsuo and Sasamaru were handling one with increasingly-smooth teamwork, while Ducker dashed in to take her place with Keita.

Neither of them were forwards, strictly speaking, but they were gradually reaching the point where they could at least fake it with proper coordination. Keita spun his staff in a blue-edged Tempest,
hitting the dwarf six times over the head in quick succession; taking advantage of the Stun effect the skill caused, Ducker darted in and around to deliver a precise Backstab to its spine.

The Stun wore off about the time Keita began the windup for a Hard Jab to the dwarf's throat. Its retaliation was one Sachi didn't immediately recognize, a skill that had it spin completely around and drive the edge of its axe right at the side of Keita's neck. He saw it an instant late, after the System Assist had taken over; the loss of control probably saved his life anyway, pulling him just a little bit out of the intended path of the attack.

It still caught him hard in the flank, sending him stumbling sideways, but it was better than taking the automatic critical that a neck hit would've been.

It didn't get a chance to try anything else. With a yell, Ducker stabbed it in the back again, and while the dwarf was stumbling from that, Sachi came down from the Sonic Leap she'd started the moment her HP had neared blue. Cutting down from its left shoulder to its right hip, this time the strike was enough to shatter the dwarf into polygons without it managing any kind of death blow.

The breaking-glass sound seemed to stutter, and Sachi realized after a moment it was because Tetsuo had killed another at about the same moment. “Nice!” Kirito called, from where he was dancing around the Bandit Lords, somehow keeping aggro from both without seeming to be in much danger himself. “Get the last two, and I'll pass these guys over to you!”

While Keita fell back to heal in turn, Sachi and Ducker took off for one of the remaining Bandits, while Tetsuo and Sasamaru shifted to the other. What level is Kirito at? Sachi wondered along the way, catching a glimpse of the small smile on the clearer's face. Those are elite mobs, and he's just playing around with them. I know the frontline is nine floors above, but still!

Admittedly, on a one-to-one basis, the regular Bandits weren't actually too much trouble even for the Black Cats. Most of the damage they'd taken had been before the room had started clearing; with room to maneuver and nothing trying to flank them, it wasn't too hard to avoid being hit. Even so, when they did hit, it hurt, and these were just the small fry.

Despite that, by the time the last two Bandits had been dropped and the Black Cats converged on the first of the Bandit Lords, Kirito didn't even seem very tired. He just flashed them a grin, waved, and switched to confusing just the one. From Sachi's glance at his HP, he'd taken maybe five percent damage, if that.

“Kirito,” Keita called, dropping back to Sachi's right flank in preparation to Switch, “you can back off a little; we'll take both!”

Sachi wasn't entirely comfortable with that, and from the way Kirito's grin slipped, he wasn't either. It did make some sense, though: against roughly human-sized mobs, trying to engage with more than a couple of players at a time would just have them getting in each other's way.

“Okay,” Kirito said, after only a moment's hesitation. “But I'll stay close enough to interrupt if things get too hairy.”

That was reassuring, at least. Enough so that Sachi only felt very anxious, instead of terrified, when the clearer leapt back out of the way, leaving her front-and-center in the eyes of the first Dwarf Bandit Lord. That the switch from his last blow to her first left it disoriented for a crucial second also helped.

A little, anyway. Seeing the fierce grin behind the Bandit Lord's huge beard directed at her wasn't good for Sachi's nerves, even as she used that tiny moment of computer indecision to land a Vertical
Arc on its torso.

_Solos are crazy,_ she thought; her quick pair of hits rocked the Bandit Lord back, but it swung its weapon—a sword, not an axe like the lesser Bandits—toward her with uncomfortable speed, recovering from the hiccup in its targeting algorithms far more quickly than she liked. _How did Kirito manage before he met Asuna-san?!_

Keita's staff swung up from behind her at the last moment, catching the descending sword and deflecting it into a strike against her breastplate instead of her head. It still shoved her back, stumbling, and for an instant Sachi was convinced the next blow _would_ hit her skull.

Somehow, she got her shield up and around, taking the two-handed Falling Leaf skill on it instead. She had a moment to reflect on how hideously misnamed the skill was—_*That hits more like a boulder than a leaf?!*_—before being slammed nearly to the floor, dizzy from the impact.

While Sachi tried to clear her head, she thought she heard an oddly high-pitched yelp from the Bandit Lord—Ducker, she thought muzzily, stabbing it somewhere sensitive—followed almost instantly by a cry from Tetsuo. She managed to look up just in time see him sail across the room, crashing into the rock wall with a crunch.

“Stay calm!” Kirito called out. “I know it's tough, but if you stay focused, you'll be fine!”

_Easy for him to say—why isn't he helping us?!_ Even as she thought that, dragging herself back to her feet, Sachi knew the answer, though. _...If he does it for us, we'll never learn. What good then?_

Automatically, she flung her shield arm up to shove aside the Bandit Lord's next attack, then stepped inside its reach, drew back her arm, and with a shout swung her sword toward its left shoulder. Her blade enveloped in bright blue light, it swung quickly to the left and back to the right in a Snake Bite that inflicted a deep cut with the first blow, and tore the arm completely off with the return.

“Keita, Switch!”

With the Bandit Lord reeling at the loss of its arm, unable to hold its heavy blade properly, Keita was able to slip in and hit it with a Tempest while Sachi recovered. Off-balance already, the repeated assault to its face drove it back several steps.

Then Tetsuo dashed past, heading for the other Bandit Lord, and bashed the wounded one over the head with a normal mace attack on his way by.

The look of dazed frustration on the Bandit Lord's face was, Sachi thought, totally worth it. Right up until it adjusted its remaining hand's grip on its sword, stomped forward, and catapulted her into a wall.

It was a weary but cheerful group that gathered in Taft that evening. Despite everything, the Black Cats had indeed managed to clear out the entire bandit camp, including the two Dwarf Bandit Lords, with only minimal assistance from the duo of clearing. All of them were in the mood to celebrate.

_Well, almost everybody,_ Kirito thought, sneaking a glance past his tankard of ale at the small guild. Sachi, at least, looked sober, which didn't surprise him; she was still the most nervous of the Black Cats, and getting flung across the room had obviously worried her more than Tetsuo. _Still, she got most of the credit on that first one, so I'd say congratulations really are in order._

“I think that went well,” Kizmel murmured from beside him. “They suffered greater injury than before, but they didn't let it demoralize them. That's more than can be said for some clearers, in times
“That's true,” he admitted, remembering Illfang; a battle which had, really, gone far better than anyone had had any right to expect, yet had almost collapsed with the loss of one man. “That's more important than levels, a lot of the time. Still, I'm not sure how it would've gone if we hadn't been running interference for them.”

“Give them time, Kirito. This was their first large-scale battle; young knights always require a little help from their instructors at that stage.” The elf’s gaze drifted over the lower-leveled players, expression difficult for him to interpret. “Considering how much more serious this is than they were prepared for, I think they're making excellent progress.”

You don't know the half of it. Kizmel still thought that the Swordmasters had all been proper warriors from the start, even if they had believed they'd be effectively immortal in Aincrad. Kirito wondered idly what she'd think if she knew just how utterly unprepared they really had been.

Sooner or later, he was going to have to find out, too. If she really was as advanced an intelligence as he'd come to suspect, someday he was going to have to find a way to tell her truth about the Swordmasters. About the nature of Aincrad itself.

That wasn't a conversation he was looking forward to. Not least because he wasn't sure she could handle it; humans didn't always do so well about having their world view overturned, and none of them had ever had to come to grips with their very reality being a fabrication.

Some people didn't handle just being trapped here very well, Kirito thought with a wince, remembering how the very first death recorded on the Monument of Life had been “Falling in midair”.

“Okay!” Keita called out, interrupting the post-quest celebration and Kirito's own gloomy thoughts. “Today went really well, guys, so I think now we've got a good road map to joining the clearing group. Kirito, Argo-san has quest guides for every floor that's been cleared, right?”

“By the time the labyrinth is reached, she's usually got all the major quests of any floor, yeah,” Kirito agreed, setting down his drink. “After this long, she'll know pretty much everything up to the Thirtieth Floor, at least.”

“Excellent. In that case, I say we work through every significant quest from the Twenty-Third on up, at least everything suitable for a party our size. If we're careful, that should boost our levels pretty fast, and we can save more time by not having to do any of the actual mapping.”

Kirito frowned. That sounded a little bit risky to him. He and Asuna had done as much when clearing those floors originally, of course, even doing some quests that by rights should have taken full parties; but they'd usually been several levels about the floor average, and on several of the early floors they'd had some support from Kizmel.

Keita must've caught his expression, because the guildmaster's own sobered. “I'm aware that it's not the safest course, Kirito, and that we'll be relying on you and Kizmel to keep us from getting in over our heads. But if we do use this strategy, you won't have to hold our hands for more than another month.”

“Yeah,” Tetsuo chimed in, leaning back in his chair with an easy grin. “You've been lifesavers, guys, but we don't want to monopolize you too long. Downright embarrassing, to need babysitting all the time!”
“…It could work,” Sachi said quietly, frowning down at her ale. “If we're really careful… We did pull through today, after all.”

Kirito sat silent for several moments, mentally weighing the pros and cons. If he and Kizmel did continue to provide backup, taking a direct hand every now and then if things got really sticky… That is one way to power-level, he conceded. And if the stakes weren't so high, I'd probably even say it was safe. As it is… Tetsuo’s right, we can't just hold their hands forever.

He looked over at Kizmel, who already seemed to have reached her own conclusion. “It's a risk, Kirito,” she said quietly. “But what in war is not?”

True enough. As a solo—well, former solo—he probably knew that better than anyone in the room. And, if he was going to be perfectly honest, a part of him was leaning toward agreement for another, far less noble reason.

“Okay,” Kirito said finally. “With Argo's guides, it should be possible—though there's one or two I might recommend against, not every single-party quest is as easy as it looks on paper—and yeah, it should be a good way to grind up to clearer levels.”

“Another step up to the big leagues!” Sasamaru said with a grin, and lifted his tankard. “To victory, guys!”

“Victory!”

Raising his tankard with the others, Kirito only wished he was agreeing out of pure conviction, unalloyed by his ignoble fear of the responsibility they'd placed on his shoulders, and the knowledge that the sooner they leveled up, the sooner that fear might be lifted.

September 1st, 2023

It had been a little over a month since the Black Cats began their concerted effort at ascending Aincrad's floors, a few quests at a time. Over the course of it, Kizmel had been through three Pillar Guardian battles, and had had the privilege of watching the small guild grow rapidly in strength from their humble beginnings. Their “levels” were still well below the clearing group, but they'd come a long way from the ambush she and Kirito had rescued them from almost two months before.

They'd moved their sleeping arrangements up several floors along the way, and now spent most evenings in what Kirito termed a “Bed and Breakfast” on the Eighteenth Floor, in the town of Corineth. On this particular night, they were all together in the inn’s dining room, planning the next day's excursion.

After they'd all eaten, Keita rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward, a serious look on his face. “Great work today, guys,” he began. “I think that marks just about the first time we got through without Kirito or Kizmel having to step in at all.”

“Hey, we couldn't stay noobs forever, Keita,” Tetsuo pointed out, grinning. “Get tossed around enough, and even Ducker learns to dodge!”

“Hey!”

Kizmel nodded to herself, smiling a little at the banter. That day they'd gone into a forest in search of some rare herbs a human healer had requested, and stirred up a nest of Giant Hornets in the process. Despite the sheer number of swarming insects, though, the Black Cats had pulled through without their clearer backup so much as having to draw their swords.
It's more than just individual strength. They've finally truly begun to fight as a proper team, keeping each other's strengths and weaknesses in mind. ...I'm not sure that she would agree even now, but I believe Keita truly did make the right choice in pushing Sachi to take up the sword. That change in their strategy is exactly what they needed for balance.

Keita rapped the table sharply. “I think we're making good progress, everyone,” he said, when he had his guildmates' attention again. “To be perfectly honest, I'd hoped to be farther along this by now, but having seen firsthand what the higher floors are like, I'll admit that was a bit over-optimistic. By any reasonable measure, I think we've done better than we could've expected, really.

“We've also saved up quite a bit of Cor over the last month and a half. So I was thinking... now that we're getting close to the frontlines, this might be a good time to finally buy a guildhouse.”

Sachi perked up at that. “A place of our own,” she said, sounding wistful. “We haven't had that since...”

“Since we got into this whole mess,” Sasamaru finished for her, looking thoughtful. “Y'know, Keita, that's not such a bad idea. It'd be kinda nice to have a place we could really call home.”

“Not to mention save us a bunch of Cor on inn rooms,” Ducker said, flashing a grin.

“Nothing like having your own place to hang your hat,” said Tetsuo, nodding. “And your armor, your mace, your Man-Eating Tiger pelts...”

Kizmel found herself smiling faintly at that. The Black Cat macer couldn't have known, but it reminded her of the days when she'd first fought with Kirito and Asuna—or rather, the nights. At the time, she'd been living in a simple tent in a forward camp, and it had been carpeted with fur pelts. A comfort that had at first been a cold one to her, for a time; with the losses the camp had suffered, it had been empty and lonely.

Until Kirito and Asuna had entered the war between Dark and Forest, and brought warmth back into Kizmel's life with them.

Leaning over toward her theretofore silent partner, she murmured, “Sounds like old times, hm?”

Kirito blushed faintly, and she stifled a chuckle. While she knew he had enjoyed their early partnership as much as she had, she had little doubt some of his memories were not quite so unalloyed. Certainly she hadn't missed him gawking at her, when first he saw her unarmored—nor Asuna's response.

It was barely a week that we shared that tent, yet I think those were some of the best days of my life. ...I hope we can share a place like that again someday.

“Anyway,” Keita was continuing, having seen the unanimity of his guildmates, “I was figuring we might take care of that the day after tomorrow. Take one day off from grinding to settle into a new place, catch our breath, that kind of thing.” Lifting one hand, he swiped his menu open, made several quick motions across it, and materialized a piece of parchment. “I'd just like to take care of one more quest tomorrow, first. Judging from the information from Argo-san, this one should provide enough experience to get us all one more level.”

It was Kirito's turn to lean forward, looking interested. “What quest is that, Keita? Something on the Twenty-Eighth Floor?” That was the floor they'd just finished gathering herbs and slaying wasps on; if Kizmel remembered correctly, they'd cleared approximately half of the predicted tasks there.

She still wondered just how it was Argo acquired such detailed information. Most Swordmasters of
the clearing group focused on the frontline, yet Argo was obviously keeping up with the plight of humans on lower floors, if she had such a wealth of knowledge about quests that had come up since the clearers originally passed through.

“Argo-san's latest guide labels it as 'Exterminate the Black Forest Invaders','” Keita said, waving the parchment. “Giran Village, off in the southwest of the floor, is having problems with demi-humans hunting anyone wandering into that forest, occasionally venturing out at night to attack the village itself.”

Kirito frowned. “…Huh. I don't remember hearing about that one… though it's true I usually only focus on the ones Kizmel and I can handle by ourselves.”

“Well, according to this, it shouldn't be too hard for a full party.” The guildmaster tapped the guide. “There's supposed to be a lot of them, but individually pretty weak, and traveling in small packs. A bit longer to get them all than most quests we've done, I think, but it's just a matter of endurance, not any real trouble.”

Kizmel found herself nodding. She wasn't quite comfortable with Kirito's lack of knowledge on the subject—or her own, for that matter—but it was obviously something that had come up since the two of them had passed through originally. They were hardly going to find out every problem that cropped up in their wake, certainly.

And demi-humans should not be much of a threat, indeed. The twisted offspring of humans and goblins, if I remember the tales right, and not one that especially benefits from the breeding. A team of Swordmasters should have little trouble putting them down.

“The one trick is to not get lost,” Keita went on. “The Black Forest is supposed to be pretty confusing.” Despite his words, he was smiling. “Of course, thanks to Argo-san, we just happen to have a map, so…”

That night, Kizmel found herself on the balcony attached to their inn room, leaning on the railing beside Kirito; she'd removed her cape and armor, leaving her tights and tunic, while he'd put away his habitual black coat. Sachi had not yet arrived—though she continued her habit of sleeping with them, she'd been staying out later than she once had, lately—so for now, it was just the two of them.

Just like before, the elf mused, looking out over the dark streets of Corineth. …I don't really mind that, somehow.

“A guildhall, huh,” Kirito said quietly. “They really have come pretty far, haven't they? Pretty impressive for a group of low-levels hanging out in a cheap inn on the Eleventh Floor, like when we first met them.”

“It is.” She glanced at him sidelong. “I would say they've earned a place for themselves; a small guild they may be, but in some ways they seem more a team than many clearers we've known.”

“Yeah, that's for sure. Better than the DDA or the Army, no contest; I bet their guildhall will be a lot more comfortable, too.” There was a distant look on his face now, she noticed, like he was seeing something other than the town below them.

Kizmel thought she had an inkling of why, after traveling with the human Swordmaster this long. It was a pang she'd felt, just a little, more than once over the past months, and before they ever met; Kirito, she suspected, felt it far more keenly than she ever did.

I could return to the capital any time I wished, at least for a short visit. Kirito's separation is far
After a few moments, she said, “Have you ever considered buying a home for yourself, Kirito? A place you can truly call your own, here in Aincrad?”

Kirito shrugged. “…I've thought about it once or twice,” he admitted slowly. “Asuna brought it up, back when we were in Rovia on the Fourth Floor; that whole floor is just too hard to get around for me to want to stay there, though. Since then… I guess I've just been focused on moving forward. I've saved most of my Cor for keeping my gear and supplies up, and inns aren't really that expensive.”

“I suppose that's a practical approach.” Kizmel turned her gaze back to Corineth, looking over the human architecture that she'd grown used to in the months she'd traveled with Kirito. “Still… by now, you've saved up a considerable amount of money; far more than our usual expenses, certainly. It might be something to consider—perhaps when the Black Cats no longer need our guidance?”

Her partner was silent for a while, perhaps thinking much the same things she was. In a way, it would be a relief to finish their task; Kizmel did wish she could spend more time on the frontline, speeding the conquest of the Pillars, testing her blade against stronger foes… Not having to worry about warriors-in-training behind her, able to trust that those by her side could handle themselves as well as she.

In another sense, she suspected she'd miss it. If nothing else, the cheerful camaraderie and banter of the Black Cats was warm and comfortable, even if they never quite seemed to extend it to her the way Kirito and Asuna did. Having a place where she and Kirito could gather with their friends—Asuna, when she had time; even Argo, with her too-cheerful playfulness—was something she thought might capture some of that feeling for themselves.

“It's something to think about,” Kirito said finally. “I guess… it might be nice, at that.” He turned to face her fully. “What about you, Kizmel? You've got a place back in Lyusula, and without Mystic Scribing, you still can't trade properly with human merchants.”

“As you once told me, there's surely still a way to fulfill the ancient treaties, Kirito,” she said, serenely confident. “We need only find it. And really, is there anything we've yet failed to do, together?” Kizmel smiled, and edged just a little closer to her partner. “As I believe Asuna has said in the past, we do make a good team.”

She thought she heard him mutter something about not understanding why he had so many girls hanging around him these days, and her smile widened. *There's something endearing about the way you fail to see your own strengths, my friend—I only hope I'm present to see the look on your face when you finally understand it.*

September 2nd, 2023

The trek through the Black Forest wasn't the worst Kirito had endured in Aincrad. For one thing, the map actually worked, which was more than could be said for the Forest of Wavering Mists in which he'd originally met Kizmel, and it didn't have the humidity or tenacious insect life of the Seventh Floor's jungles. There were, as expected, demi-humans aplenty, but they weren't much of a threat even to the Black Cats, let alone a couple of clearers.

Even so, something was bothering him about the whole thing. He knew it was silly, but he just couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right.

“All right,” Keita called at length, from his position at the front of the group. “From Argo-san's info and what the Village Chief told us, that should be the last of the demi-humans in the Black Forest
“It” was a clearing deep in the Black Forest, in the center of which was an obsidian tower reaching toward the underside of the Twenty-Ninth Floor. Not quite as tall as the labyrinth that actually connected the two floors, nor as wide, it still stood a good fifty meters.

That's probably what has the hairs on my neck standing up, too, Kirito thought, looking up at the tower uneasily. Kizmel and I never went near this place when the clearing group came through; I don't think this quest even existed back then.

It was probably just Cardinal and its random quest generator at work; it certainly wouldn't be the oddest quest Kirito had seen in Aincrad. Most likely, it was just the same uneasiness about changed scenarios that had been bothering him ever since Diavel died.

Or maybe it was the Village Chief's ominous warning that they might want more friends if they were to assail the tower. Of course, Keita had brushed it off, pointing out—reasonably, really—that Argo's guide had indicated it was pure flavor text, a caution only for less-prepared parties; after all, most level-appropriate parties wouldn't be aided by a pair of clearers whose stats and gear were from several floors up.

It was probably just the uncertainty that was getting to him. It wasn't like he was psychic, after all.

“The quest finishes in there, Keita?” Sachi asked, looking more than a little uncomfortable herself.

“According to the guide, yeah. The Demi-Human Commander should be at the top of that tower.” Keita waved a reassuring hand. “Relax! I know it's half as tall as a Floor Labyrinth, but it's not nearly as big around; clearing out this place shouldn't take more than an hour or so.”

“Then let's get to it, Keita!” Ducker called, grinning and bouncing in place. “Think of all the loot that must be in there, too!”

Trust the self-proclaimed thief to focus on that. Kirito couldn't really disagree, though; his gamer's soul was calling out to him to find out what treasures and secrets lay within. The part of him that had even grown to love Aincrad's lore since meeting Kizmel seconded it, seeing in the tower's ominous construction hints of deeper knowledge.

It's a quest seven floors below the frontline, he reminded himself. Whatever is in there, we can handle it. Still...

Just before Keita moved forward to open the heavy stone door at the base of the tower, Kirito raised a hand. “Before we go in, Keita, I just want to confirm: everybody has at least one teleport crystal, right?” The items were expensive, being moderately uncommon and capable of teleporting a player back to a town even from the middle of a Floor Boss fight, but obtaining a small supply had been one of his conditions for helping train the Black Cats.

In the game of death Aincrad had become, there was no shame in retreating if the situation turned against you. Every clearer knew one truth: in this world, survival was everything.

A couple of the Black Cats, notably Ducker, rolled their eyes, but Keita simply nodded, a sober look in his eyes. “I'll be fine, Kirito. I doubt we'll have any serious problems in there, but if we do, we'll be ready.”

After this long, Kirito believed him. The Black Cats were still a little over-eager for his peace of mind, but in a fight, they'd shaped up into a serious team. When blades were drawn, they took no chances.
“Is everyone ready?” the guildmaster said then, when Kirito raised no further objection. “Then let's go finish this.”

Pulling open the massive door, Keita led the Black Cats into the night-black tower.

Prowling the stone corridors of the tower as the rear guard, Kirito's sense of unease grew the higher they climbed. Five floors up, and the Black Cats had shredded twice that many groups of demi-humans, while he and Kizmel had hammered down an ambush per floor themselves. So far, nothing had happened to particularly challenge the group.

So why am I still feeling like we're walking into a lion's den? I can't shake the sense that something about this place is…

“Kirito,” Kizmel murmured to him, too low for the Black Cats to hear. “I'm not sure why, but… something about this tower feels familiar. As if I have seen something like this before.”

“You, too?” Even with the chill of the unknown eating at him, Kirito felt just a bit relieved that he wasn't the only one getting a sense of déjà vu. If his partner sensed it, too, then… Well. Maybe that wasn't such a good sign. “I don't know what it is, either, but I'm sure I've been somewhere like this before. The art, maybe?”

There were bas-relief sculptures on the walls in places. He hadn't had time to examine them in detail, and at a distance the sheer blackness of the obsidian walls obscured them, but every so often light from the torches illuminating the tower struck them just the right way to make them almost fully visible.

Aincrad had a lot of different styles of architecture and art across its floors, and with a full one hundred levels, it wouldn't be surprising if things were occasionally repeated. That was probably all there was to it.

“Hey, I think this is it, guys!” Tetsuo was leading then, Keita having fallen back a few paces to use a healing potion after the last demi-human group, and now he had stopped in front of a set of double-doors at the very end of the hallway. “Five floors up, with these really high ceilings… we should be about at the top, right? These doors look fancy enough for a 'Commander' to be on the other side.”

Kirito pushed forward with Kizmel, gambling for now that the rear would be secure for awhile. Looking close at the doors, he couldn't disagree with Tetsuo's assessment; actually, he had the foreboding thought that the macer might actually be understating things a little.

“…These do look like boss doors,” he said slowly, unease edging toward outright anxiety. “Keita… I'm not sure we should do this.” He peered more intently at the point where the doors joined, certain that there was something significant about the design emblazoned on them; in this light, though, he just couldn't tell. “Something… doesn't feel right.”

“Oh, c'mon, Kirito,” Sasamaru said, shaking his head. “We got the info from Argo, and this ain't like the beta test. This is fresh information. A Demi-Human Commander and some adds. So what if the door's scary-looking?”

“I don't know, Sasamaru.” Sachi bit her lip, hand tightening on the hilt of her sword. “If Kirito thinks we should be careful…”

“Ominous door, awesome treasure,” Ducker reasoned, tapping his foot impatiently. “Look, we haven't run into anything that bad yet, so let's just get going!”
Tetsuo was nodding, so Kirito turned to Keita, hoping for a tie-breaker from the usually cautious guildmaster. The staff wielder, though, wasn't looking very concerned himself. After a moment's thought, he only shrugged and said, “Ducker's… enthusiasm aside, Kirito, he's right that we haven't had much trouble yet. Like Sasamaru said, everything's been like the guide so far. And if anything does go wrong, we've got the crystals. I think we can risk it.”

By everything Kirito knew about SAO, even after everything that had changed since the beta, Keita was right. By all his experience with Argo and her information gathering, Keita was right. Anything they were likely to encounter, they could handle; anything unlikely, they could escape.

He shot a glance at Kizmel, who gave him a not-too-happy look in return. Even so, she shrugged. “We appear to be out-voted,” she said simply.

Yeah. I guess so. Sighing, Kirito stepped back, letting Keita take his place at the front of the group again. Together with Tetsuo, the two Black Cats pushed at the doors, scarcely less thick than those leading into the tower in the first place, and opened the way to the final chamber of the tower.

They all walked into the new room, weapons at the ready, and at first saw… nothing. Nothing but a wide, circular chamber, seemingly empty; only a handful of the torches lining the walls were lit, and the far end of the room was cloaked in the darkness.

As far as Kirito could tell, nothing was making a sound, either. As far as his eyes could see, ears could hear, there was nothing in the room at all. We can't see the other side, though. Anything could be…

“Huh,” Ducker said, bringing up the rear. He looked around curiously, scratching his head with the hand not holding a knife. “This, uh… is kind of a let down, actually.”

BOOM.

Kirito spun around just in time to see the heavy doors slam shut behind the thief—then, almost as fast, whirled to face front again as the remaining torches spontaneously lit themselves. The ring of lights swung around to meet in the middle of the far wall, and what had been concealed was suddenly starkly visible.

A dozen figures in black armor, wearing face-concealing helmets, bearing wicked-looking scimitars in hand. Just behind them, wearing a fancier version of the same armor, a tall figure whose face was hidden by a black-horned mask. The figure's eyes seemed to gleam red behind the mask, and in his hand was a one-handed sword that glowed a vibrant blue.

The adds' cursors, when Kirito focused on them, were a red a few shades darker than the demi-humans the Black Cats had fought through to get here. Their leader's was darker still; to the Black Cats, it would almost certainly be close to black.

The name that appeared when Kirito looked at him, heart pounding in his chest: Fallen Elven Remnant: The Commandant.

From the collective intake of breath behind him, he knew the Black Cats recognized the significance of the “The” just as well as he did.

“W-what the hell is a boss doing here?!” Ducker squeaked, bravado long gone.

Fallen Elf. That artwork… dammit! Why didn't I remember?! If the walls hadn't been pitch-black, Kirito was sure he would've realized it in a heartbeat: remembered the look of the Fallen Elf Twilight
Citadel he, Asuna, and Kizmel had stormed at the end of the Elf War Quest, a brutal assault that had come terrifyingly close to killing Kizmel. He would've realized that the very layout of the tower was similar to that place, an oversight he could only attribute to how very, very busy he'd been that day.

He had never expected to face the Fallen Elves again. Now he was face-to-face with what he could only assume was a Field Boss, and while his own level far outstripped it, he was backed only by one clearer, and a single party of relative newbies.

“Run,” Kirito heard himself saying, staring at The Commandant; who had, curiously, not yet made a move to attack. “Everyone, get out, right now.”

“The doors won't open!” Sachi called, voice shrill with growing panic. “They're locked!”

“Then teleport!” he snapped. “Hurry!”

Ducker quickly dug for the crystal in his belt pouch, held it aloft, and shouted, “Teleport: Corineth!”

Kirito expected to immediately see a bright blue flash in his peripheral vision, hear the distinctive sound of his comrade teleporting to safety. He'd follow soon, along with Kizmel, but only once they were sure everyone else had escaped—

“The crystals aren't working!”

His blood ran cold. *A trap. It's a trap, and even crystals aren't working... this has never happened before, not even on the Twenty-Fifth Floor! What the hell—?!*

Only then, when the Black Cats knew there was no escape, did The Commandant make a move. “Puny humans, and one Dark Elf,” he said, the grin that his mask hid evident in his voice. “You destroyed my people... now, it is your turn to die. My brothers... kill them all!”

Everything narrowed to the sword in The Commandant's hand, the sword in his own hand, and Kirito charged, screaming a battle cry.

Kirito's solo attack on The Commandant flew in the face of the careful coordination he and Kizmel had been teaching the Black Cats the last couple of months, but she knew at once why he'd done it. With thirteen strong Fallen Elves arrayed against them, they were outnumbered two-to-one, and Kirito was the only one who stood a chance of holding off The Commandant alone.

Against just one, perhaps as many as three, of the Fallen Elf Knights, Kizmel thought that might just have been enough to buy the Black Cats and herself time to even the odds. Against twelve, she felt a terror she'd not known in months. She herself could take any one of them herself, she was certain, but she was just as sickeningly sure that wouldn't be enough.

Even so, she did the only thing she could: she lunged for the nearest Fallen, Corrupted Sword of the Order glowing deep red in a Fell Crescent. The Fallen Knight met her halfway, laughing as he came, and their blades met in a concussion of sound and burst of light.

At the same time, the other Knights joined their Commandant in motion, and the room descended into total chaos.

It was a mad, terrifying whirlwind of battle that Kizmel hadn't seen since the ambush that killed her sister. Kirito's Sonic Leap managed to stop The Commandant in his tracks, while she locked blades with the first of the Knights—but the Black Cats had never anticipated a trap like this. The shock of their escape being cut off, and the strength of their opponents that their Mystic Scribing allowed them
to see more clearly than she could, shook the teamwork they'd trained so hard to learn.

They fought anyway, with no way out. Kizmel caught a brief glimpse of Sachi huddled by the doors, shaking in terror, but the others met the Fallen with weapons in hand. Keita and Sasamaru managed to beat back several themselves, for a few previous moments, with the spinning Tempest and Hurricane skills of their respective pole weapons; Tetsuo desperately dodged to one side of a scimitar thrust and smashed the offending Fallen's breastplate with his mace, while Ducker hurled himself screaming on another, driving his dagger for an unprotected throat.

Clashing with her own foe, Kizmel could see little else after that. Her opening Fell Crescent had been canceled, but it had done the job of getting her into reach. Her own speed was marginally greater than the Fallen Knight's; she recovered a breath faster than he did, took the extra moment to slam her kite shield into his faceplate, and followed up with a Treble Scythe that spun her around to deliver three whirling slashes to his chest.

The Fallen was driven further off-balance, stumbling back from the impacts. The last knocked him off his feet completely, and by the time he could even try to regain himself, the charm's backlash had released her. In that moment, she reversed her saber in her hands, leapt high in the air, and drove its point through the Fallen's armor and straight into his heart.

On an individual basis, Kizmel realized, the Knights were no match for her whatsoever. If they could just keep this up—a bellowing Kirito went past the corner of her eye just then, furiously trading blows with The Commandant—they could still survive. Recovering her blade from the shattered body of her first foe, she turned to engage the next—

A terrified scream, the likes of which she had never heard before and would never forget now, reached her ears, and she whipped around just in time to see Ducker fall away from a Fallen's scimitar, breaking into countless azure shards before he ever hit the floor.

"Ducker!" Sasamaru screamed. Breaking away from the Fallen who was trying to gut him, he charged at Ducker's killer, heedless of his own safety, and put all his terror, rage, and momentum into a Straight Thrust aimed for the elf's helmet. His spear, by luck or skill, stabbed right through one of the eyeholes; the Fallen tried for a moment to bring his scimitar up, then fell limp and shattered, following his victim into death.

Blinded by grief and fury, the lancer didn't see the next Knight coming. Only a bare instant before the Fallen's sword could pierce Sasamaru's chest did he look up, eyes going wide with terror—and then the Fallen's head was leaping from his shoulders, severed by Kizmel's desperate two-handed blow.

Three of twelve Fallen Elf Knights dead, along with one of the Black Cats. Kirito was, somehow, managing to keep The Commandant busy all by himself, countering every skill the general attempted with one of his own, yet it was at best a stalemate. And the remaining Knights were splitting up, separating into groups of three in an obvious attempt to overwhelm the survivors.

Kizmel's heart was racing, torn between grief and fear of her own. Even so, she pushed all that aside, and went for the first of the trio cornering her and Sasamaru with a Reaver to the gut. All she could do was fight the foes directly before her, and hope that Keita could hold out—and that Sachi would, somehow, recover enough of her wits to run. So far she was being ignored, Tetsuo was still whaling away with his mace, there was still a chance…

A pained grunt surprised her as she was in the act of putting a Linear through the throat of her third opponent, having found they were as weak as anyone else to blows that threatened the head. She took one brief moment to look, and her heart clenched at the sight of Kirito flying back; he'd
misjudged an attack from The Commandant, and though his armor and physique were more than up to the challenge, his balance was not.

The only bright spot was that he ended up using one of the Knights threatening Keita as a cushion, forcing the elf to the floor just in time to buy the guildmaster a few precious moments of breathing space.

Kizmel didn't see what happened after that. The companions of the Fallen she'd just finished closed on her together, and for several moments she was too busy fighting off their blades to make out anything else.

The next thing she did register was a blood-curdling shriek, followed by an all-too-familiar sound like shattering glass. The realization that Tetsuo, now, had fallen distracted her, and it was her turn to be caught unawares and thrown from her feet.

The impact disoriented her, and for the space of a few breaths—an eternity in battle—Kizmel wasn't sure what was going on. When she came back to her senses, though, the next couple of moments did feel endless. The two Knights who had been attacking her had turned to Sasamaru, joined by the two survivors of Tetsuo's murder. The lancer was almost surrounded, with nowhere to go but backward, and Kizmel could tell from the red marks on his body that he was sorely wounded.

At the same time, The Commandant had turned his attention to Kizmel, and his sword was beginning to gleam as he prepared a Sword Skill. She knew she had something of an advantage in strength, but she'd been wounded some herself fighting the Knights—and if he was any kind of swordsman at all, he would do the same as she had, and try for her neck.

Keita was too far to help either of them. He'd, somehow, managed to kill one of his attackers, but was sorely pressed by the remaining pair. Sachi was nowhere in sight, apparently safe but in no shape to help.

In that endless moment, Kizmel saw that Kirito had regained his feet, and was readying himself to help. At the same time, she could see the horrified realization in his eyes: that there was time enough to help one or the other of them, but not both.

He had to make a choice, between his own kind, and her.

Four blades thrust at Sasamaru, moving with painful sloth to her eyes. The Commandant's gleaming sword began to fall, an executioner's stroke coming to take her head.

Kirito flung himself forward, and time snapped back to normal.

A split second before The Commandant's blow could land, Kizmel's vision was obscured by black. Strong arms wrapped around her, and she was suddenly rolling across the stone floor, out of reach of the sword that struck obsidian instead of flesh. Those same arms pulled her to her feet at the end of the tumble; she found herself standing beside Kirito, their swords both pointed toward The Commandant.

Alive. She was still alive…

One more scream, and Keita's anguished howl, heralded another sound of a shattering body, and she knew Sasamaru no longer was.

Kizmel wanted to weep. No more than three minutes had passed since entering this death trap, and three of the Black Cats were gone. Fully half of the Fallen Elf Knights had joined them in death, but that was scarcely any consolation.
Especially since Keita had finally lost his own battle with despair, and dropped to his knees, staff falling from his hands. Two Knights still stood before him, waiting for that moment, and four stood between him and the clearers, to say nothing of The Commandant himself.

Kizmel was alive. It didn't look like that mercy was going to be granted to her comrades—her friends.

She and Kirito attacked anyway, throwing themselves at The Commandant with twin battle cries. They battered him back, Kizmel with a Reaver to the stomach, Kirito a Horizontal Arc across the chestplate, and The Commandant did stumble—but it wasn't enough, and she knew it.

Then another scream, this one of denial, echoed off the walls, and a blur of blue and white charged Keita's assailants. A brilliant Sonic Leap knocked one Fallen Knight clear off his feet, and before the second could fully shift his attention away from Keita, a sword traced three slashes like a numeral four across his backplate.

*A Savage Fulcrum,* Kizmel realized. *That's—*

A half-sob, half-scream tore from Sachi's throat again, and she followed up with the forehand, spinning backhand, and second forehand of a Sharp Nail that flung the Fallen at the wall. He shattered into fragments before he ever reached it; his companion regained his feet then, but Sachi took his furious Slant on her shield and didn't even flinch. She simply waited the breath for the backlash of her last attack to fully release her, and tore into the Knight with screaming fury.

Her techniques, higher-level than any she'd demonstrated in training with her guildmates, showed none of the hesitation that had always been there before. Sachi was gripped by rage and grief, but her movements were smooth, precise—and powerful.

*But she can't do it alone,* Kizmel thought grimly. “Kirito, I leave this to you!” she called. Even as her partner nodded, she pulled back from The Commandant and lunged for the first of the four Fallen Knights that remained between her and Sachi.

*Between the two of us, however…*

A chaotic swirl of blades, unlike anything Kizmel had known since the assault that finally toppled the Fallen Elves' war effort. It began as four on one, but Kizmel didn't care; even when Fallen scimitars got past her guard and inflicted shallow cuts, she ignored the defense completely, intent only on destroying her foes.

Here, a Sword Skill. There, a blow powered only by her own strength, lacking the overwhelming force or speed of the charmed techniques but also not hindered by their recovery time. She buried steel in the chest of the first of the quartet, kicked his shattering body away contemptuously, and lopped the arm off the next in one smooth motion.

She would kill them, for what they'd done today. Not one Fallen Elf would she allow to leave this obsidian fortress alive.

Two Kizmel cut down, then a third; then the last staggered as he was struck from behind. Sachi had finished the last threatening Keita, and assaulted the only survivor; with her new-found skill and confidence, Kizmel left it in the young girl's hands, and turned back to The Commandant.

Somehow, impossibly, Kirito must've been keeping track, because as he finished the Vertical Arc he'd just carved into the masked swordsman he shouted, “Switch!”

She was there in an instant, driving The Commandant back with heavy slash across the chest. His
impossibly durable armor held, though, and he struck a Horizontal against her in turn—and then Kirito was slamming a boot into his chin in a Crescent Moon.

The Commandant was strong, but he was only one swordsman, of a stature much like Kirito and Kizmel. And strong as he was, he was weaker than the foes they had encountered on higher floors; he simply could not match the strength they'd built up against those opponents, and his sword was sorely hampered by their armor.

For a short time, they battered The Commandant, timing their skills to cover each other's moments of weakness, and at length Kirito gasped out, “Just—a little—more—!”

At that moment, The Commandant abruptly pulled back, just a little, and wrenched his sword around in a complete, azure-edged circle. A Serration Wave, Kizmel realized—not enough to do more than scratch warriors such as they, but its real purpose was the wave of air pressure that forced them both back.

Maybe it was meant to give The Commandant another chance at taking their heads. Perhaps he intended to take the brief opening to try and slay Keita, a last spiteful revenge before his inevitable death. Kizmel would never know, because the gap created by the Serration Wave was filled by a speeding figure, sword glowing blue. A Sonic Leap came down and carved into The Commandant's shoulder, staggering him again.

Before he could recover, Kirito's left hand flew forward, glowing in the simple Embracer skill. Flattened into a knife edge, it struck with enough force to finally shatter The Commandant's armor, sending him stumbling still further.

Into that last opening, Sachi lunged forward, shouted wordlessly, and snapped her sword to one side and back in a perfect Snake Bite. A blow that could've shattered a sword bit twice into The Commandant's neck, and his head flew free; it and the rest of his body dropped to the floor, twitched, and broke into a thousand tumbling, glittering shards.

Silence fell.

There was a huge [Congratulations!] notice hanging in the air now, confirming that The Commandant and his subordinates had indeed been considered a boss fight. Kirito only barely noticed. He felt numb, empty in a way even the battle with The Adamantine Arachnid hadn't left him.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. They'd come so far, accomplished so much; now, nothing remained to mark the efforts of three players who had tried so hard. Aincrad's nature meant not even bodies remained to mark their passing.

This wasn't even like a floor boss, Kirito thought, sword slipping unnoticed from his fingers. Everybody goes into those knowing what the risks are, being ready for them. This… this was…

He could hear ragged breathing not far away. Sachi, the one he'd been most frightened for, had pulled herself together at the last moment; now, having gotten the Last Attack on The Commandant, she'd fallen to her knees, seeming oblivious to her surroundings. Kizmel, he noticed distantly, had gone silently to her side.

Kirito was never sure how long that silence lasted, disturbed only by Sachi's heavy breath. He only knew that, at length, there was a scraping sound of boots on stone, and then, “Why?!”

Against his will, he turned to see Keita standing up, eyes red and watery as SAO faithfully expressed
his anguish. The guildmaster was trembling, hands curled into fists, and his hard stare demanded answers. Answers that Kirito didn't have, couldn't give him, no matter how badly he wanted to.

Keita's face darkened further at Kirito's silence, and he took a slow step forward. “Answer me, dammit! What the hell happened here?! This isn't what the guide said it was going to be! There wasn't supposed to be a damned boss here! You… you told me the Rat's information was always good, so what the hell happened?!”

Kirito couldn't meet his gaze. “…I don't know,” he whispered, knowing even as he spoke that it wasn't close to an acceptable answer.

“Like hell you don't!” Keita took another step, face flushing red with fury and grief. “That… that thing knew you! It killed my friends to get back at you! Is… is that why you did this? Did you know about this, and trick us into coming here as… as cannon fodder?!”

There was no point, Kirito thought dully, in pointing out that he'd tried to get them to put more stock in the Village Chief's warning. After all, even he hadn't worried enough to really push the issue, had he?

“That's… that's not true,” he got out, even knowing it would fall on deaf ears.

“Liar! You and the Rat… you really are Beaters! If you weren't—if you weren't, Sasamaru, at least, wouldn't be dead!” Keita gestured angrily at Kizmel, who still hadn't said a word. “If you really gave a damn about anyone but yourself, you wouldn't have picked a damned NPC over a player!”

Kirito flinched. There was absolutely nothing he could say to that, and he knew it. He'd been too far from Ducker and Tetsuo, too busy trying to make sure The Commandant didn't just overwhelm them all—but he had had a choice when Sasamaru was attacked that last time. It was a choice he hadn't even thought about at the time. In that instant, it had been his reflex to save Kizmel—save his partner.

“You bastard,” Keita spat, when Kirito said nothing. One more step, and he was right in the Black Swordsman's face. “You selfish, miserable…” Words seemed to fail him then, and the next thing Kirito heard was the sound of Keita's fist impacting on his own jaw.

Being in the same party kept the blow from doing any actual damage—keeping Keita's cursor from going orange from the attack—but it still dropped him to the floor. From the look on Keita's face, the Black Cat didn't consider that enough; for a second, Kirito thought the other player would actually go for his weapon to finish the job.

“You should've been the one to die,” Keita said, voice dropping to an anguished whisper. “You led us here, you let Sasamaru die for that thing—”

Kirito could voice no denial. To his surprise, though, someone else did. “She's his friend!” Sachi yelled, suddenly on her feet. “Of course he picked her!”

Keita stared at her, incredulous. “His friend?” he repeated, visibly shocked. “Sachi—she's not even real! None of this is real! The only kind of person who'd pick a program over a human is some crazy beta who either lost his mind or wanted all the loot—”

Two long strides, and this time it was Sachi's fist meeting Keita's face. “It's real enough to kill us,” she said, tears running down her face. “It wasn't Kirito who brought us here, Keita—we brought them along. All along… all along, he and Kizmel have tried to tell us not to get ahead of ourselves, but we kept pushing!”
It took Keita a second to find his voice, stunned as he was. “We... dammit, Sachi, this is why we were trying! Because we thought we could make a difference! If we'd known that this bastard was just like the rest of the Beaters—”

“Stop saying that!” Sachi glared at him through her tears. “Beaters?! Keita, I was in the beta test, too!”

“What?”

“I didn't say anything... I felt guilty that I got in and you guys didn't, and then when we all got the full version, I didn't think it mattered anymore. But I did. I wasn't very good at it,” she continued bitterly, “but I was there. I got far enough to know Kirito's been telling the truth about how much things changed. I know—because I thought things were the same, and my friend died because of it.”

Kirito drew in a sharp breath. Suddenly, a few things that had puzzled him made sense. How Sachi seemed to know just that much more about how to fight than her friends—and why she always seemed so much more cautious than even Keita.

“You remember Sumika, don't you?” Sachi continued, swallowing hard. “She and I went on quests together while the rest of you were still hiding in the first town, using what I remembered from the beta to get by. Except... except we finally ran into something that wasn't the same, and Sumika died.” She wiped at her eyes, which were redder even than Keita's now. “So I know what the 'Beaters' have really been facing, Keita. Maybe some of them are that bad—but Argo and Kirito aren't.”

Keita stared at her for a long moment. The fight seemed to have drained out of him entirely; now he looked broken, exhausted and anguished. For a whole minute, there was only silence again.

Finally, the guildmaster looked away. “…It doesn't matter anymore, anyway,” he whispered. “Ducker, Tetsuo, Sasamaru... we can't keep going without them. Joining the clearers... that was nothing but a stupid dream, and we paid for it. Let's... let's just go back, leave the fighting to... them. There's... nothing more we can do…”

Kirito was more than a little surprised when Sachi took a long breath, and firmly shook her head. “I can't do that,” she said softly. “If I hide again... I might as well die. I've been out training every night for weeks now, trying to be strong enough not to let anyone die again. If I stop now... none of this will have meant anything.”

The guildmaster of what had been the Black Cats just looked at her, looking utterly broken; Kirito thought he didn't have anything left to even by surprised by Sachi's decision, now. “…Do what you want. I... I can't... do this... anymore... If you need me, you'll know where to find me…” His hand fumbled at a belt pouch, and came out with a bright blue crystal. “Teleport: City of Beginnings.”

With the battle over, apparently the game considered the trap to be destroyed, as well. Blue light flashed in a sphere around Keita, and he was gone.

Only then did Kizmel quietly walk over and rest an arm on Sachi's shoulders. “You could've gone with him, Sachi,” she said softly.

“No,” the other girl whispered. “No, I couldn't... Not this time. I can't just run away again. If I do... my friends will have died for nothing.” She swallowed. “But... I don't know what to do now. I'm not ready for the frontlines, I know that. I need... something else.”

In that room of horror, Kirito couldn't help but admire Sachi's courage. If he'd lost as many friends as
she had, especially all at once like this, he was sure he'd have run away, like Keita. The strength it
must've taken to go on, in the face of that…

_I… have to do something. Whatever Sachi says, Keita wasn't all wrong, either. I have to try and do
something to make up for this… however pathetic it might be._ It was his turn to swallow now,
unnoticed by either girl. _Well… here's hoping he doesn't hate me._

“I've got an idea,” Kirito said aloud, reaching up with a shaking hand to open his menu. “I… know
someone who might be able to help you, Sachi. Let's get back to town, and then I need to send a
couple of messages…”

Kizmel didn't know who, exactly, her partner had decided to contact. One of them, she was fairly
sure, was Argo—if anyone knew what had gone wrong, it would be the information broker—but all
she knew about the other was that a reply had come quickly enough to surprise Kirito, and then he'd
led them not just back to Corineth but to the town's teleport gate.

The Seventeenth Floor wasn't one she'd spent much time on. It had been cleared by the time she
made her way up to rejoin Kirito, and their expeditions with the Black Cats had mostly skipped it.
Even so, Kizmel had always wanted to see more of it, after Kirito mentioned offhand that its
architecture was much like that of his own ancestral land.

This time, she hoped, they might have time to take a closer look at the pagodas of Taira, when their
business was finished. For now, though, she and Sachi simply followed in Kirito's wake as he led
them through the town's streets according to directions he'd received from his contact.

At length, they came to a halt in front of a building of the same style as the high-tiered fortress that
dominated one end of Taira, albeit on a much smaller scale. Looking anxious, Kirito hesitantly lifted
one hand and knocked at the front door.

It opened at once, revealing a man Kizmel could only describe as “scruffy”, to borrow an expression
from Argo. Wild red hair kept in check by a bandana, a shadow of a goatee, red armor of a style that
somehow reminded her of the buildings around them, and a katana at his waist; if she hadn't known
better, she might've taken him for a mountain bandit.

The way the man's face lit up at the sight of his visitor dispelled that idea in an instant. “Oi, Kirito!
Long time no see! C'mon, get in here!” He didn't give the young Swordmaster time to reply before
grabbing him by the arm and hauling him bodily into the building.

“Oh, hey, take it easy, Klein,” Kirito protested.

“Heh. First time I hear a word from you in months, and you think I'm gonna take it easy?” The
redhead shook his head, grinning, then sobered. “Sorry. Your message said you had something
serious to ask me. Got anything to do with your friends…?”

Kizmel wasn't surprised by his reaction, once he'd caught sight of her. Clearers were used to her by
now; Swordmasters farther from the frontlines tended to react more like the Black Cats originally
had. _Or worse_, she thought sadly, remembering Keita's spiteful words. _Though I suppose it is hard to blame him for being angry that Kirito would save me over another human… But why did he say I'm “not real”? Did the loss truly harm his mind that badly…?_

The older Swordmaster's actions, when he snapped out of his initial surprise, startled her out of her
brooding. He abruptly snapped to a position of attention, then bowed with truly awe-inspiring
precision. “Excuse me, My Lady! My name is Klein, twenty-three years old, currently single—Oof!”
He stumbled back, almost falling over, from the force of Kirito's punch to his shoulder. “This isn't the time for that, Klein,” he said; despite his rebuke, though, Kirito actually seemed to loosen up a little, and when he turned back to his companions it was with an expression of resigned tolerance. “Sachi, Kizmel, this is Klein, guildmaster of Fuurinkazan. He may look scruffy, but you can count on him.”

Klein straightened up, rubbing his abused shoulder, but he grinned gamely. “Yeah, what he said. Uh… nice to meet you guys.”

“Um, likewise, Klein,” Sachi said softly, bobbing her head in a nod.

“A pleasure, Guildmaster Klein.” Kizmel paused; then, unable to resist, added, “But I'm afraid your implied request would require my Queen's permission.”

The guildmaster blinked, seemed to notice only then that she wasn't human, and then glanced at Sachi's subdued face. “Okay,” he said after a moment. “I can see something big happened. 'Sides, Argo got here before you did, and I've never seen the Rat look that ready to go orange before. Why don't you guys tell me all about it?”

Ten minutes later, they were gathered around a low table within Fuurinkazan's guildhall. Argo had been waiting for them, looking angrier than Kizmel had ever seen, and the rest of Klein's guild looked just as furious by the end of it.

“Damn,” Klein said softly, when Kirito had finished outlining the day's horrible events. “That's just… Who the hell expects a boss at the end of something like that?” He looked over at Argo, who was pacing restlessly. “You got any idea what went wrong?”

“Damn right,” the Rat spat, coming to an abrupt halt. “Kii-bou, I checked into it the minute I got your message. I got sold bad info, and I don't let that slide. Even if you weren't friends of mine.” Her fists were clenched so tight that were it not for the charm protecting Swordmasters from harm within their settlements, Kizmel feared she would've hurt herself. “This wasn't just 'bad' info, either. This was a straight-up lie. The son of a bitch was trying to get people killed.”

“This… was on purpose?” Sachi whispered, blinking back fresh tears.

“You're sure?” Kirito said sharply. “I know MPKs have been tried before, but—”

“Pretty sure,” Argo said grimly. “Knew I shoulda been suspicious when Joe, of all people—you remember him, right? One of Cactus-head's lackeys?—starting coming up with new info, but everything before this checked out fine. This time…” She hissed, sounding more like an angry cat than her namesake. “I tried to 'ask' him about it when I got your message, and you know what I found? He's gone. Took off this morning, nobody's seen him since. An' believe me, our old 'buddy' Kibaou is about ready to go orange himself. Cactus-head hates your guts, Kii-bou, but this was just the kind of thing he gets on 'Beaters' for.”

Kizmel found herself nodding. Kibaou, from what she remembered, was an unpleasant individual, but hypocrisy didn't seem to be one of his vices. At least, not the kind that made him anything like the one group he most despised.

Argo spun on her heel, stalked angrily to the other side of the room, and stopped again. “One thing's for sure—I'm gonna be a hell of a lot more careful about my sources from now on. That somebody used me to get people killed—” Abruptly, the anger seemed to drain out of her, and she turned back to the group with a pained expression. “Kii-bou, Kii-chan, Sacchin… I'm sorry. I screwed up.”

Kirito looked away, unable to speak; Sachi, though, managed to meet Argo's eyes. “It's not your
fault, Argo-san,” she said softly. “I… don’t know if Keita will ever see that, but I do. Especially if someone else set you up.”

“I still let myself get tricked in the first place.” Argo huffed. “I can’t fix what happened, but I’m gonna make damn sure it doesn’t happen again. \textit{And} I’m gonna find out who put Joe up to this; I \textit{don't} think that screaming ninny had it in him to come up with something like this himself.”

Thinking on that for a moment, Kizmel was inclined to agree. She hadn't seen Joe much, but she did remember him as being rather high-strung. \textit{Enough so to irritate even Kibaou, as I recall.}

“I’d try and find out more about Morte, if I were you,” Kirito put in. “This really sounds like his handiwork. Just… be careful, okay, Argo?”

“Always am, Kii-bou.” Argo tilted her head. “So. What're you guys gonna do now? Must be some reason you wanted Klein in on this.”

“Right.” Kirito took a deep breath, turning his attention to the guildmaster. “Klein, I know it's selfish of me to ask, after what happened back on the first day…”

“Shut up, Kirito,” Klein said, surprising Kizmel by glaring at her partner. “Are you \textit{seriously} still beating yourself up about that? I told you back then: it wouldn't have been fair for me to count on you all the time. You taught me the basics, and it got me—and my buddies—this far just fine.” His expression and tone both softened. “You don't have a damn thing to be sorry about. So c'mon, tell me what you need.”

Kizmel thought for a second that Kirito's eyes had misted up, just a little; if so, though, he blinked them clear in a hurry. “If you say so, Klein… Anyway. Keita went back to the City of Beginnings, after the battle, so… the Black Cats really don't exist anymore. I was wondering if maybe you could pick up where we left off, training Sachi…?”

If Klein was at all surprised by that, it didn't give him much pause. He turned to look at Sachi, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Kizmel's mental image of him as a mountain bandit was broken by the sympathy in his eyes as he evaluated the lost young girl, suddenly looking more like a true leader than any human Swordmaster she'd yet met.

“Heck of thing you went through today, Sachi-san,” he said after a moment. “I've lost a couple of friends myself since Kayaba turned this place into a death trap, but never anything like that. You sure you're ready to keep going?”

Sachi swallowed, but met his gaze levelly. “I… I am. If I don't keep going, either I'll die, or I'll go and hide somewhere and never come back out. Maybe not even when we finally clear this place.”

Klein looked at her a moment longer, then looked up at his guildmates. “Guys? What do you think?”

A tall, mustachioed man with a bandana covering most of the top of his head shrugged. “More the merrier, Leader. Helping out a girl in trouble's right up our alley anyway, right?”

His fellows nodded, and Klein turned back to Sachi. “Okay, Sachi-san, you're in. Welcome to Fuurinkazan. But,” he added, raising one finger, “you're not going anywhere for a couple of days, at least. I get what you mean about running away, but I'm not letting you back into a fight until you've had time to rest, got it?”

Sachi nodded. “I understand,” she whispered. “And… thank you, Guildmaster.”

“Just call me Klein.” He waved a hand, then turned back to Kirito. “Speaking of rest. You and
Kizmel-san are staying here tonight, too. Don't even try to argue,” he said, when Kirito opened his mouth. “You're staying here, or I pay Argo to do something. If you've been hanging around with a girl since I last saw you, I'm sure she's got blackmail material.”

“…You fight dirty, Klein,” Kirito complained.

“Like I'd win any other way? You taught me everything I know about this game.” Klein gestured toward a doorway leading farther into the guildhall. “Go on, get some rest. Let other people worry about things for a while.”

Kirito wasn't prepared to admit it, but as he walked into the unused bedroom Klein had directed him to, he was actually grateful for the demand that he stay the night. The last thing in the world that he wanted to do was go back to the inn the Moonlit Black Cats had been using as a base, and it was by now far too late to go looking for another.

After everything, all he wanted to do was rest, and try to forget, if only for a little while, the enormity of his failure.

Argo says it's not my fault. Klein says it's not my fault. Sachi says it isn't. Kirito stowed his sword, coat, boots, and gloves in his inventory, then flung himself down on one of the futons the Sengoku-themed guildhall used for bedding. Give me a few months, and maybe I'll even start to believe it. Maybe.

Though the knowledge that they'd been set up did assuage his guilt some. Of course, at the same time it made him feel more guilty, for giving him a reason to feel better about himself.

Lying on his side, facing away from the door, he didn't see when Kizmel came in, but he heard her well enough. Heard the distinctive tinkling sound as her armor was banished in whatever arcane way the Dark Elves stored their equipment, and then a faint rustling of cloth from her settling into the futon next to him.

Kirito tried to pretend he was already asleep, dreading what his partner might say to him now that they were finally alone, but she'd been with him too long. She knew his habits fully as well as Asuna had come to, by now. “Kirito,” she said softly. “We need to talk.”

 “…Yeah.” He didn't know what she was going to say, exactly, but her relative silence since the defeat of The Commandant had struck him as very, very ominous; and much as he wanted to, there really was nothing good to come from postponing whatever this conversation would be.

For a long moment, she said no more, as if trying to put her thoughts into words. Then, finally, Kizmel said, “Keita said… that I wasn't 'real'. And Guildmaster Klein… he called this a 'game'. All along, I've heard Swordmasters refer to themselves as 'players', but I thought there must have been some meaning in your language that I didn't understand. Yet now…”

He closed his eyes, wincing. That was a question he'd known for months now was going to come up sooner or later, ever since it became plain just how intelligent Kizmel really was. At the same time, he'd been trying to put it off—at first because he'd been deathly afraid of what reaction her program might have to it, and then because he couldn't think of any way to really answer it that she could even understand, given her worldview.

No, Kirito told himself. That's not the real reason. The real reason is... I've been afraid she'd hate me for it. ...I still am.

That didn't make the other point any less valid, though. How could he explain that she only existed inside a dreamworld, seemingly the only “real” person out of the thousands of NPCs and mobs?
someone had told him he was only a program, he wouldn't believe it either, and he at least had the right frame of reference to grasp the concept.

No, I can't explain that. Especially since even I don't know why she is different from all the others. But... maybe I can explain about us, a little. I just hope... she doesn't hate us for it.

Maybe Kizmel had some idea of just what a difficult question she'd asked, because she waited patiently for him to think of a way to phrase it in a way she'd understand. Finally, he said, very quietly and hesitantly, “...It wasn't supposed to be real. None of it was.”

She made a thoughtful sound. “Sachi once told me you were expecting it to be almost like a game, that you had been told you'd simply awaken in your own world if you died here...”

“No.” The word was a whisper, forced out past a lump in Kirito's throat. “It wasn't supposed to be 'almost' like a game, Kizmel. It was a game. That's how Kayaba sold it. It was supposed to be... the closest way I can think of to say it that you'd understand is like a lucid dream. It was just going to be the most lifelike game ever.”

There was a long silence from behind him. Then, “So... when you refer to yourselves as players...”

“Yeah. That's all we really are, Kizmel. We came here to play a game, and got stuck fighting for our lives.” He sighed. “It's still hard for a lot of us to accept, even now. That we're being killed by a game. Some people still don't believe it.”

“Like Keita.”

Kirito shook his head. “Not... exactly. It's...” He trailed off, and made a frustrated sound. “I'm sorry, Kizmel, I really don't know how to explain a lot of this. But... it's one thing to accept we can die here, and another to really think of Aincrad as 'real'. ...Or the people in it as real.” He hesitated. “...Honestly, I used to feel the same way. Until I met you, Kizmel.”

That was a hard admission to make. Very hard. He didn't have the least idea how she'd take it, but he'd realized now that if they were going to continue as partners, he had to admit his own uncertainty —and that it had once nearly led him to let her die.

As he had let her die, three times, in the beta.

For a time, all he heard was the sound of his partner breathing. At length, she asked, very softly, “So what do you think of this world now, Kirito? Of its people? Are we... 'real'? Is Aincrad 'real' to you?”

“You are,” Kirito said immediately. His lingering questions about her aside, it was impossible for him now to think of her as anything but a person, whether he understood how it was possible or not. “Otherwise... Truth is, I'm not sure what's going on, Kizmel. I thought I knew, but some things just don't make sense... So ever since I met you, I've treated this world just like I would my own.”

After another long, tense pause, Kizmel said, voice still soft, “Kirito... your people aren't fighters at all, are they? The Swordmasters... If you were expecting an actual game, then training in real war was not in the summoning criteria at all, was it?”

“...No,” he admitted. “I'm sure there's some people here that actually had military training in our world, but most of us? Kids having fun, like the Black Cats, were most of the people who got caught in this.”

“And you?”
Kirito laughed; a bitter, humorless sound. “Me? I'm a school kid, Kizmel. The closest I came to knowing how to fight was a little kendo practice—wooden swords—when I was little. Not even kenjutsu; kendo's just for sport. Everything I know about really fighting, I learned here.” He snorted, a sound of self-reproach. “That's why… I've always avoided guilds. Why I was always afraid, working with the Black Cats. It's… why I left Klein to fend for himself, the day we came here. I've got no business being responsible for other people…”

It actually felt kind of good, saying it out loud at last. Admitting just how insane it was for him to get involved with anyone else. After all, the deaths of Ducker, Tetsuo, and Sasamaru had only proven it. Maybe they'd all been tricked, but they never would've been in that position if he hadn't gotten involved, lifting them to heights they couldn't handle.

*Of course, now Kizmel knows just what kind of a fraud she's been working with,* he thought, gloom overtaking the selfish relief. *Just a pretend hero; nothing like a proper knight—*

Kirito heard another rustle of cloth, and was startled to feel arms slipping around him, warm softness pressing against his back. “You're very brave, Kirito,” Kizmel whispered. “B-brave?” he stuttered, caught off-balance both by her words and the feel of her breath on his neck. “Me?”

“You came to this world believing it to be nothing more than a game, with no training for battle. Yet you not only persevered, but you've always been right at the front this whole time, Kirito. Had you not told me, I would never have even suspected you were anything less than a warrior from a long lineage.”

He started to shake his head in denial; stopped when he realized the effect it had on the body pressed against his. “I left Klein behind, when I could've helped him. Today, I… I couldn't save Tetsuo, or Ducker. And when I could have saved Sasamaru, I…”

“No one expects you to bear responsibility for everyone, Kirito,” Kizmel told him gently. “Klein said as much himself, didn't he? And for all those you may not have saved, how many more have lived because of your efforts? As for saving me…” It was her turn to hesitate. “…I will always feel some guilt myself, for that choice having been made. But, Kirito… it means a great deal to me, that you would make such a choice.”

“But… how can I face anyone else from my world, after that? I mean… whatever I may believe about you, almost nobody else does think you're really 'real', Kizmel, and I… don't know how I could even tell them they're wrong.”

Her response was to pull herself closer against him, causing his face to turn a bright red he was sure could be seen even in the dark. “I cannot answer your existential questions, Kirito, or theirs. But I can say that, as far as I'm concerned, no one has any right to question your choices, when you've done so much, despite being so ill-prepared.”

“…I still couldn't save the Black Cats,” Kirito whispered, closing his eyes. Despite his protest, she had eased his mind—and part of him hated himself for it.

“Neither could I,” Kizmel pointed out simply. “Do not believe that I will sleep easily tonight either, Kirito. Whether the responsibility was truly yours or mine, we still failed, and it hurts me as much as it does you. But nothing we do now will bring them back. All we can do is push forward—and free all of you to return to your homeland.” She shifted against him, the feel of her body against his enough to make him fear spontaneous combustion from sheer embarrassment. “For now… like Klein said, sleep, Kirito. I will be here with you.”
Sleeping sounded easier said than done, to him, especially in their compromising position. Even so, despite his fears of Argo wandering in and obtaining her best blackmail material yet, the stress of the day was catching up to him; gradually, Kirito started to slip into the temporary reprieve of darkness.

Just before he dozed off entirely, though, he thought he heard Kizmel say something else. He couldn't quite make it out, though, and he decided muzzily that it couldn't be important.

“...See it… with you…”

Klein knew he didn't always come across as the most reliable guy around. Actually, he was perfectly well aware that a lot of people, his own guildmates included, considered him to be pretty goofy, a lot of the time. And, if he was going to be perfectly honest—to himself, anyway—he couldn't really deny it.

Even so, there was a reason that, ten months into the death game, Fuurinkazan hadn't lost even a single member. He took his responsibilities as a guildmaster damned seriously, and the first thing he did after completing the formalities of registering Sachi with Fuurinkazan was buy every bit of information about the Black Cats that Argo had. Rat-like prices be damned.

While he was looking over the surprising wealth of information the Rat had on such a small, low-level guild, Klein took the time to look in on his newest recruit and his guests. All things considered, he wasn't surprised that Sachi stayed up a little later than was really wise—nor, from what Argo said, that she ended up in the same room as the guests.

Looking over the sleeping young warriors, Klein slowly shook his head. “They've had a hell of time, haven't they?” he muttered to Argo, who'd followed him as he did his rounds.

“Yep,” she agreed, for once not a trace of trolling in her voice. “Most of the Black Cats were pretty sheltered, right up until today. Sacchin, though… she knew something like this could happen. And Kii-bou… You talked to him much since launch day?”

“He'd answer if I had a question. Or if I got fed up waiting and asked him if he was okay. But today was the first time he sent me a message on his own.” Klein grimaced. “I've heard rumors, though. The 'Beater', huh?”

“Kii-bou saved a lot of lives with that stunt, Klein. Probably the only reason it didn't kill him was because everybody knew we needed him.” Argo took a near-silent step forward, knelt, and gently drew a blanket over her sleeping friends; right now, her demeanor was entirely at odds with her reputation. “It ain't all been bad, Klein… but he's always been right at the front. Some of the other clearers think he goes for the LA all the time 'cause he wants loot. You and I know better.”

Klein nodded. Kirito had made a powerful first impression, that day. He'd taught Klein the essential basics of SAO, and tried to get him clear of the chaos when Kayaba revealed his crazy plan. He'd run away, sure, but Klein knew damn well that it wasn't greed, but raw terror that drove him.

If his young friend had ever run away since, Klein hadn't heard a whisper about it.

“So,” he said, when Argo had pulled back from the sleeping pair. “An MPK, huh? Pretty bold, using you to bait the trap.”

“Joe will pay for that,” she said, voice low and dangerous. “I may be a Rat, but I ain't a murderer. I'm gonna find him, and whoever put him up to it, and they're gonna pay. Maybe I can't fight 'em head-on, but they're gonna find out why you don't make an info broker mad.”

Klein believed her. There were a lot of people in Aincrad who didn't like Argo the Rat, but there
were damn few who didn't take her seriously these days; making an enemy of the single biggest—and most reliable—source of information in the game wasn't smart. She had a long reach, if she wanted to use it.

Argo took a noticeable deep breath, and when she spoke again, she was calmer, if no less firm. “You'd better take care of Sacchin, Klein,” she said, gazing sadly on the girl; from the pinched look on her face, and her fitful movements, Sachi's sleep was anything but peaceful. “I don't know her that well, but she's been through hell.”

“You've got my word on it,” Klein said sincerely. “I won't let anybody in my guild die, Argo. You know that.” His gaze drifted to the other sleepers, and he found himself shaking his head in bemusement. “Those two, now… That's the weirdest thing I've seen since all this started.”

Death if HP hit zero, no way to log out, monsters of every shape and form that turned out to be a lot scarier when there wasn't a computer monitor between you and them… He'd dealt with all of that. Human jackasses screwing things up for the hell of it, well, he'd been playing MMOs long enough to know griefers all too well, even if he couldn't understand how people could be insane enough to keep doing that under these conditions.

Even the rumors of MPKs he'd been hearing about lately, Klein wasn't really shocked by. Worried, furious, uncomprehending—but not shocked.

The obviously-NPC elf girl currently curled up against Kirito's back, that confused the hell out of him. He'd worked with NPCs a few times in specific quests, but they all had very obvious patterns, and clear limits as to where they could go. A Dark Elf with a cursor dark enough to make him more than a little nervous following a player through town and dungeon both?

To say nothing of how she'd behaved in the short time Klein had been around her, which from Argo's blackmail files was only the tip of the iceberg.

“…You think she's real?” he asked after a minute or so of silence. “I mean… she's an NPC, but the way she talks…”

“I don't know.” Argo said frankly, shaking her head. “Kii-bou and Aa-chan do, though. And it's true I've never seen an NPC who came that close to me at trolling…” She shrugged. “I don't know. It's crazy, really, but the truth is I've never seen an NPC at all like Kii-chan.

“Either way, Kii-bou and Aa-chan think Kii-chan's a person, and I owe 'em both. 'Specially Kii-bou.” Argo watched the sleeping partners, an unusually gentle smile on her face. “Think maybe I'm gonna do my best to help 'em out. 'Least I can do for them, dontcha' think?”

Chapter End Notes

Here we have the point I had originally expected to reach as of the end of Chapter II. ...Reaching the expected endpoint of Chapter III is still several chapters beyond this.

This is really the point at which the plot started to take off. The main plot got its big start here, and one or two of the most important subplots begin in this chapter. While some have claimed this entire arc was a waste of time, it in fact has ramifications yet to hit as far as Chapter XIX.
Couple of continuity notes. First, yes, I screwed up in having Kirito already know about Cardinal; I'd forgotten he only learned the details about a week before the end of the death game, and by the time I realized my mistake there was way too much material referencing it in-story to fix. So, my bad.
Second, I'm not sure she's mentioned in the anime, but Sachi's deceased friend is canon. Her name is my invention, as is Sachi's status as a former beta tester, but the friend's death is indeed why she was so convinced she was going to die as well.

So. Arc fatigue the first over with. Next arc: shameless Zelda pastiche! (Hey, Kayaba's already a mass-murderer; what does he care about copyright law?)
Chapter VI: Minuet of Forest I

October 3rd, 2023

September had been a slow month for the clearing group. The frontline had been on the Thirty-Fifth Floor at the beginning; now, just at the start of October, they'd only gained two floors since.

Kirito couldn't bring himself to begrudge the slow progress, though. The slow going—due for once to the maze-like nature of the floors in question, rather than mob strength—had given him some much-needed time to pull himself back together after the fiasco that had opened September. The mobs and Floor Bosses had been relatively easy, posing little threat to the strong players who formed the core of the clearers.

The Thirty-Seventh Floor, from the look of it, wasn't going to be so confusing. Kirito wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing; it looked peaceful—after the defeat of the previous floor's boss, he'd emerged onto this one in a quiet forest—but looks, especially in SAO, could be deceiving.

Especially when Argo the Rat requested a personal meeting, in a very out of the way place, before even the first edition of her next floor guide could possibly be ready.

Following her instructions, Kirito and Kizmel had made their way to the forest village Ilden, a hamlet near the southern edge of the floor. There was no proper road there, only what looked like a game trail; from what Kirito could tell, no other players had yet discovered the place. Possibly, he thought ruefully, even other clearers had decided a game trail should wait until they'd gained a few levels on the new floor.

Considering the strength of the predators haunting the trail, he didn't blame them. He and Kizmel were strong enough to fight off the Sabertooth Jaguars lurking in the trees, but only because of the intensive training they'd done since the tragedy on the Twenty-Eighth Floor. He was pretty sure even he would've been killed in short order, if he'd been solo.

“Argo is certainly in a mysterious mood,” Kizmel commented, when they finally emerged into Ilden proper. “Why would she want to meet in a place like this? And how did she get here, alone?”

“If there's one thing she's good at, it's hiding,” Kirito reminded her. Still, he was uneasy, too. “Still risky for her, I'll admit… Think that's the place she was talking about?” he added, pointing toward a small, cozy-looking inn not far into the village.

“Likely enough. I suppose we need not speculate any longer, then.”

As expected, the Rat herself was sitting at a table in the farthest corner of the inn's dining room, sipping distractedly at a large mug of something while checking her menu. When she saw the duo enter, she flipped back her hood, grinned, and waved them over.

“You know,” Kirito said by way of greeting, sliding into a chair across from her, “isn't the back corner kind of overkill, Argo? I don't think there's any other players within a kilometer of the village, let alone in the building.” Inside a building no one's cursor would appear, but to his experienced eye
the other inn patrons were all NPCs, going through the motions of life without quite feeling “genuine”.

Kizmel, he noticed absently, was also looking over the NPCs as she sat, an oddly thoughtful look on her face. If anything was bothering her, though, she made no comment about it then.

“That any way to say hello, Kii-bou?” Argo asked him, shaking her head. “Ah, never mind. Let's say I wanna be really careful… especially these days. Ever since… Well, you know.”

“Yeah.” So far, no one else had tried to pawn off false information on Argo, but Joe had successfully evaded pursuit and had not been seen since most of the Moonlit Black Cats had been murdered. Worse, Kirito had heard of other monster PKs since, suggesting that Joe—or whoever put him up to it; he still suspected Morte of continued involvement—hadn't given up.

“Have you had any word from Fuurinkazan?” Kizmel asked, before the silence could get too gloomy. “Kirito and I have been busy lately, so we've not had a chance to check in on them in weeks.”

Kirito winced. That was true enough, but there was more to it than that. They'd never discussed it since that night, but both of them still felt guilty over what had happened; he suspected his partner was just as uncomfortable around Sachi now as he was.

“They're doin' fine, at least as of yesterday,” Argo assured them, waving her mug. “Klein's careful—and he and his guys are stronger than the Black Cats ever were. Last I heard Sacchin was getting back to being a forward—that sword she got for an LA Bonus is really helping her out.”

Goblin-Cleaver, that was. Sachi had acquired the sword from striking the final blow on The Commandant, and from what Kirito had heard since its potential stats when fully-upgraded would've made him green with envy if it had been acquired under better circumstances.

“I'm glad she's still able to fight,” Kizmel said quietly, eyes shadowed. “I know what she said after the battle, but I was still worried…”

“That makes three of us. But it looks like she really does have some real steel in that spine.” Argo took a gulp from her mug, set it aside, and leaned her elbows on the table. “Anyway. That was part of what I was gonna talk to you about, but there's more. Business is business, after all. You guys want the first edition of the new guide?”

Kirito blinked. “Already? Even for you, that's fast, Argo.” It was one thing below the Tenth Floor, when what she'd been doing was updating information she already had from the beta; her guides had tended to come out much more slowly since.

“Been working overtime on this one, Kii-bou,” she told him, looking unusually serious. “Stumbled on something early on that got my whiskers twitching, so I hustled. Usual price, though, despite the rush job.”

Shaking his head, Kirito dutifully exchanged a small pouch of coins—three thousand Cor, just for the first edition; her prices had gone up along with the value of treasure of the higher floors—for the small hardbound book Argo favored for her guides.

He immediately tucked it into his storage without reading it, though, and fixed the older girl with a hard look. “Okay, Argo,” he said. “Not that I'm not glad to have some advance info… but that's not really why you called us out here, is it? Most other players couldn't get here yet even if they knew about it. What's with the skulking around?”
Argo's mouth twitched in a smile. “You see right through me, don't ya, Kii-bou? You're right, though.” The smile faded. “Truth is, there's another quest I found that ain't in that guide.”

Kirito sighed. I should've known. “How much, Argo, and what kind of quest? It must be big if you're selling it separately.”

She shook her head. “No charge for this one, Kii-bou. Honestly, I'm not sure you should even try it. Not 'cause it's hard—I dunno yet what kind of difficulty we're talking about—but 'cause it might make things harder for you with the other players. Again.” She hesitated. “Truth is, yesterday I stumbled on a Dark Elf fort a ways north of Mydo.”

Startled, Kirito exchanged a glance with Kizmel. Mydo was the hub town of the floor, so it made sense to search its surroundings for quests. But a Dark Elf fort…

“I didn't even know any of my people were this high up the castle,” Kizmel said slowly, giving voice to Kirito's thoughts. “As far as I was aware, we've never had any interest much above the capital.”

“Surprised me, too. Can't tell ya what they're doing here, though, Kii-chan, 'cause they didn't let me in.” Argo somehow seemed to pull off staring at both of them simultaneously, expression very, very intent. “They did tell me this: they're waiting for just the right people to show. To be exact, they're looking for a human… partnered with a Dark Elf. Supposed to be something that needs one of each to pull off.”

Kirito stiffened. In any other game, that might not be so strange—but in SAO, the only player race was human. Dark Elves were NPC only—and there was only one player who had ever worked with Dark Elves outside the Elf War quest, let alone partnered with one.

Kizmel had been scripted to die in the battle in which he'd met her. In the beta, every time he'd gone through the quest exactly that had happened. Every time someone had run the quest after he met her, it had been a different Dark Elf, who had indeed died as in the beta.

There should be no quest that required such a partnership. It essentially meant that Kirito and Kizmel were the only people in all of Aincrad who could undertake it, and the idea of a quest that only a single player could ever take on was completely unheard of in MMOs.

Let alone a quest that would be flat-out impossible if Asuna and I hadn't somehow broken the script. Unless… I know Cardinal is supposed to be able to generate new quests autonomously, but has it really noticed us? If it had, I'd have expected it to… “correct” Kizmel, not this…

“It's real info, Kii-bou,” Argo said quietly, obviously following his train of thought. “Far as I know, nobody else has even found that camp yet. But… like I said, you might want to leave this one alone. Been awhile since that whole 'Beater' nonsense got thrown around much, but if the rewards for this quest are as big as I think they might be…”

She had a point, Kirito knew. A lot of the flack about “unfair advantages” had died down once the frontline advanced beyond the highest point the beta testers had ever reached; even more of it had faded with Kibaou's retreat. Even so, there were some who still remembered Kirito's past claims, and even those that didn't would be understandably resentful about “unique” quest rewards.

Argo's right about that… but that's not all there is to this, now. It's about more than just staying alive, or clearing the game. At least, it is for me.

Kirito had been edging in that direction ever since he met Kizmel, and began to realize there might be some in Aincrad besides players who had hopes and dreams. To this day she remained the only
such he'd ever found, but—some things still bothered him. Bits of lore that didn't quite add up, strange events he couldn't completely account for; like the way The Commandant had recognized him, and held him personally responsible for the defeat of the Fallen Elves.

And all that combined with one simple fact: it would be important to Kizmel. Whatever was really going on in Aincrad, that alone deeply affected his decision.

He wasn't sure how much of that Kizmel followed, when he noticed she was looking at him. Probably most of it, as perceptive as she was; either way, though, she did have her own reasons for everything, including this. “It may be dangerous to us, Argo—especially to Kirito,” she said. “But if my people are asking for help, I cannot simply ignore it.”

“She's right,” Kirito agreed. “This could be pretty important for them. And, well—it wouldn't be the first time something like this proved important to dealing with a Floor Boss, right? Like knowing about the poison attack the Third Floor boss had, or Viscount Yofilis helping to take out the Fourth.”

Argo sighed, but didn't argue; she'd seen the latter event firsthand, after all. And if anyone knows me as well as Asuna or Kizmel these days, it's her. The thought wasn't an entirely pleasant one for Kirito, since that familiarity included a lot of blackmail material, but he knew it was true.

“You're right,” she said, shaking her head. “Okay, then. Here's what I know: the Dark Elves have a stone fort about a kilometer north of Mydo. They're looking for a human and a Dark Elf, 'cause of something to do with 'needing the strength of both races' or some such. You'll prolly need that signet ring you got from the Queen; pretty sure that's what the gate guard was talking about when he said I needed 'proof of fellowship with the Dark Elves' to get in. You still got it, right?”

“Of course.” Even if it hadn't given him a nice boost to his stats—which was of course a welcome bonus—Kirito would've kept it just for the connection with Kizmel, during the months they'd been apart. Asuna, he knew, had kept hers for much the same reason.

Argo nodded, then stood. “Well, that's about all I got for ya on this one, Kii-bou. Anything else you'll have to find out yourself—and what you do learn, I'll buy for the usual rate.”

“And sell it to whom?” Kizmel asked, lifting one lilac brow. “From what you've said, no other Swordmaster could use the information at all.”

The Rat grinned again. “'Cause someday, Kii-bou's story is going to make me a killing as a tell-all book, o'course! I'll keep the really juicy stuff to myself, don't worry—well, and Aa-chan, naturally—but I'm telling you, bestseller here!”

The frightening part, Kirito reflected, was that she might actually be telling the truth. He couldn't imagine why anyone would want to read a book about him, but if there was a way to monetize it, Argo would find it. There was nothing he could possibly do about it, either, except...

“I'd better get a signed first edition, free,” he told her, trying for a severe look. “You'll owe me, Argo.”

“Of course, of course!” Argo started for the door—then stopped, very suddenly, and was so quiet Kirito thought she was muting the whole room.

“Argo…?”

“…One other thing you should know, Kii-bou,” she said, voice barely audible now. “You remember Naga, one of Lind's guys, right? …He's dead.”
Kirito felt a sudden chill. Since the Twenty-Fifth Floor nearly wiped out the Army's best, the clearing group had only very rarely lost anyone, and never outside of a boss fight. “I hadn't heard the DDA had gotten in any trouble lately. What happened?”

“Didn't have anything to do with the rest of the DDA. And it wasn't a monster, Kii-bou.” Argo took a deep breath, meaningless in any sense but psychologically in this world. “Wasn't even an MPK. The DDA are keeping it quiet, but that tells ya a lot by itself; if it were a monster, even an MPK, they'd say so.”

He swallowed, chill deepening. Nearly a year since the penalty for character death became real, and not once had anyone been murdered directly. A handful of MPKs, at least two “duels” under suspicious circumstances… but never cold-blooded, personally-executed murder.

After a moment of silence, Argo lifted her hood over her head. “I know you're good, Kii-bou, and you've got Kii-chan to watch your back. But—be careful, 'kay? I don't wanna see your name struck through on the Monument. Ever.”

The two of them were, indeed, extremely cautious when they left Ilden's inn. Kizmel insisted on a light meal, despite their mutual lack of appetite, to avoid the distraction of hunger, and when they set off for the trail back to Mydo it was slow and careful. Kirito's eyes were glowing under the influence of the Search charm he had so prudently trained all this time, and Kizmel strained every sense she had to watch her own side.

For all the Swordmasters as brave and selfless as Kirito, there are still those who have completely lost their senses, she thought, keeping her shield positioned to guard her partner's right flank as much as her own left. To kill their own—that hinders their own efforts to conquer this castle, and escape. It makes no sense…

But Kirito had told her, some time before, of the laughing killer Morte, and now Kizmel could believe it all too easily. Now that she knew the Swordmasters were not trained warriors but ordinary people who had been tricked by what they believed to be a game into risking their lives, she could well believe that some of them had been broken by the realization.

The cruel trap had driven Kirito to become a warrior she gladly pledged her assistance to, and had produced steady, strong leaders like Asuna and Klein. By the same token, she could easily see it producing twisted, desperate bandits.

She only hoped she would never have to cross swords with any of them herself. If nothing else, Kizmel had no idea how the other Swordmasters might take it if a Dark Elf were forced to strike down one of their own.

Probably not well. Their perspective on this world is so different...

Kizmel shook off those thoughts. There was no time, now, to ponder the implications of the sincere belief of the Swordmasters that her world was nothing but a very dangerous dream. She'd spent quite enough time thinking about it at night lately, when she really needed to be resting; doing so now, under threat from Sabertooth Jaguars—and very possibly worse—would be foolish indeed.

About halfway back to Mydo, Kirito spoke up. “So, what do you think Dark Elves are doing way up here, anyway?” he asked, sounding very thoughtful.

She noticed he was avoiding the subject of Naga's murder, and decided it was probably just as well. “I have no idea,” she said honestly. “Admittedly, I was never privy to all of Her Majesty's secrets—I never knew of the Fallen Elf fortress we assailed months ago before it became necessary—but I'm
somewhat surprised myself to hear that we have a genuine stronghold this far up the castle.”

“That's what I thought. A camp would be one thing, I could see something unexpected coming up, but it sounds like you've had some people living up here for quite awhile.” Kirito frowned, obviously very troubled by the whole thing—as, she'd noticed, he had been since Argo first brought it up.

“Unless there's something they're guarding, like the Keys we gathered back—whoops!”

His exclamation was the only warning she had, before a Jaguar dropped out of nearby tree and tried to rip her partner's throat out.

For far from the first time, Kizmel found herself wishing she had Kirito's ability to estimate a foe's strength at a mere glance. What her own senses told her more vaguely was that the enormous feline was not the kind of monster one would've wanted to stumble upon right upon arriving on the new floor. Kirito managed to get his left arm up in time to keep the beast from his throat, but as always he wore no armor there but the leather of his coat; from his grunt and wince, she knew he'd taken no small injury.

That spurred her into bashing the Jaguar with her shield, knocking loose its grip on Kirito's arm. As it fell to the ground, she pulled her sword back, let the charm read her intent, and drove the blade forward in a Piercing Thrust.

Kizmel sometimes thought the Swordmasters' immunity to pain did them more harm than good, leading them to be more reckless than they might otherwise, but it served Kirito well now. As soon as the Jaguar was off him, he had his own sword held over his shoulder; when it recoiled from Kizmel's strike, he let the Sonic Leap carry him forward, swinging the blade down just below the Jaguar's jaw.

Where it had failed, he succeeded: the flashing blow cut cleanly through its throat, severing its head completely.

“Guess I got a little careless there,” he said, while the beast fragmented into blue shards. “Uh… maybe we should save the talking until we're someplace safer?”

Looking up at the sets of glowing eyes becoming visible in the trees around them—another half-dozen Sabertooth Jaguars, she estimated—Kizmel nodded in agreement. “Agreed. I fear we'll be too busy for any further discussion for a little while.”

Kirito grinned, the look of a warrior reveling in a good fight; no trace at all, now, of the lost young student who showed through in his more vulnerable moments. “What the heck. We could probably use the EXP, anyway.”

She shook her head, but couldn't help smiling anyway. “Asuna is right—you do enjoy this too much, sometimes. But… I think I could use a chance to vent.” She lifted her saber to point directly at the nearest Jaguar. “Come, then, beasts—if you dare to challenge two Knights, we will oblige!”

It leapt, joined swiftly by its fellows. Their swords were waiting.

By the time they actually reached Mydo again, Kirito was feeling refreshed. Argo's news had been disturbing in more ways than one; fighting through a veritable pack of bloodthirsty cats—something he could tangibly fight against—had been a welcome distraction. Even if Aincrad were somehow “real”, he at least had no particularly compunction about forcing hungry beasts to respawn.
other side of Mydo gave neither of them more than a passing glance now, used to both the “Beater” and his NPC companion; whether they’d still be so uncaring after the next quest ended, he didn’t know.

They passed out of Mydo’s north gate a bit after noon, and Kirito forced himself to relax. With no information of any kind, it was far too early to start worrying about witch hunts again. Besides, on balance quests with the Dark Elves have actually been pretty fun, at least when no one’s stirring up trouble on purpose. He actually found himself smiling at that. Hey, that is one good thing about this: if we’re the only ones who can do it at all, there’s no chance of guilds coming to blows over it.

The trip through along the northern forest path was much quieter than the return from Ilden. The mobs being much more appropriate for players just arriving on the floor—let alone those as over-leveled as he and Kizmel were—they even managed to snack between encounters, their appetites having returned some.

Kirito had settled for a basic sandwich; Kizmel, he was amused to note, was once again experimenting, this time with a crepe she’d asked him to buy from a street vendor in Mydo. “You humans have a surprisingly wide variety of foods,” she said, when she noticed him looking. “Not that my people are lacking in the culinary arts, but the sheer imagination of yours is remarkable.”

He shrugged. “Nine Kingdoms before the Great Separation here,” he pointed out between bites of his sandwich, “plus whatever stuff got imported from my world. We’ve got a lot of different cultures to draw from, that’s all.”

“There is that,” she admitted. She took a small bite of her crepe, chewed, swallowed; gave a satisfied nod, took a larger bite. “The sheer variety of your clothing alone is bewildering. You seem to have something special for every possible use. Even bathing, which I would think would defeat the purpose…”

Kirito choked on his sandwich, and was suddenly grateful he didn't actually need to breathe. He coughed, tried—probably in vain—to fight down a blush, and mumbled, “Technically, those weren’t actually for bathing… Swimsuits are meant for, well, swimming, not…”

Kizmel smiled at him; the look, he thought, of someone who’d gotten exactly the reaction they were looking for. “Ah, so that’s where they came from! I thought Asuna wasn’t being completely honest; after all, neither of you bothered with such things when you stayed in our camp on the Third Floor.”

He found himself wishing for a mob attack, preferably strong ones. Anything to change the subject. “You didn't have separate baths at Yofel Castle, and humans… we don't really go in for mixed bathing. Hey… didn't I tell you that before?”

“‘You did,’” she acknowledged, still with that teasing note in her voice. “‘I still think it’s a waste, though… Ah, I believe we have arrived.’”

Kirito had never been so grateful to see a grim edifice of stone in his life. The Dark Elf fort Argo had pointed them toward was much smaller than Yofel Castle, and had none of that island fortress’ majesty, yet just then it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

He wasn’t even bothered by the pair of heavily-armored guards standing before the main entrance, or the way they pointed spears at them as they approached. “This is territory held by the Kingdom of Lyusula. Even those of our people may only enter with proof of their business—and humans only with proof of Royal favor.”

Kizmel came to a halt just before them, saluted, and then lifted her right hand. “I am Kizmel, a
Pagoda Knight in service to Her Majesty,” she proclaimed, showing the ring that, among other things, allowed her to cure herself of poisons. “I am ascending the castle as Swordmaster Kirito's companion, repaying the aid he gave to our Kingdom.”

Awkwardly, Kirito followed her lead, both in salute and presenting the ring he'd been given by the Queen of the Dark Elves herself, after the defeat of the Fallen Elves. “My name is Kirito, human Swordmaster, friend of elves and Kizmel's companion.” He hoped that was about right, as pretentious as it sounded. “We had word that the Dark Elves here needed help…”

The guards cautiously stepped close enough to examine both rings, then returned to their positions, shouldered their spears, and saluted. “Lady Kizmel, Swordmaster Kirito—we had heard you might be coming. You may enter: Countess Ryella awaits inside.”

Kirito exchanged a surprised look with Kizmel. *They were expecting us, specifically? ...Well, I guess if Cardinal created this quest because of us, it makes some sense...*

“We shall see her at once, then,” Kizmel said, relieving him of the need to figure out what to say. “Where do we go? I'm afraid I've never been here before.”

The guards looked blank, and after a pause on of them said, “I am sorry, you will have to be more specific.”

She frowned. “Where are we to meet the Countess?” she prompted.

“The tower above the central keep, Lady Kizmel,” the same guard answered, as if the pause had never occurred. “Countess Ryella prefers to be able to view the surrounding forest as she works.”

“Thank you.” She gave the guards a strange look, then shrugged and motioned for Kirito to follow her inside.

He did, and spared a thoughtful glance at the guards himself. *That's never happened before. It's like... like Kizmel found a question that wasn't specific enough for their algorithms to answer...*

There was, as the guards had indicated, a tower reaching high above the rest of the fortress from the central courtyard. Another pair of guards protected its entrance, but allowed the clearer duo to pass completely unchallenged; somehow, they'd apparently already received word.

*Another elven charm?* Kirito wondered as they climbed the stairs inside. *I'm sure nobody went in ahead of us... Well, of course the system wouldn't have any problems letting one set of NPCs know what another saw, but there's always been some kind of in-universe rationalization before...*

He shelved the thought for another time when they reached the top floor of the tower, and came to a heavy wooden door at the end of the hall. Deferring to his partner, he let Kizmel precede him to knock. “Enter,” came the soft reply from inside.

Following Kizmel inside, Kirito's first thought on entering the office was that it was about the direct opposite of the first such chamber he'd entered, the office of Viscount Yofilis. Because of Yofilis' health condition making light dangerous for him—or rather, as Kirito had found by the end of that quest, shame over his scarred face—the Viscount's chambers had been concealed by darkness, making it impossible to see any detail.

By contrast, this room was lit by wide windows on three walls, giving both plenty of natural light and a commanding view of the surrounding forest. A few tapestries and weapons adorned the walls, including a particularly fine set of the latter behind the large desk; sitting in a chair at said desk was
plainly visible a Dark Elf woman. She was dressed much as Kizmel was when out of armor, though to Kirito's—admittedly inexperienced—eye, this elf's clothes were of a higher quality, befitting nobility.

Before he or his partner could speak, the woman stood. Slightly taller than Kizmel, Kirito thought, with much the same skin tone; darker hair, though, and maybe a bit plainer features. “Lady Kizmel,” she said, “Swordmaster Kirito. Welcome to Fort Renya; I am Countess Ryella. I have been expecting you.”

Kirito twitched. That was the first time he'd ever heard an NPC use his name without hearing it spoken directly; even Kizmel had needed a couple of tries to get the pronunciation right. The surprise of it, on top of everything else already odd about the situation, drove whatever greeting he'd originally planned right out of his mind, and for a second he just stood there dumbly.

Fortunately, Kizmel didn't have any such hangups, and responded smoothly. “Thank you, Milady. Although I admit, I wasn't aware of any reason you should have been expecting us; nor, to be honest, that this fortress even existed.”

Ryella gestured for them to sit in the pair of chairs on the other side of the desk, and when they'd all sat, she said, “Your reputations precede you, Lady Kizmel, Swordmaster. Word reached us several months ago of the end of the war with the Forest Elves and the defeat of the Fallen—and more recently of your alliance in wresting control of the Pillars from the evil that holds them now. It was only a matter of time before you reached this place.

“As to Fort Renya itself, our role is not well-known even among the Dark Elves. Here on this floor, known to those of us who live in this place, lie relics dating back to the time before the Great Separation. Relics of great power, which my family has guarded for many generations.”

Kirito leaned forward, suddenly interested. This was exactly the kind of lore he'd been chasing down ever since Kizmel first hinted to him the greater story behind Aincrad's in-universe existence. “Relics, Milady?” he asked, awkwardly copying Kizmel's form of address.

Ryella nodded. “Indeed. By now, you doubtless know that the Kingdom of Lyusula and the Nine Kingdoms of Man have never been particularly close, even before the Great Separation—yet there have been times of mutual need, and certain items remain of these ancient alliances. My family has been charged with guarding a repository of them on this very floor, to prevent their misuse.” She paused. “Recently, I received word from Her Majesty to prepare for the end of that duty.”

Well, at least something's going normal, Kirito thought, relaxing a little. So far, other than the oddly specific requirements for the quest, it was sounding normal enough; he could guess easily enough what the task Ryella had for them was, now.

From the look on her face, Kizmel had come to much the same conclusions, but without his understanding of gaming conventions, she was obviously confused as to the reason. “Milady, are you suggesting that Kirito and I are to take these relics?” Ryella nodded. “Why?”

“Her Majesty's letter was sparse, but she said she believes the time has come that our people must aid humans once more,” the Countess said softly. “The scope of what may occur when the Swordmasters finally reach the Ruby Palace cannot be ignored, for good or ill. Unfortunately, in the wake of our long war with the Forest Elves and the Fallen, we have few warriors to spare. Her Majesty's decision, thus, is to prepare you, Lady Kizmel, as well as may be, and offer what aid we can to Swordmaster Kirito.”

“I… see. Well, I can't argue with that.” For a moment, Kizmel actually looked sheepish. “Honestly,
Milady, I originally chose to accompany Kirito for personal reasons; but yes, from what I've heard from the Swordmasters their campaign will certainly have ramifications for our people, as well.”

*That's an understatement,* Kirito thought with a twinge. …*Well, I knew that from the start. There's still time to figure out a solution, anyway; we're barely a third of the way up.*

Shaking off gloomy thoughts of a distant future, he said aloud, “What kind of relics are these, exactly, Milady? Are they weapons, or…?”

“The exact nature of the relics is best discussed when you are closer to obtaining them, I believe,” Ryella told him. “There are three trials that must be overcome before you can open the Reliquary, and there is little sense in revealing secrets until it is clear you will be able to grasp them.”

*Three trials… somehow, I knew this wasn't going to be so easy. I just hope this turns out to be worth it; the most we got out of the Third Floor's quest line was an extra warning about poison from the boss.* There had been other things about that quest that made it all worth it, of course, but from the perspective of clearing the game, it had been more questionable.

“Three trials,” Kizmel repeated thoughtfully. “Can we complete them alone, Milady? Or should we be enlisting the aid of other Swordmasters?”

“These trials are only for those who have made a direct alliance between our two races,” Ryella answered, shaking her head. “They will require the knowledge of humans, and the skill and charms of the Dark Elves, the two in harmony. These trials were made by an alliance ages past, and must be cleared that way, as well.”

Kirito nodded. He'd expected that, just from the unique conditions for beginning the quest. “We can handle it,” he said confidently. “Where do we go first, Milady?”

“The Trial of the Brave lies some distance to the east,” she said, pointing out one of the windows. “Conquer its challenge, and you will be ready for the Trial of the Wise, to the west, and then finally the Trial of the Strong, beyond Ilden in the south. Return to me when you have proven yourselves, and I will tell you where to find the Reliquary, and what lies within.”

*Trials of the Brave, Wise, and Strong,* Kirito repeated to himself. *East, west, and south.* His quest log had automatically updated itself, but he knew it wouldn't hurt to memorize the information; sometimes the seconds it took just to consult the log counted. *Brave, Wise, Strong… Why does that sound familiar? Waaaiitt a minute…*

His facepalm drew matching looks of surprise and confusion from both Dark Elves.

With everything else she had on her mind after the visit to Fort Renya, such as the oddly lack-witted behavior of the gate guards, it wasn't until they were nearly at the Trial of the Brave that Kizmel thought to question her partner's earlier reaction. As the trees thinned, giving them a glimpse of weathered stone walls, she shot him a questioning look. “I meant to ask, Kirito,” she began. “Was there something strange about Countess Ryella's explanation? Besides the obvious, of course.”

“Eh?” Obviously lost in thought himself, Kirito shook himself. “Oh… Well, it's just… the three trials reminded me of… another human legend. A powerful relic that could only be reached after getting proof of courage, power, and wisdom. A relic of an elf-like people, actually.”

That piqued Kizmel's interest. They'd already encountered more than one quest related to ancient history that both their peoples recalled, if only in myth and legend; the ongoing effort to restore the ancient Order came at once to mind. Then there had been matters such as the sword Sachi had taken
from The Commandant, remembered in stories of the Swordmasters, but not the Dark Elves.

This was the first time she could recall that they'd been drawn into something related to her people that her partner seemed to recognize, yet she did not. Of course, it was just as likely that it was merely a Swordmaster myth that bore a coincidental resemblance to reality, but if there truly was a connection…

“Do you remember enough of the legend to help guide us through these trials?”

Kirito grimaced. “Probably not. There’s at least a dozen versions of the story floating around; I know several of them pretty well, but the odds of any of them being that close to the truth—if it’s really about this Reliquary? I don't really think…” He trailed off; they were coming into the clearing now, giving them a fuller view of their destination.

In its prime, Kizmel thought it had likely been a truly grand stronghold, fitting for an edifice built to guard the way to an artifact as powerful as Countess Ryella implied. Now, eons after the Great Separation, the fortress that contained the Trial of the Brave was clearly succumbing to the ravages of time. Its ramparts were crumbling, its walls cracked—yet despite all that, there was torchlight visible from its narrow windows, and the front gate stood solidly in their path.

“Nope,” Kirito said, after several moments’ inspection. “Can't say that this looks familiar. Um... any idea how we get in? That gate looks pretty secure. Countess Ryella didn't give us any keys, or tell us where to look…”

“I would suggest we start by examining it,” Kizmel said, starting for the weathered stairs leading up to the gate. “There seem to be no monsters outside, so we can probably take our time.” As she climbed, she added thoughtfully, “By the way, the legends you know... what does lie at the end of our journey here?”

He quickly followed her, and despite her own observations he kept a wary eye on their surroundings, clearly ready for trouble. Probably a good idea, she thought; even if this place was safe, it was a good habit to maintain. He also didn't answer her question right away, focusing instead on examining the barred, securely-locked gate.

At length, peering through the narrow gaps in the bars, Kirito said, “According to most versions of the story? A very powerful weapon. It wasn't always the same, though, and I don't think that's all there is to it, here; I think there's a reason for it to be two people going through the trials. One human, one elf... If it's about an ancient alliance, it won't just be for one or the other of us.”

Kizmel nodded. “I agree. Likely the full truth hasn't survived in any legend; I would not be surprised if not even Countess Ryella knows it all, if this was a legacy shared between our people… Ah! I believe I've found something.”

He quickly joined her by the left side of the gate, where she was running armored fingertips over an inscription in the stone. “Is that... some kind of message? I can't read the language, whatever it is.”

“A Dark Elf script,” she told him, squinting at it; old as it was, it had faded as much as the rest of the structure. “Very old; I don't think even my people have used it for much since the Great Separation; we largely adopted one of yours long ago. It is used in enough formal writing that I can read it, however. Mostly, anyway... Ah, I believe I understand:

“Only with Determination does any journey begin. Only when Courage is proven are doors opened; to the timid, every gate is closed.
“Some journeys cannot be made alone. Those who wish to test their Bravery, Human craft is needed within; yet to enter, you must have the Elven power to elude the rays of the sun. Those who possess the first Keys, step forward, and prove your Courage within.”

Kirito nodded in comprehension. “…Okay. I think I actually understood that.” He was frowning, though. “Can we do it right now, though? If that's talking about what I think it is, I thought I remember you saying it works best around morning and evening.”

Kizmel smiled, oddly pleased he'd come to the same conclusion she had, and so easily. “I think it’s worth trying. It may be at its best at those hours, but the Mistmoon Cloak can make us like spirits to the eye even in this light.”

“Good thing Asuna's not around to hear you talk about spirits,” he muttered. “Okay, then, let's give it a shot.”

The way Kirito blushed when he drew close enough for her to throw her cloak over both of them made her smile wider. It wasn't that she liked making him uncomfortable, really, but there was something endearing about his awkwardness around women, even after this long traveling with her, to say nothing of the fact that her armor was a solid barrier between their bodies.

Someday, I should perhaps ask him what kind of life he actually led, in his homeland, she mused, draping an arm across his shoulders to better draw the cloak closed. Most of the time, he comes across as mature as any Swordmaster, yet any time matters like this come up, that maturity and confidence vanishes.

It was an idle thought only, for now; whatever her friend's true birth, he was easily her equal in all respects besides social skills. Right now his skill in whatever trial awaited them beyond the gate was the important thing, and she was confident he wouldn't let her down.

Nor did she intend to fail him. So when she was sure the cloak’s charm was as complete as it could be this time of day, rendering the two of them but a thin shade in the mid-afternoon light, Kizmel guided her partner straight for the gate, heedless of its imposing bars.

Obscured from light by the charm of the cloak, they slipped through the bars as if truly nothing but specters.

If Kirito had had any doubts left as to the inspiration for the current quest, they were squashed after three block puzzles and twice as many doors with one-time-use keys. By now, he was wondering if Kayaba might be subject to a copyright infringement claim on top of his grander crimes, or if a certain company had paid Argus to get early exposure in the VR market.

Or maybe just Cardinal not caring, come to think of it, he mused, cautiously approaching yet another locked door, in a corridor lit by flickering torchlight. Wouldn't be the first quest it's invented that got a little too close to that line… I guess Kayaba didn't include legal contracts in the programming.

Kirito snorted to himself at that thought. Kayaba had already killed over two thousand people for the sake of his “game”; why should he care about copyright law? It wasn't like he'd care about a fine on top of the life sentence he'd be serving anyway.

“I'm not sure what about this situation is so amusing, Kirito,” Kizmel remarked. She was keeping a wary eye on a side corridor as they passed; they'd already been attacked by large spiders more than once with little warning, and while the mobs here weren't as dangerous as those on the path to Ilden, they were definitely appropriate to their levels. “At least, I didn't think you were enjoying this much.”
She had certainly had some fun, if her smile was any indication. They'd needed to use her cloak to pass through two more doors since entering the Trial, and Kirito was beginning to worry Argo was rubbing off on her. At least, that was the most likely reason he could think of for Kizmel to be so cheerful at their enforced proximity.

“Just thinking about how close this really is to human legends,” he told her, shaking his head. “Just close enough for me to have a general idea of what's going on, not close enough for me to know what kind of traps or puzzles we might be dealing with here. Like this door.” He gestured at the completely featureless, heavy metal door they'd arrived at. “I don't suppose you see a keyhole here?”

“No,” she admitted after a brief examination. “It does not seem to resemble the doors we passed through via the cloak's charm, either.” Kizmel frowned. “Hm… I have heard of doors that can only be opened when the life force of their guards is completely extinguished. Perhaps there are foes nearby that we've missed?”

Kirito sighed. “That would fit with the stories I've heard… or there could be a stone in the walls here that's actually a hidden switch. I guess we'll have to backtrack and look around.” Irritated, he gave the door a solid rap with his fist, knowing that all it would produce was an [Immortal Object] message.

He jumped back in surprise when, instead, a menu popped into existence a few centimeters from the door.

“Interesting,” Kizmel said, leaning close. “That's Mystic Scribing, isn't it? I recognize the language… although I cannot read this particular message.”

Right, she probably only knows the bits of English used in regular system messages… if that. Kirito wasn't completely fluent in the language himself, but he was at least proficient enough to understand the message that the door had brought up. “It says, [Open], with yes or no options,” he said, shaking his head yet again. “Now I understand what the inscription outside meant about 'human craft'… Who'd have thought we'd find a door where all we had to do was knock?”

It really should've occurred to him, he realized a moment after casually pressing [Yes], that an abnormal door that was so easy to open might just lead to something abnormal and not easy. As it was, the first clue he had of his mistake came within a second of the heavy door rumbling aside.

A clue in the form of a chained flail speeding out, wrapping around his arm, and yanking him into the next room.

“Kirito!”

Kirito heard Kizmel's yell, but was a little too distracted to reply; he was more concerned with the enormous suit of armor that had pulled him in close, released the chain, and slammed a metal gauntlet into his gut. The blow knocked the unnecessary wind out of him and propelled him bodily toward one of the hard stone walls.

He hadn't survived as long as he had without being quick-witted and learning a thing or two about midair recovery, though; halfway through his flight, he had his sword out and jabbing at the floor, and in the extra time the friction bought him he twisted around to get his feet on the ground. In a shower of sparks from sword and booteels alike, Kirito managed to bleed off his momentum a good half-meter from the wall.

Glancing up at his HP bar, though, his stomach clenched anyway. Just the initial punch from the armor had taken off a good ten percent of his health; turning his attention to the mob that had done it,
he suddenly wasn't surprised. Just very, very concerned.

A dark crimson cursor, next to the name Black Knight. Beneath that information, a heavily-armored warrior with an equally heavy shield in one hand, and a huge sword that it was just now drawing from its back to replace the flail it had dropped. At its waist, a scabbard holding a slimmer blade, for now ignored.

There were also two of them. Given that Kirito had a fairly good idea of what, exactly, these Black Knights were based on, the fact that he and Kizmel both used relatively light blades suddenly didn't seem like such a good idea.

Okay, he thought, as Kizmel rushed into the room, just barely avoiding the second Knight's bastard sword, these things are really tough, and can kill me with just a few good hits. On the other hand—if these are what I think they are, I know how to fight them.

Fighting two of the enemies they were based on at once had always been a nerve-wracking task, but in those other games he'd never had backup. With his elven partner, they could do this.

“Kirito—” Kizmel began, drawing close enough to put her shield between him and the Knights.

“I know,” Kirito interrupted, speaking quickly. “I think I know these things, so—They hit hard, but they’re slow. Dodge their swords, and try to get around behind them; they'll block pretty much everything from the front with those shields. Hit them in the back enough, and we should be able to cut the fasteners of their armor.”

She nodded. “Then let us begin—now!”

The Black Knight that had thrown Kirito around chose that moment to break the stillness, swinging its huge blade down while the other circled around; the two clearers threw themselves to either side, each trying to flank one of the Knights. It might've been more efficient to try and double-team one opponent, Kirito knew, but this way they wouldn't end up potentially sandwiched.

If fighting one of these things was bad, he knew, being in a position to be hit from front and back together was worse. The only “good” thing about this whole situation was that there wasn't yet a third; three Black Knights, if their inspiration was any clue, would've been nigh-unstoppable.

Kirito just had time to see Kizmel duck a brutal Horizontal from her foe before he was forced to dodge sideways himself, the Black Knight that seemed to have it in for him having brought its blade up from the floor in an Uppercut that came frighteningly close to splitting him in half. While inertia carried the enormous sword up over the Knight's head, he knew that put it in a perfect position to drop it back down on him if he gave it half a chance.

He had no intention of giving it that chance. As soon as the blade was above him, Kirito launched himself into a backflip—not to evade, but to smash his boot heel into the Black Knight's helmet in a Crescent Moon. The blow staggered the Knight, while Kirito landed on his free hand, threw himself upright again, and flung himself forward again. Forward, and to the Knight's right, hoping to get around behind.

There was time for one quick Horizontal, aimed with as much precision as he could manage in the moments he had, and Kirito's sword cut across one of the fasteners holding the Black Knight's waist armor in place. If he was right about how closely these mobs copied the source material, then—

He'd done more damage than he'd thought. The entirety of the Knight's waist armor fell away, leaving the area protected only by the layer of light chainmail beneath. An instant later, though,
Kirito realized he'd miscalculated slightly: free of some of its own armor, the Knight turned a fraction faster than before, swinging its sword too fast for him to dodge.

He barely managed to get his sword back up in time to parry, and he winced at both the scream of metal sliding along metal and the way his HP was ground away even without a direct hit. *It is so not fair that a sword that big is considered One-Handed!*

Kirito had managed to avoid the worst of it, though, and when the bastard sword was past he ducked under its shield to deliver the swift back-and-forth cuts of a Horizontal Arc to the Knight's legs, severing its greaves. The loss of the armor caused it to stumble, giving him a chance to check on Kizmel's progress.

He looked over just in time to see her actually jumping on top of her foe's shield, using it to launch herself higher into the air in a forward somersault over its head. Her saber spun with her in a flicker of blue light, an aerial Sword Skill Kirito recognized as a Helmsplitter; powerful by its nature of attacking the enemy's head, but difficult to even attempt. The mere sight of it reminded him of Diavel's death, during which the self-proclaimed knight had tried and failed to initiate a midair skill himself.

Kizmel performed it flawlessly, and when she landed on the stone floor in a crouch behind the Black Knight, she promptly spun around to stab it repeatedly, rising with each of the first three blows, and at full height adding another three horizontally. Several of the fasteners for its heavy torso armor fell away from the Crucifixion, leaving it noticeably loose.

In the lag from her own skill, Kizmel glanced over at Kirito in turn, and her eyes widened. “Kirito, look out!”

Her shout and a bright yellow flash in the corner of his eye was all the warning he had. He'd only begun to turn when something impacted solidly on his flank, catapulting him toward the same wall he'd only narrowly avoided at the start of the fight.

“Gah!” Once again, Kirito managed to turn before he hit, but he only succeeded in taking the impact on his back instead of his head. He was left with a Tumble effect as a result, unable to move for a precious few seconds; he was suddenly grateful that the hit *had* knocked him flying so far.

He wasn't so happy to realize what the hit had been. In the split second before he struck the wall, he'd caught sight of a fading glow from the Black Knight's *shield*, not its sword. He'd never before encountered a Sword Skill from a shield, of all things. Certainly players occasionally bashed mobs that way to gain a little breathing space, but this was the first truly offensive use he'd ever encountered.

*Powerful, too,* he realized with a chill, glancing at his HP bar. *Another hit like that, and I'm in the red.*

That realization would've been enough on its own to get Kirito moving the instant the Tumble subsided. The cry of pain he heard a moment later from Kizmel, followed by her rolling into his line of sight, spurred him on more urgently.

The elf had been knocked away from her foe's sword, nearly cutting her in half with that one blow. Now even the Knight Kirito had been fighting turned its attention to her, as the closer target, and he quickly decided that was *not* going to be allowed.

With a wordless yell, he pushed off from the floor, swung his sword behind his right shoulder, and launched himself in a Sonic Leap at Kizmel's former target. He managed to come down behind it, his
blade biting down on another of the clasps of its armor; a couple of frantic dodges later, escaping its wrath by a hair, Kirito took a chance on a normal swing of his sword and took off another.

For a second he was afraid he'd miscalculated again, and that the Black Knight was going to rip him in half in retaliation. Then, as it took a step forward, the last remaining fastener of its armor snapped under the strain, and the whole breastplate dropped to the floor in a loud clatter.

The Black Knight's response to that was more or less instant, but Kirito had anticipated its move. From the moment he realized what they were, he knew what was going to happen when its armor was reduced to just its helmet, so when it flung its shield to one side and hurled its huge sword at his face, he was already jumping sideways.

A similar series of crashing noises came from the direction of his original opponent, even as his current foe drew the lighter blade from its waist. Kizmel had regained her feet, and if she was wincing in pain to match the depletion of her HP bar in Kirito's vision, she wasn't letting it stop her; she'd managed to take out the other Black Knight's armor, and dodged the thrown blade as well as he had.

“Come, then!” she called to her target. “Let's end this!”

It might've been coincidence, or these mobs might've been keyed to respond to taunts. Either way, they both attacked at that moment, and Kirito was forced to dodge once again from a brutally-fast Slant.

They were faster without the armor, but Kirito was still feeling better about his and his partner's prospects now. With armor and shield gone, speed was the only advantage the Knights had left to them, and that was one stat he was fully prepared to bet his life on.

Stepping to one side of the Slant, he slapped the Knight's sword aside, then initiated a Sword Skill of his own: three slices from one side to the other and back, the Sharp Nail finally taking a noticeable bite out of the Knight's HP. In the race to recover from the movement penalty of their respective skills, the Knight was slightly faster, leaving Kirito no time to get out of the way; he did manage another parry, though, and while his own HP was chipped away by scratch damage, it wasn't nearly as bad as blocking the heavier blade.

As their blades screeched against each other, he caught a quick glimpse past, enough to see Kizmel bodily forcing aside her Knight's latest attack with her kite shield; her revenge was a lightning-quick Reaver to its throat, just beneath its helmet.

Recovering from the parry enough to launch a Horizontal Square at his own enemy, Kirito briefly found himself envious. A shield would've slowed him down, given his own fighting style, but he had to admit there was something to be said for having something useful in the off-hand.

And you wouldn't have been able to do that backflip right earlier, he reminded himself, as his sword finished tracing a blue rhombus in the air. Like I know what to do with a shield anyway!

There wasn't time for another Sword Skill for several moments after that. The Black Knight was no longer bothering with them, so he couldn't afford the movement penalty either, instead having to sneak in improvised thrusts and slashes where he could. Gradually, though, he was whittling down its HP, and though his own was getting far lower than he was comfortable with, the Black Knight was coming off the worse.

Kirito did consider it completely unfair that it barely flinched when he did manage to get in a Snake Bite, cutting its left arm clean off just below the shoulder. It only glanced down at the stump,
shrugged, and redoubled its attack with its remaining arm.

“Kirito, Switch!”

He didn't question the sudden command. Immediately he pulled back his blade just before he could initiate his next Sword Skill, ducked past the Knight's sword, and leapt toward Kizmel's opponent, at the same moment she came at his from behind.

Unable to adjust to the sudden swapping of targets for a couple of seconds, the Knights were frozen by conflicting algorithms just long enough for Kizmel's spinning Treble Scythe to tear up the back of one and through its neck, while Kirito's Savage Fulcrum did the same to the other.

Silence filled the room for a split second. Then, with a low, rumbling groan, both Black Knights shattered into azure polygons and faded away.

Panting with exertion, despite his tireless virtual avatar, Kirito slowly drew himself upright again, performed his usual flourish, and sheathed his sword. “Well,” he said to Kizmel. “I didn't expect that. I should've, though.”

“You knew enough to know how to fight them,” she pointed out, slipping her own saber back into its scabbard. “We should be more cautious in the future, however.” She winced, pressing a hand to her side. “I fear I took more injury than I expected in that battle.”

He grimaced; she acted so human most of the time that he still managed to forget, all too often, that unlike players she was fully capable of feeling pain. Damn you for that, Kayaba. Bad enough what you did to us…

He dug into a belt pouch quickly, and tossed the potion he withdrew over to her. “Sorry about that, Kizmel,” he said sincerely, as he dug out another for himself.

“I was careless, myself,” she said, gratefully downing the healing item. “Ah… much better, thank you. Well, shall we see what they were guarding?”

“Right.” In the heat of the battle, Kirito hadn't even noticed, but there was an ornate chest sitting against one wall, not too far from an equally-ornate door. From the slowly-fading glow, he suspected it had been designed to unlock only once the Black Knights were both dead.

Crossing to it, he carefully pried it open—keeping his face well back, in case it proved to be yet another trap of some kind. This time caution proved unnecessary; as he'd somewhat suspected, there was only one thing inside the chest, and not at all dangerous.

“I think this would be a 'Big Key','” he said, pulling it out with a rueful smile.

Kizmel shot him a narrow-eyed glance. “It is certainly large… but I suspect that's not exactly what you meant.”

“In-joke about the legends this is obviously related to; I'll tell you later.” Kirito looked over the door. “I don't think it's a stretch to say this goes to that door.”

“Most likely,” she agreed, eyeing the door warily. “What do you suppose it beyond it? Just the 'proof' we're supposed to obtain here?”

“Probably won't be that easy.” He glanced up at the HP bars again, noting that both had recovered nicely. “If this is anything like the legends... there's probably something nasty on the other side. Those Black Knights won't be the last challenge here.”

Kizmel nodded slowly. “You're probably right. We'd best be careful—but I see no reason to delay.
Our mission will not be complete until we pass whatever trial lies ahead.”

“Yeah.” Kirito checked the HP figures on more time, then walked to the door and slid the key into the ominously-prominent lock. “Okay, here goes nothing,” he said, and turned the key.

“Nothing” was almost exactly what they found in the next room. They went in preparing for a fight, and on the other side of the door was only another pair of doors. Kizmel actually found herself suppressing a laugh at the way Kirito hesitated, stared warily at the doors, and then lowered his sword with a sigh.

“Okay,” he said after a moment. “I guess I should've expected things wouldn't be that predictable. … Think those are the same kind of doors as earlier?”

“Probably.” The door on the right was built of the same bars as the Trial's front gate, while the one on the left was as featureless as the door that had led into the chamber with the Black Knights. “What do you think we're meant to do here, Kirito?”

Kizmel could think of three possibilities, herself. It might be that they were supposed to clear one room, then the other; or, it was very possible that the intention was for them to choose just one, with the wrong choice presumably leading to a trap of some kind. Or…

“Those doors are too narrow for more than one person,” Kirito said slowly. “The Swordmaster door is one thing, but the Dark Elf doors don't 'open' at all; we have to go through those together. So…”

“We're likely intended to each go through one of them,” she finished. “It is a Trial of Bravery, so I suppose it makes some sense. Both our peoples' strengths are needed to reach this place, and then from here, we prove our courage in our own ways.”

“That's what I was thinking, too.” He grimaced. “I don't like it.”

Privately, neither did Kizmel. Even so, she shook her head. “That's very possibly the point, my friend. Like it or not, this is the only way forward; if we turn back, we fail the Trial.”

“…Yeah. You're right.” Taking a deep breath, Kirito nodded to her. “Be careful, Kizmel.”

“The same to you, Kirito.”

Together, they stepped to their respective doors. Kirito tapped the surface of his to conjure up the Mystic Scribing that governed it, as Kizmel drew her Mistmoon Cloak around herself, disappearing completely in the Trial's torchlight. When the Swordmaster door slide aside for her partner, she stepped through the ethereal surface of the Dark Elf gateway.

This time, even she found the result decidedly anticlimactic. The very first thing she noticed in the next room was that Kirito was not two meters from her, his door having led him to the very same place as hers. He jumped in surprise when she swept her cloak back again, then sighed.

“Yes,” Kizmel agreed, before he could say anything. “This is… not what I was expecting, either.”

The chamber was, admittedly, more impressive than the antechamber they'd just come through. Not quite as large as the rooms the Pillar Guardians laired in, but still quite broad, with ancient murals on the walls depicting winged figures, lit by brighter torches than the rest of the ruin had used. At the far end, a large chest sat in an alcove, protected by iron-framed glass doors; on one side Kizmel could see dark cloth folded neatly, while on the other there seemed to be a hollow for an object to be placed.
There was no sign whatsoever of any foe, not even any darkened spaces like the place The
Commandant and his Knights had used as a trap.

“The doors you stepped through were but the final proof of your alliance, not the Trial itself. That
lies within this chamber, Kirito, Lady Kizmel.”

Kirito nearly hit the ceiling when the voice spoke from nowhere, and when Kizmel glanced at him
she was startled to see his face had taken on a pale, frightened look. “Wh-what the hell…?!” His
eyes darted about the room, then fixed on something, and his complexion turned paler still.

When she turned to follow his gaze, she discovered they were no longer alone in that chamber.
Halfway between them and the alcove at the far end, a young man in light armor had appeared; he
bore a shield on his back, a sword much like Kirito's slung at his left hip, and his hair was a startling
shade of blue.


Kizmel inhaled sharply. She'd never met Diavel, but her partner had spoken of him from time to
time. A strong, charismatic Swordmaster who, while apparently not as pure and selfless as he
presented himself, had nonetheless genuinely led the Swordmasters through most of their first great
battle in Aincrad.

His death, she recalled, had nearly destroyed that effort, and while the Swordmasters had won
through and persevered, it was only with the rise of the Knights of Blood and Heathcliff that a
comparable leader had appeared to take Diavel's place.

“I am not Diavel,” the swordsman said, and as he spoke Kizmel noticed he was slightly translucent,
like a spirit. “Not as he was in life. But in this place, for this Trial—for the two of you—the memory
of me is fitting, I think. For one of you, anyway.”

Kirito swallowed hard. “I… I don't understand…”

“You seek more than you know, Kirito. As such, you will be tested in ways you may not even
realize, and I am part of your Trial.” Diavel inclined his head toward Kizmel. “You, Lady Kizmel,
will have your chance to be tested so, but that is not part of your Trial of Bravery.”

“I will… take your word for it, Swordmaster Diavel,” she said warily. “Then… what is the Trial that
stands before us now?”

“What you seek to claim is of great significance—yet it will come at a price, to both of you. There
are virtues you must embody, to have any hope of attaining the rewards of such a quest. The first of
these is Bravery: you must prove that you have what it takes to press on against adversity and loss;
without determination, you will never reach the challenges that require Wisdom or Strength of arms.

“The Trial of the Brave knows its challengers. The test before you is simple—but don't mistake that
for being easy.”

So far, Kizmel was only confused and uncertain. Kirito, she thought, had the look of someone who
was expecting to be struck down by a vengeful ghost at any moment. “What… is this test, Diavel?
Some kind of boss monster?”

“Your bravery in the face of monsters is well-proven, Kirito,” Diavel replied, shaking his head.
“From the day you rescued a raid from my death… although that raid isn't actually unrelated.” He
fixed Kirito with a hard, sober stare. “Kirito. You led that raid to victory, despite the panic my death
caused. Then, afterward, you took it upon yourself to stop a witch hunt, even though it made you,
personally, a bigger target.

“Yet I wonder—how long could you have kept going, had the memory of that battle not faded? If more of the thousands of frightened players had known of the gambit you took, more than just the handful who were there, and saw how your subsequent actions belied your claims of villainy?”

Kirito shivered. “I… I don't…”

“In the end, memories of the hate of beta testers faded, especially as the growing skill and knowledge of the player population as a whole made the distinction harder to make out.” Diavel's shade was not harsh, but his words were firm, inexorable. “How well would you have borne it, had there been a mark that kept that knowledge fresh in the minds of those frightened people?

“After all, as we both know, you're no knight, and no hero. In the world we came from, you hardly even left your room, barely even speaking to your own family. You survived by isolation, unknown to others, protected by anonymity. You proved against Illfang that for brief moments of dire need, you can stand tall, and carry the weight of a few dozens' hatred.

“Could such a boy carry on, if those around him despised him?”

Had Kirito not possessed the tremendous physical fortitude of a Swordmaster, Kizmel would've been very afraid he was going to collapse on the spot. Diavel's words had clearly struck him in ways she couldn't even imagine; his cool deconstruction relied on the realities of the world the Swordmasters came from, which Kizmel could only dimly grasp.

There was some small softening of the shade's expression now, though. Almost… pity, she thought. “Whether this quest, or another in the future, Kirito, that is a question you must answer. You simply aren't capable of remaining in the shadows, not if you keep going as you have.”

“…I'm… not some kind of hero…” Kirito got out, voice barely a whisper. “I'm not the kind of guy to… take the spotlight…”

“Are you certain? You certainly captured everyone's attention well enough when I died. If you stay on your course, Kirito, you will be either a hero or a villain in the eyes of the Swordmasters. You need to face that now, or you'll never be able to move forward.” Then, abruptly, Diavel turned to Kizmel. “Now you, My Lady… you face a different quandary.”

She took a deep breath, and faced the shade squarely. “And that is, Swordmaster Diavel?”

“You are a Dark Elf, fighting for the cause of humans,” he told her. “Indeed, you've pledged to aid not merely humans, but Swordmasters, who aren't even of your world; their—our—goal is at least as much to simply go home as it is to conquer the evil that grips the Steel Castle. While I can't complain about your choice to aid the one who made my sacrifice mean something, the path it's set you on has its own price.”

There were several ways that could be taken; the one that came most readily to Kizmel's mind was that the closer she and Kirito became, the more painful it would be when he inevitably returned to his own world. It was a thought she'd tried increasingly hard to keep buried, in recent months. “I'm… aware of the potential cost, Swordmaster Diavel,” she said quietly.

“Are you? Perhaps not, Lady Kizmel.” Diavel turned and began to pace, hands clasped behind his back. “There are things about Kirito, and his nature, that you still don't understand. Things you can't, until you begin to see the truth for yourself. Some of it, perhaps, you'll see on this very quest—but even reaching that level of understanding may cost you dearly. Come, let me show you.”
He led an uneasy Kizmel, and a pale, anxious Kirito, over to the alcove closed off by glass. Now, closer in, Kizmel could see that the folded cloth was a heavy black coat, with a stylized “B” embroidered on its back and both shoulders. On the other side, the hollow basin seemed just large enough to hold a piece of jewelry—and was sloped so that whatever was placed in it would fall away in the wall.

“You're a Pagoda Knight, Lady Kizmel, in service to the Queen of the Dark Elves,” Diavel said. “Though she's given you leave to aid Kirito indefinitely, I wonder how well you can? To truly understand Kirito, and the Swordmasters, you'll need to see the world through their eyes, and as a Pagoda Knight there are certain ways you'll always be shackled.

“The symbol of courage, the Bravery Pendant, lies beyond the glass, Kirito, Lady Kizmel. Only acts of Bravery will open it: acknowledgment of a willingness to become a symbol, be it of hope or hate—and the willingness to sacrifice much of what you are, in order to see what may be.”

Kizmel could see, now, what Diavel meant, without any further explanation. He was telling her that to see the world through a Swordmaster's eyes, she might have to exchange it for the ties to her own people. As the Swordmasters had been deprived of so much to come to her world, if she wanted to understand theirs, she could well be called on to make an equivalent sacrifice.

Which meant that the hollow leading into the stone wall was meant to accept one, particular token.

“The choice is yours,” Diavel said, his voice gentler now. “Both of you could leave this place now, and continue the fight to clear Aincrad in the way you have been. This isn't something you need to face right now, in this place.”

Kizmel shared a long look with Kirito. She was relieved to see his complexion had darkened a few shades closer to healthy, but she could see in his eyes the same recognition of what was being asked of them as she had. Just as she could see that he'd thought of the same thing she had.

Her partner tried to speak, coughed to clear his throat, and tried again. “If we don't face it here, we'll have to face it somewhere down the line, won't we, Diavel?”

“I can hardly predict the future, Kirito,” Diavel replied, smiling wryly. “After all, I did die, didn't I? …But yes, I'd think so. As long as you're the kind of person who would step forward to turn a rout into a victory, all by yourself.”

“It wasn't exactly by myself,” Kirito pointed out. “I had Asuna with me.”

“Just as you have me, now.” Coming to a decision, Kizmel abruptly reached up and tapped at the clasp of her cloak, banishing it and her armor in a flash of light, leaving only her tights and tunic—and her hands bare. “Her Majesty has other Knights to call on, if the Kingdom is in danger. I will not abandon my friend.” Before she could second-guess herself, she pulled off the ring that her Queen had granted her when she was knighted, placed it in the hollow basin, and let it fall out of sight into the wall.

No small sacrifice, that. Seeing the look on Kirito's face, though, reminded her of exactly why she was so determined to hold to her course, and learn more of the Swordmasters who fought for the freedom of Aincrad, and from it—especially the two who had worked so hard for her own people, and her specifically.

“Well, then,” he said, meeting her eyes, “I guess I can't just turn away now, can I?” He swept his hand through the air to bring up his Mystic “menu”, turning to Diavel in the process. “Honestly, Diavel, I can't say for sure how long I can keep going, if the other players hate me. Like you said,
I'm just a 'boy'… but as long as I can hold up, I have to. I've got promises to keep, to you, to Asuna… and to Kizmel.” A few touches on immaterial writing, and his coat flared and vanished.

When it was gone, Kirito picked up the branded coat; with another flash, it went from his hand to settling on his shoulders, billowing briefly in a sourceless wind.

As the glass doors silently swung open, Diavel smiled at them. “Few things are braver than stepping forward without knowing if you can remain standing,” he said. “Or being willing to cast aside the certainty of the past for an uncertain future. Take your reward, Kirito, Lady Kizmel, with pride.”

Coming to silent agreement with a glance, the two of them moved forward together, and pushed open the chest's lid as one. Inside, resting in red velvet, lay the prize they’d come so far to obtain.

Kirito, though, tilted his head in apparent consternation, turning to look back at Diavel. “…I thought there was supposed to be one pendant, Diavel.”

The knight's shade laughed. “You're not the Hero of Time, Kirito. Two partners, two pendants. Surely you should've expected another change, at the very end? Go on, put them on.”

Shaking his head, Kirito returned his attention to the chest. Together with Kizmel, he lifted one of the emerald pendants and hung it around his neck; as soon as both were firmly in place, they flared brightly, briefly blinding them.

When the glow faded, Kizmel was startled to see Kirito's previous coat was in place, with no trace of the “B” to be seen. Likewise, she found herself back in her full armor and cloak again—and the ring that was proof of her Knighthood was back on her finger.

Diavel smiled at their expressions. “The important thing, my friends, was the act of Bravery; this Trial was to prove you could make such sacrifices, not to demand them of you now. Kirito's, in particular, was as much symbolic as anything else. After all, what's the point of wearing such a ridiculous coat?” He sobered. “Which is not to say that this quest will not demand such of you by the end. What you receive in the Reliquary will be powerful—but power always comes at a cost. Remember this, when the time comes.”

“We will,” Kizmel said softly, looking down at the ring once again adorning her hand.

“Yeah…” Kirito's inspection was of the pendant he wore; perhaps realizing, she thought, that it alone was bound to provoke questions when next they met with other Swordmasters. Then he looked back up at the shade, shadows in his eyes. “Diavel? …What are you?”

Diavel shrugged. “A remnant, Kirito. Fragments of memories, caught by a crimson bird… If you really want to understand it all, I'd give you the same advice I will your partner: keep searching. If you want the best of both worlds, you'll need to find certain answers, before the curtain falls on the Steel Castle's stage.” He stepped back, beginning to fade from translucent to completely transparent. “Those are questions for another day. For now, seek out the Trial of the Wise, and prove you can find those answers…”

By the time they stepped back out of the Trial of the Brave, evening was closing in. Normally, by this time, Kirito would hardly be tired at all; he’d run quests well past midnight sometimes, both with Asuna and with Kizmel. Tonight, though, he felt almost as drained as he had the last day with the Black Cats.

“I'd advise retiring for the night, Kirito,” Kizmel said, moving a little bit away from him once they were past the charmed gate. “The battle with the Black Knights was quite tiring as it was. The actual
Trial…”

“Yeah. I can't say I was expecting that.” The ghost of Diavel—which he thought was some subroutine of Cardinal using Diavel's avatar and records of the battle with Illfang—wasn't something he'd been remotely prepared for, even after it became plain Kayaba had taken liberties with the usual progression.

“For now, I'd suggest we ask shelter at Fort Renya; it's closer than Mydo, and I believe Countess Ryella would raise no objection.” She started down the steps leading to the forest path, then stopped when he failed to follow. “Kirito?”

He shook himself. “Sorry, Kizmel.” Kirito hurried to catch up, suddenly eager to put the ruins behind him. “It's just… Seeing Diavel again was kinda startling.”

“I would be surprised if it wasn’t.” When their strides had matched, Kizmel glanced at him sidelong. “If I know you, though, that wasn't the only thing that bothered you about it. Nor just the Trial itself.”

“…No.” Not that the Trial had been fun; Kirito considered the gag with the “B” coat to be a particularly cruel joke, on top of forcing him to face the possibility of a repeat of Illfang's aftermath. It was something he'd faced before, though, and whatever happened, he was confident he wouldn't have to face it completely alone. Just as back then, there was Asuna, Argo, and Agil; even Klein, if he could put aside his own guilt… and Sachi.

Not to forget Kizmel, either. Not even a little.

The real fright, in a lot of ways, had been part of “Diavel's” reasoning.

“…He knew about my life back home,” Kirito said, realizing he'd been silent long enough for them to have gotten well into the forest again. “I mean, it could just be a good guess—people like me probably make up a lot of the Swordmasters, really—but… put it together with how this whole thing seems to be about the two of us, specifically? …It makes me nervous.”

Kizmel lifted one eyebrow, a small smile gracing her lips. “You don't suppose it could simply be our destiny?”

He snorted. “Do you?”

“…Perhaps not,” she admitted. “Honestly, there are… certain things bothering me, as well.” She came to an abrupt halt, turning to face him directly. “But that's exactly why I'm going to keep going, Kirito. If we stop now, we will never see the truth behind any of this. I want—no, I need to see where this path takes us. Even if I do have to make sacrifices, even if the truth proves to be frightening, I have to know.”

The declaration struck a nerve for Kirito, knowing as he did just what one of those truths was, and how shattering it had the potential to be for his friend. Even so, he couldn't disagree; for all he knew, the questions he had would have answers just as frightening for him. Especially “Diavel's” comment about the “best of both worlds”.

Ever since he'd met Kizmel, he'd known there were things about SAO that weren't quite as expected. Mysteries that probably had mundane explanations—but which might not.

“The answers are there, Kirito. And we can find them, together.” Smiling, Kizmel raising one hand, beginning a gesture he and Asuna had taught her almost the first day of their acquaintance. “We passed this Trial, didn't we? Then let us pass the next, as well, and those that come after. Who
knows? Perhaps the answers will be happier than we can imagine now.”

You know… maybe she's right. It's not like everything I've learned, everything I've experienced, in this world has been bad, right? Finding himself smiling in return, Kirito gave his partner's hand a hearty slap. “Okay, then. Let's go find them.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the Zelda is strong with these chapters, I know. But it's relevant--extremely relevant.
“Life's never boring when you're around, Kii-bou, I'll give ya that.” Argo took a bite of her cheesecake, swallowed, and shook her head in obvious amusement. “Trials to prove courage, wisdom, and strength? Powerful ancient artifact at the end? Heh. You guys do know what you've stumbled on, don't ya?”

Kirito, having decided not to skip directly to dessert the way the info broker had, took his time chewing his bagel before he answered. “Yeah,” he said when he'd finished, “that was kind of obvious by the time we were halfway through the first dungeon.” He lowered his gaze to his plate, remembering what happened after that. “It wasn't a boss battle at the end of it, though. We… saw a ghost.”

She set her fork down on her plate, favoring him with an unusually serious expression. “Sounds heavy, Kii-bou. C'mon, tell Argo-nee-chan all about it.” A trace of a grin reappeared, showing just a hint of canine teeth. “Usual rate, o'course. Bonus if it's really juicy.”

A forkful of omelet halfway to her mouth, Kizmel sighed. “It never ceases to amaze me the kind of information you're willing to pay for, Argo. You yourself said this quest was unlikely to be of any use to other Swordmasters, and in this case I don't even see any potential blackmail material.”

“You do know me, Kii-chan! You're catchin' on.” Argo's grin returned in full. “Like I've said before, you'd be surprised what comes in handy. So spill! I can tell you're both just dying to hear what I've got to say about it all.”

It was Kirito's turn to sigh, but he didn't deny it. At the outset, and most of the way through the Trial of the Brave, the quest they'd received at Fort Renya had seemed reasonably straightforward; it had convinced Kirito that Kayaba had no more scruples about business practices than any other kind of morality, but it had at least been—he thought—predictable.

Right up until the expected boss fight to receive the Pendant of Bravery had turned out to be a test of character, given by what looked remarkably like the ghost of the martyred first raid leader, Diavel. That by itself might not have bothered him too much—other than the fact that it made it seem even more like the whole quest had been very specifically designed for a particular pair of clearers—since it did stand to reason that Cardinal would have access to the avatar data even of dead players.

But the way he seemed to know about my life offline… that wasn't normal. I've never talked to anybody about that in-game—not even Asuna or Kizmel. I'd like to think it was just lucky guesses based on the game's target demographic, but…

Well, that was why he and Kizmel had headed back to Mydo, after spending the night at Fort Renya. If anyone had any answers, it would be Argo the Rat, the extent of whose full sources and knowledge base even Kirito couldn't guess at. He'd sent a message asking for a meeting as soon as they'd settled into the Fort's barracks for the night, and so they'd come back to the central human town at first light.
Early as it was, there were other players around the NPC restaurant, unlike the place in Ilden they'd met at last time. Kirito had even noticed a couple of players in the white and red of the Knights of Blood, obviously getting ready for a day's push toward reaching the labyrinth leading up to the Thirty-Eighth Floor. He didn't recognize either of them, but then he'd mostly kept his distance from guilds in general since the dissolution of the Black Cats.

“Well, Kii-bou,” Argo said, when he and Kizmel had finished the tale up to that point, “I gotta admit, that's a new one on me. And honestly, I think it just supports my talk yesterday that this might not be a quest you should be taking on at all. This is really starting to smell fishy. But,” she continued, before either of them could retort, “I can already tell you ain't stopping now.”

“No,” Kizmel said quietly. “Leaving aside my duty to my people—there is something going on that I need to face. I'm certain Swordmaster Diavel was right about that.”

“No turning back now,” Kirito agreed. “We have to know, Argo. So… instead of the 'usual rate', how about a story for a story? I'd just be paying you back what you'd be paying us, anyway.”

Argo grinned again. “You are getting the hang of this, Kii-bou. Good thing you're hangin' out with elves half the time, instead of hunting down every last lead, or I might have some competition.” She sobered, and bought herself a moment with one last bite of cheesecake. “Awright. I dunno about any 'ghosts' that know things they shouldn't. I do know, though, that there's been a few… weird things popping up, here and there. Rumors mostly, but—turns out this ain't the only thing going on that's got to do with only certain people.”

Kirito leaned forward, intent. “Like what?”

“You know about 'extra' skills, right? Ones that don't show up from regular leveling up or skill-grinding?”

He nodded. Around the time he, Asuna, and Kizmel had assaulted the Fallen Elf stronghold on the Ninth Floor, he'd gotten a message from Klein asking if he had any idea where to get Katana-type weapons. That the weapon type was usable by players wasn't itself particularly surprising, but up till then no one had figured out how to gain the required skill.

As far as Kirito knew, the exact conditions still weren't known, but it had been determined that a player could get it consistently if they spent enough time leveling the “Curved Sword” Skill; the precise skill level seemed random, but it was reliably within a certain range.

One or two others had been discovered since then, he'd heard, and under the same vague conditions. That was old news, though, so he wasn't quite sure why she'd brought it up.

Seeing the look on his face, Argo waved a hand. “It's relevant, Kii-bou, trust me. Y'see, the thing is… there's another skill that's turned up without explanation. Doesn't seem to have anything to do with regular skills, and so far, only one person has it—and like this quest you've gotten yourself into, it's suspiciously appropriate to the one who got it.”

Kizmel's eyebrows went up in obvious interest. “How so, Argo?”

“Ah. Now, the details, you guys will have to pay extra for,” the Rat said, leaning back in her chair. “They're kinda trying to keep it quiet for a little while. You'll prolly see it when the boss raid comes around, though, and it ain't the specifics so much as the fact of it that matters here, so… far be it from me to turn down a profit, but maybe you wanna save a little Cor for now.”

Kirito eyed her suspiciously. “If you're suggesting we not pay you… you must be looking forward to
the looks on our faces, aren't you? I can't think of anything else that'd be worth for you.”

“Me? Perish the thought, Kii-bou! I'm just trying to run a generous business.” The grin gave the lie to her words, but Argo only waved a hand again, as if it didn't matter. “Sides, I still think what you've got going on is lots more interesting. So, back on topic, I'm thinking you want info on the route to this 'Trial of the Wise', yeah?”

He nodded. The first edition of Argo’s guide for the floor had covered the eastern forest surrounding the Trial of the Brave well enough, as several other early quests had dealt with the area; much less had been known of the regions west of Mydo at that point. Given the kind of trouble he knew lay on the road to Ilden in the south, he and his partner both wanted any advance info they could get.

*Like if there's something like the Drunk Apes from the Thirty-Fifth Floor. Leveled up a bit, those could be nasty again.*

Kirito started to say as much, but just as he opened his mouth someone else beat him to the punch.

“So you finally show your face, Kirito? I'd wondered; normally you and your… partner are ahead of the pack at the start of exploring a new floor. You haven't been this hard to find since you came back from your sojourn on the lower floors last month.”

He stifled a sigh. That voice, he knew all too well, and glancing up, he saw he was right. Long blue hair, silver plate armor, blue tunic… the scimitar that completed the ensemble was fancier than the last one Kirito had seen, but it was still perfectly recognizable.

So was the look on the man’s face, which seemed to be a genuine attempt at friendliness, but to Kirito’s eyes usually had more than a trace of condescension in it; though this time, there seemed a darker shadow in it.

“Guildmaster Lind,” Kizmel said, before Kirito could make any reply. “It's good to see you well.”

“Likewise, Lady Kizmel,” Lind said, bowing graciously. The Divine Dragons Alliance leader's attention immediately returned to Kirito, though, with a raised eyebrow directed at the black-clad swordsman. “If you’re meeting with Argo, I assume you’re in need of information to… catch up, after whatever has had your attention this time?”

“Something like that,” Kirito replied noncommittally. Lind’s air of *I know best* had been irritating as far back as when the DDA and ALS competed for top spot in the clearing group; since the KoB had begun to take a firm lead, it had only gotten worse. “It's always a good idea to touch base with her when we have the chance, don't you think?”

“Her information is generally good,” Lind acknowledged. “Though with her prices, it can be advantageous to… distribute the costs, in my experience. There are ways to make things easier on yourself, you know.”

*This, again?* Kirito groaned inwardly. *Why now? I thought once Kizmel joined up with me, he'd given that up!*

“I'm sittin' right here, ya know,” Argo put in, rolling her eyes. “Not that it's any of your business, Lind, but I can tell ya right now Kii-bou doesn't have any problems meeting my prices. Matter of fact, half the time—like now—he pays me with *information*—when exactly was the last time you had anything like that to barter?”

Lind's face tightened, losing a bit of his affability, but he rallied quickly enough. “Fair enough, Argo. I'm just suggesting it would be more efficient to do things as a group, the way even Kirito's former
partner has. Especially since it seems there are more dangers than ever, these days.”

*PKers*, Kirito thought with a shiver. *That's right, Argo said Naga was murdered…*

“You ask me, Kii-bou's as safe as he can be with the help he's got. Lots more 'efficient', that's for sure.” Argo waved a dismissive hand. “Unless you got something else to say, Lind, would ya let us get back to business here? Face it, yer princess is in another castle.”

The DDA master looked at her for a moment, then shrugged; a hint of annoyance slipped through, despite his best efforts. “Sorry for getting in the way, then. I trust there'll at least be something interesting in the next edition of your guide, if Kirito's been so busy.”

With an admirably knightly bow, Lind turned to leave, at which point the various players who'd turned to watch the encounter also seemed to lose interest.

“I see he still hasn't changed,” Kizmel remarked when he'd gone, shaking her head. “…What princess, Argo?”

“Old joke from back home,” Argo said, turning her attention back to her second slice of cheesecake. “Before Kii-bou's time, so I'm not surprised he hasn't mentioned it…”

“I'm pretty sure you're not much older than I am, Argo,” Kirito pointed out. “That 'joke' has got to be, what, thirty, forty years old? You don't look…” Too late, Kizmel took a page from Asuna's book and kicked his leg under the table, reminding him far too belatedly the dangers of that particular topic, especially with girls. The exasperated look his partner favored him with only added to his sense of impending doom.

Surprisingly, Argo only grinned at him. “Oho? Well, Kii-chan, if you really wanna know, you know how it works: you got the Cor, it's for sale. My age, favorite food, three sizes…”

“It's not important!” he said hastily. The frightening thing was, for all he knew she was entirely serious; supposedly, the identities of beta testers were the only things she wouldn't sell. Right now, next to his all-too-mischiefous Dark Elf partner, he had no intention whatsoever of testing that. “Right! About the path to the Trial of the Wise…?”

The info broker's smirk grew; the fact that Kizmel seemed to be smiling as well, just a little, made him distinctly uneasy. “O'course, the trails to the west. So happens, Kii-bou, that I've already gotten word of an old ruin that nobody can seem to figure out how to get into, so I bet I know just where to send ya. As fer the route there… I got one piece of advice for you.”

Kizmel leaned forward, obviously intrigued by Argo's continued—nay, increasing—mirth. “And that advice is…?”

There were *fangs* in that grin now, Kirito was sure of it. “One word, Kii-chan: soap.”

Manning the stall he'd gotten set up in Mydo's shopping district, Agil raised an eyebrow at his customers' large purchase order. “There's a story here, ain't there, Kirito. Last time I saw you two this desperate for soap, you'd just been at ground zero of a bunch of exploding goats. Right now, you ain't even smudged.”

Considerably more sober than at the height of Argo's trolling, Kizmel grimaced. “As Kirito might say, Agil, this time we 'read the fine print'. Or rather, Argo told us quite specifically some of what we can expect to deal with on the road we're traveling today. When Argo advises something like this…”
“Better to have more than we need than less,” Kirito finished, signing over an amount of Cor that otherwise might've bought a couple of dozen healing potions without complaint, in return for a large bag of the highest-quality soap currently available. “She was looking way too happy about the whole thing.”

“Ha! Now you've really got me curious.” Agil grinned. “Might just have to buy that story from the Rat, later… Come again if you need more! I'll be here.”

**Argo has a gift for understatement,** Kizmel thought, slogging determinedly down what Kirito's immaterial map insisted, against all evidence, was a road. **Soap, indeed. Trying to wash all this mud off my armor and cloak is going to be a challenge by itself.**

The western “road” that Countess Ryella had said led to the Trial of the Wise was one of the first that the clearing group had investigated, on arrival at the Thirty-Seventh Floor. As such, Argo's information included meticulous maps—which was the only reason she and her partner had any idea where they were going. The road was only visible as such at the few points it reached higher ground; otherwise, it was only a jagged line on a map, leading straight through a swamp.

Kizmel was coated up to the bottoms of her thighs in mud already, and from the unpleasant squelching it had gotten into her boots, as well. Kirito's pants were similarly stained, and from his grimace he was no happier than she. When another of the large snakes that inhabited the bog slithered a little too close and raised its head just enough, he took obvious pleasure in venting his frustrations by lopping said head off with a well-placed Horizontal.

“A swamp,” he groused, inspecting his sword carefully for mud. “That's just… It's almost making me nostalgic for the Seventh Floor. At least the jungle was only humid. Mud up to our knees, poisonous constrictors… What next, rain?” He looked up quickly at that, as if expecting his words to have summoned up a storm that very instant.

It was difficult to tell through the heavy foliage of the swamp, but no deluge followed; Kizmel chuckled at the way Kirito continued to stare distrustfully upward for a few moments anyway. For her part, she might almost have welcomed a little rain, if only to wash some of the mud off. Certainly, it wasn't going to make road conditions any worse at this point.

“At least we shouldn't be dealing with this for long,” she said, another dozen meters or so down the road. “From what Argo said, after we've conquered this Trial we should be focusing on preparing ourselves for the greater battle to come, at least for a few days.”

A loud sigh from her partner. “True enough. Never thought I'd be grateful for a field boss… I do kinda hate taking time off from this quest for it, though.”

“The quest for the Reliquary is, itself, for the sake of conquering the Pillars,” she reminded him. “Delaying the retrieval of its treasures to aid in clearing the way to this floor's Pillar is no diversion from our cause; and from what Argo's information said, every Swordmaster available will be needed.”

Usually, the guardian creatures Swordmasters referred to as “field bosses” were singular monsters of great power; strong, often large, but thoroughly outnumbered by a properly prepared raid. Indications from some of the more daring clearers' explorations, however, were that a mob of merely “elite” status was waiting in the broad clearing in the northeast of the floor—but had gathered to itself a veritable army of lesser foes.

If the camp laid out across the path that led most directly to the Pillar was any indication, between three and five hundred Wood Goblins were waiting for the Swordmasters. Individually they would
likely be no match for any Swordmaster of appropriate skill and equipment to the Thirty-Seventh Floor, but the sheer numbers were certainly daunting.

“I guess you've got a point there,” Kirito admitted now. “I could wish we'd managed to get clear to the Reliquary first—we could use a little more power—but, eh. We'll manage.”

“And it at least is nowhere near the swamp.” Kizmel glanced down at her boots in disgust, wrenching one foot, then the other, out of the mud as they finally ascended another hill. “Ugh. No matter what challenges await us in the Trial of the Wise, I'll be content as long as it is dry.”

He shot her an exasperated look. “You had to say it.”

When they came out of the dank forest, Kirito was glad to see that the swamp did, in fact, also end there. Actually, the wide open space was about as bright and peaceful as was likely to be found on the entire floor. They stood now on the shore of a placid lake, with the only sounds being distant bird calls.

That placid lake was also why he wasn't anywhere near as relieved as he otherwise would've been at escaping a swamp.

At his side, a mud-spattered Kizmel stared at the island in the center of the lake, carefully scrutinizing the ruins perched on it. The place was, if anything, in even worse shape than the Trial of the Brave, with pools of water visible on the inside through holes in its crumbling walls; obviously the lake had made some inroads on the island itself, and the ruins had suffered for it.

“Kirito,” she said after a moment. “I'm not certain why, but I feel very uneasy about this place. I have the oddest premonition that I will soon have a headache. Does that make any sense?”

“Yeah,” Kirito said, sighing. “After what happened last time, I think we can expect something other than a boss fight at the end of it—but if I know the stories, getting there is going to be a lot worse than the Trial of the Brave. A ruined temple surrounded by water? No way this is going to be fun.”

And speaking of getting there... Is there anything else Argo left in the guide that she didn't mention when we talked? Remembering the Rat's grin, he wished now he'd actually read the guide before coming this far, rather than taking her at her word that the area around the temple was safe. Bringing up his menu long enough to materialize the guide, he quickly confirmed that, yes, her notes did mention the probable inspiration for this particular dungeon.

It also, as he'd feared, didn't say anything to suggest there was anything on the shore that he was missing now.

Sighing again, he dropped the guide back in his inventory; there obviously wouldn't be any information about what they'd find inside, given the nature of the quest. “Kizmel? I'm pretty sure there's no boat here, and Argo's notes don't mention one either, so…”

After a moment, Kizmel nodded in understanding. “We'll have to swim for it, then.” Shrugging, she mustered a rueful smile. “At the least, it should clear some of this mud off. A pity we'll not be able to wash our armor the same way.”

That was the other reason Kirito was uncomfortable now. As far as Argo's sources knew, there weren't any mobs of note in that lake—which was fortunate, because swimming with anything resembling full equipment just wasn't happening.

The consequences at least weren't likely to be as hazardous as when he and Asuna had had to swim
to Rovia on arrival on the Third Floor, Kizmel being considerably less self-conscious than the fiery fencer. At the same time, that was kind of part of the problem, as far as he was concerned.

Look on the bright side. Argo isn't here, and she hasn't found any recording crystals yet. A sudden shiver went down his spine. …I think. Right, let's get this over with.

Kirito turned to Kizmel, already opening his mouth to say as much, only to see a flash of light as she anticipated him. Mud-covered armor vanished into whatever ether Dark Elves used for storage, leaving a thin singlet; with arms and legs bare, it was much more suited for swimming than her battle gear.

Realizing she was being watched, she directed a raised eyebrow and small smile in his direction. “I'm prepared to begin as soon as you are, Kirito.”

Wrenching his gaze away from dusky legs with more effort than he was willing to admit to, Kirito hurriedly brought up his menu and went into his equipment tab. A few quick jabs of his finger, and his own leather gear disappeared, replaced by a pair of swim trunks. Ordinarily, it would've left him quite cold—this being one of the floors that did seem to reflect the real-world calendar, by now descending into autumn—but under the circumstances, he hardly noticed the chill of the air.

It could've been worse. At least he'd long since made a point of replacing both the set he'd gotten from the Second Floor boss and equally-undignified variant Asuna had made for him on the Fourth. His new swimwear was far more abbreviated than he was comfortable with in present company, but it was a simple, plain black; no silly animal prints of any kind.

Regardless, Kirito didn't dare look back at his partner. He felt like he was being stared at as it was, and he had no desire to confirm it. “Okay, then! Let's get over to that lake and get this over with!” Only then sparing a—very brief—glance to confirm she was with him, he rushed for the water's edge and dove in.

Unlike the air, the shock of the cold water did get through the warmth of embarrassment, and only with difficulty did Kirito manage to remember the unique technique required for swimming in virtual water. Fighting thermal shock all the way, he flung himself into the swim, arrowing across the lake as quickly as he could.

There were, as promised, no monsters to try and drag them into the depths during the twenty-meter sprint to the island shore. Kirito was darkly suspicious of a long, narrow shape darting around near the lake bottom, but whatever it was seemed totally uninterested in the potential snacks at the surface; the only things that came anywhere near them were some curious fish, and some kind of non-hostile mob that resembled a condor-sized pelican that seemed more interested in the fish than the people.

He was still grateful to haul himself up on the shore, out of the freezing water. Swimming might be a perfectly fine way to pass the time, but not here, not with potential man-eater fish, and definitely not with company that could get him blackmailed if the wrong people happened by at the wrong time.

As soon as he was on solid footing, Kirito wasted no time in bringing up his menu and reequipping normal clothes, heavy coat, and the comfortingly familiar weight of his sword. Hearing a splash from a meter or so away, he turned to make sure his partner had similarly made it across without incident.

From the look of things, not only had she been fine, but she'd enjoyed it a lot more than he had. If the cold bothered Kizmel at all, it wasn't obvious; if anything, she looked refreshed by the experience. When she came to her feet on dry land, she took a moment to shake water out of her lilac hair.

The way the motion affected her body, and the way her water-soaked singlet clung to her, drove
anything Kirito might've been about to say right out of his head.

Noticing his petrified state after a few moments of shedding water, Kizmel only smiled, shook her head, and tapped her shoulder to call up her muddied armor. “That was refreshing,” she commented. “Would that we could take the time to clean our armor, but I suppose this will suffice for now. Shall we?”

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Kirito redirected his attention to the ruins they were here for. “Uh, right! Yeah, let's see how we're supposed to get into this place.” Turning, he marched toward the steps leading to the temple entrance, determinedly ignoring his partner's chuckle.

The Trial of the Wise would have been, if intact, roughly a pyramid in structure, with a couple of rectangular wings to the sides. In the ancient, decayed state the game rendered it now, there were enough holes in the walls and the “floors” of each outer level to let plenty of sunlight in; there was even a sizable gap in the highest layer, which in theory could've been a shortcut right to the end of the dungeon.

In practice, Kirito was unsurprised to see, the staircases leading above the Trial's ground level were too broken to use. A few more points to his Strength and Agility stats, and he might've been able to jump; as it was, sequence-breaking was obviously impossible.

They could, possibly, have gone in via some of the damaged walls that were within reach. Practically speaking, though, he was pretty sure there would be traps to discourage the attempt. That left just the main entrance, at the top of the only exterior stairway that was at all intact.

When they'd reached it, Kirito wasn't really surprised by what kind of gate awaited them. “Is that what I think it is?” he asked his partner, more resigned than anything else at this point.

Kizmel leaned close to examine an inscription beside the gate, writing in the same script as that outside the Trial of the Brave. “The second half of the inscription is the same as before,” she reported, “save for speaking of Wisdom rather than Courage. It's probably safe to assume we enter through the same means. The first half is somewhat different, however:

“Bravery alone means little; a journey must have a destination. Without Wit, doors remain forever closed; without it, Courage is but foolhardy fearlessness. Determination is only the beginning; the road demands the Wisdom to rend illusion that leads astray, to find the true path to that which is sought.”

Pure flavor text, Kirito thought—or so he would have assumed, had it not been for Cardinal confronting them with Diavel's ghost last time. Being as this was specifically a test of wisdom, he was already starting to worry about what was waiting for them in this Trial's inner sanctum.

“Well,” he said, “that at least proves we're in the right place. And this time, we've got a better idea of what's likely to be thrown at us. I hope.” He turned a rueful smile on his partner. “No point in putting it off, right?”

“None at all.” Kizmel drew closer as they approached the gate, and this time there was none of her previous amusement at their enforced proximity when she swept her cloak over them both. “I'm sorry for the mud this is going to get in our hair, though.”

Kirito managed a shrug, regretting it only slightly when he realized just where his left shoulder was, relative to her. “We'll still have to swim back to the mainland when we get out. That should take care of most of it.”
“Until we have to go back to the swamp on our way back to Mydo,” she reminded him, as their translucent bodies made contact with the barred gate, and slipped through as easily as ghosts.

“…Yeah. I was kind of trying to forget that part, actually. Something tells me getting it all off our gear is going to be even worse. With our luck, this is as stubborn as Fire Goat ashes…”

“I knew it,” Kirito said forlornly, slapping a bright green switch with his off-hand. “As soon as I saw this place, I knew it was going to be like this… no wonder Argo was grinning like that, she must've known from the descriptions…”

Listening to stone grinding in the distance as she watched his back, Kizmel couldn't help but share his melancholy. Strange stone-moving puzzles aside, the Trial of the Brave had at least been reasonably easy to navigate. So far, they'd been in the Trial of the Wise for half an hour and had, by her count, gotten turned completely around at least five times.

The strangely mobile architecture was not helping. At all. Kirito's map was keeping up with the changes the various switches made to the temple's labyrinth, but that only applied to areas they'd already been in; it was useless for predicting where they were supposed to go next, or exactly which arrangement of switches would open the next path.

At least the monsters had, so far, been reasonably easy. Such as the one that was just now swarming up the hallway toward her, apparently drawn by the noise of the rotating walls elsewhere; from Kirito's comments, the “level” was almost perfectly balanced for increasing their own abilities according to Swordmaster numerical measurements.

Taking a burst of fire on her shield, Kizmel decided that she didn't really care very much about “experience points” just then. Her concern was that the beast scuttling up to her had far too many tentacles, an assessment she expressed by lopping three of them off with a single Reaver. One more got through, drawing a hiss of pain from her when it opened a scratch on her face; she smashed it away with her shield, then pushed forward through the retaliatory fire to drive her saber right through its beak.

“Land-based, fire-breathing squid,” Kirito remarked as it disappeared in bright blue shards. He sounded more bemused than anything else. “Okay… not quite what I was expecting.”

“But you were expecting a temple whose hallways change direction at the touch of a switch.” She glanced at him sidelong. “Perhaps, Kirito, when we're someplace safer you should give me at least the short version of one of the tales you know of this quest.”

“Not sure how much good it'll do, but yeah, I guess I probably should.” Summoning up his Mystic Scribing, he consulted his map of the temple, frowning thoughtfully. “First lesson: dungeons associated with water are bad news. Always. Given this is supposed to be a trial of wisdom, and they're a lot more literal about it than I was expecting, I really should've figured this was going to happen… Okay, I think that did it. According to the map, the way to the second sublevel is clear.”

“Barring beasts out to strangle us, burn us, or worse,” she said wryly.

“Well, yeah; I can tell already that there's at least three mobs coming up the stairway now…”

Five minutes later, with two Ignition Squids and an Octoshark shattered, they stood at the bottom of the second staircase leading to the temple's lower levels. Kizmel eyed the door beyond with deep suspicion; the Octoshark, according to Argo's notes, was an amphibian that preferred water to land, yet the stairwell itself had been bone dry. Moreover, this door was one of those that required Mystic Scribing to open.
Exchanging a wary look with Kirito, she moved forward with him to open the door, blades drawn and ready. If there was a repeat of their encounter with Black Knights in the previous Trial, they would be ready. So, tentatively, the human Swordmaster reached out, tapped the door, and pressed an acceptance on the ethereal page that appeared. Obligingly, it slid open—

Water rushed out with a roar, nearly sweeping them both off their feet. Cold and completely unexpected, it left Kizmel coughing, unable to see, trying to at least keep her shield between them and anything that might be waiting on the other side.

A few seconds only, and it subsided, leaving them waist-deep in water, soaked to the skin. With no trace of monsters on the other side, the two were left to simple look at each other in silence for a moment, united in resigned disgust at their predicament.

“Well,” Kirito offered presently, “at least it got the mud off our clothes?”

Kizmel sighed. “That would be so much more comforting if we did not need to face the swamp again after we leave, regardless.” Lifting her waterlogged cloak, wincing at the added weight, she directed a glare at the hallway beyond. Also flooded to waist-height. “As you Swordmasters might say, whoever originally designed this Trial had a very unpleasant sense of humor.”

“Kirito,” Kizmel asked an hour later, voice a dangerously level tone Kirito normally associated with Asuna about to kick him, “please, tell me. Does your world have such an unpleasant abundance of sea creatures with tentacles?”

Hacking another limb off the Tyrant Squid King that laired in the lowest level of the temple with the quick down-up combo of a Vertical Arc, he winced. “Not capable of coming up on land, anyway,” he got out, skipping back a step to dodge a tentacle aiming to wrap around his throat. “Though you should probably avoid—uh, some books that neither of us should really go anywhere near anyway…”

Even in the middle of her attempt at giving the Tyrant Squid a death of a thousand cuts, the elf spared a moment to give him a very narrow look. “Normally that's the kind of comment that would have me asking Argo for more details. This time, I believe I don't really want to know.”

“Hey, this one I really do only know by reputation!” he protested, ducking around flailing limbs to ram his sword into the hideously oversized cephalopod's face. “Do I really look like that kind of guy?”

Actually, he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer to that. Certainly Asuna had expressed some dark suspicions about the purity of his intentions, in times past.

“…That was unfair of me, I apologize.” A tentacle got through Kizmel's guard, forcing a grunt of anguish from her; in return, she took the opportunity to grab hold of it with her shield arm, giving her the chance to bring her saber down on it with brutal force. “I'm just—frustrated—with these things!”

Oof. It was times like this that reminded Kirito that making his partner angry wasn't really a good idea. The last time he'd heard that tone out of her, it had been just before they launched their final joint assault on the Fallen Elf King, a battle that had been one of the most brutal he'd ever experienced in Aincrad.

A few minutes more parrying and assaulting heavily-muscled appendages—punctuated by Kirito at one point being flung clear into the ceiling, when he'd missed a dodge—and he saw the opening they'd been waiting for. With only two of its original twelve tentacles left, both of them far to one side, the Tyrant Squid King's main body was vulnerable.
Kizmel saw it at the same time he did, and her eyes narrowed. “Kirito, match my timing!” she snapped, sounding every bit the Royal Guard Knight in full fury. “It's time to end this!”

Watching her backflip twice to gain distance, then crouch like a sprinter at the starting line, Kirito swung his sword up and behind his right shoulder, assuming the starting position for a Sonic Leap. When she rushed forward, soon engulfed in the white light of her chosen skill, he let the System Assist take over for him as well, taking him up in a flying lunge.

In the middle of the Flashing Penetrator, the Tyrant Squid tried to swipe Kizmel aside with one of its remaining limbs. Gripped by the brutal momentum of the skill, though, she powered right on through it, ripping the tentacle in two and hardly slowing down as she did; the sheer wind of her passage flung both halves well out of her way as she continued on.

Kirito's own skill didn't take him as far as he'd intended, the last remaining tentacle sweeping into his path before the halfway point; instead, his blade buried itself to the hilt in muscle, taking a lesser but still nice chunk of HP from the giant squid's bar. It also seemed to trigger a programmed pain reflex, ensuring the tentacle wouldn't obstruct his partner's attack.

The unintended consequence was that Kirito himself ended up slammed into a stone wall hard enough to leave a dent and take a good twenty percent off his HP, but he was muzzily certain it was worth it.

By the time he'd recovered his senses, along with his sword, he was proven right. Kizmel's powerful blow drove her saber deep into the Tyrant Squid King's skull, wrenching a high-pitched squeal of agony from it. When she ripped her blade free again, it shrieked again—and exploded.

It took Kirito a moment to realize the squid's main body actually had shattered in the normal fashion of 

The cloud of ink it released in its death throes made it kind of hard to see details like that, after all.

Covered in ink from lilac hair to armored boots, for a moment Kizmel only stood there silently. Kirito tensed, expecting an explosion of another kind from the normally even-tempered elf; the way her sword shook visibly in her hand for a moment only made his expectation worse.

After a few moments of silent fury, though, she said only, “It's as well we need to pass through half-flooded halls again, before we find the Trial chamber. …We are never coming here again.”

He nodded hurriedly, and walked very quickly to the chest that the Tyrant Squid King had been guarding. “Here's the final key,” he reported, checking the contents. “Let's head back up.”

“All in all, not the hardest dungeon they'd ever conquered together, even taking into account the giant

Dealing with a pair of them simultaneously, in a narrow corridor near the highest floor of the temple, was a bit of a sticky moment, but nothing two determined clearers couldn't handle with some awkward acrobatics.

The above-ground levels of the Trial temple at least were comparatively free of cephalopods. What seemed to be palette-swaps of the Giant Bats from lower floors lurked in shadowy corners, instead, and large rodents with metal-armored heads were the most common hall monitors. The former were easily dealt with so long as they kept their wits about them; the latter were trickier, being nearly invincible from the front, but standard Switching tactics made reasonably short work of them, as well.
squid. That just made Kirito more nervous, as they approached a door with a heavy lock on the top level. Both Trial dungeons had been comparatively easy as far as combat was concerned, but the Trial of the Brave had done a number on them both mentally.

He wasn't sure he wanted to know what waited for them in a trial of Wisdom.

_This isn't even the right genre for this_, he complained inwardly, fishing the large key out of a belt pouch. _This game was supposed to be about swords, and nothing else. Not weird mind puzzles that try and break us for real._

“Judging from the map, there isn't much beyond here,” Kizmel remarked, seeming no more eager than he to see what waited for them this time. “I doubt the room ahead is large enough for a serious fight to be our final obstacle here. …This probably will be similar to the previous Trial.”

“That's what I'm afraid of, yeah.” Sighing, Kirito slid the key open, twisted it, and watched the door rumble out of the way. “No point in putting it off, I guess.”

The next room was very small, as he'd more or less expected. Just large enough to have another pair of doors, just like in the first Trial: one for Swordmaster, one for Elf.

This time they didn't hesitate, simply going straight for their respective gates. As she drew her cloak around herself, wavering out of sight, Kizmel gave him one last encouraging smile. “See you on the other side, Kirito.”

“I'll be right with you, Kizmel.” Tracking her departure only from the sound of her footsteps, Kirito tapped [Yes] on the pop-up that appeared, and stepped into the darkness beyond the narrow passage.

_Wait. Last time it just led right into the next room, this is more like—_

Kizmel was not expecting a fight when she passed through the gate into the final chamber of the Trial; not after what had turned out to be waiting at the end of the first. Neither, though, did she expect to briefly be engulfed in darkness, similar to the effects of a human Teleport Gate.

When there was light again, she flung her cloak back and reached for her saber. “Kirito?” she called out, realizing quickly that her partner was nowhere to be seen. All that could be seen in the small room were torches lighting murals on the walls, and a locked chest protected by glass doors at the far end; there was no trace of anyone else. “Kirito, can you hear me?”

There was no answer, and as her chest began to tighten anxiously Kizmel started to draw her blade—only to be brought up short when another voice _did_ speak. “It is alright, Kizmel. Swordmaster Kirito only has his own Trial to face; he is perfectly safe… for now, at least.”

Eyes widening, she whipped her head around to see who had spoken, and her heart leapt into her throat. A semi-solid figure had appeared in the middle of the room, much as Diavel's shade had in the Trial of the Brave; but this one she knew from more than just stories. The young woman who was fading into view wore the robes of a Dark Elf herbalist, not the armor of a knight, but her features were very close to Kizmel's own.

“Tilnel…?”

The apparition of her sister, gone now nearly a year, nodded, smiling softly. “In a way,” Tilnel said. “Much like the Swordmaster Diavel, and yet… not. As he appeared before you in the first Trial, I am here for your second, Sister. For this, the Holy Tree has granted me a little time in this realm once
more."

Shaking, Kizmel took her hand off her sword. “What kind of trial?” she asked, voice trembling. There were a thousand questions she would've rather asked, so many things unsaid before tragedy had struck, yet this was the only one she could. If Tilnel was here for this one task, Kizmel couldn't put personal feeling before duty… however much it hurt not to.

From the sad twist in her smile, Tilnel understood. “I am here to ask of you, Sister, a question: what conclusions have you drawn about the dreams? The visions you have had of other outcomes of your first meeting with Swordmaster Kirito?”

Kizmel inhaled sharply. She knew what her sister spoke of: the same dreams that had prompted her to leave Lyusula’s capital and rejoin Kirito, the ones that she’d first begun to have shortly after meeting him. Nightmares, really, showing her battles that ended in her death, not her living to see Kirito and Asuna’s victory at their side.

“…I assumed, once, that they were nothing but ordinary nightmares,” she said slowly. “But Kirito seemed to react to the details I shared with him, and I’ve since learned that he had visited a dreamlike version of Aincrad before…” Kizmel hesitated, trying to put into words the theory she'd begun to form, in recent months. “I... have begun to wonder if, in my own dreams, I may have truly visited that copy myself. I don't know how, but…”

Tilnel nodded, seeming unsurprised. “You suspect that the dreams are more like memories, that you were somehow linked with Kayaba Akihiko's incomplete copy of the Steel Castle… Yet you continue to trust Kirito?”

Kizmel started in surprise. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Think of it, Sister,” Tilnel said gently. “If you truly were, somehow, within that copy, and your ‘dreams’ are true memories… then Swordmaster Kirito let you die, more than once.”

The question was like a blow to Kizmel's stomach. “Kirito… let me die…? No. No, that can't be…”

“Can it not?” Her sister's eyes were sad, yet firm. “Sister, your life was saved by two Swordmasters, alone. In the dreams, Kirito is accompanied by not one, but several of his people—and yet each time, you fall. Do you truly believe that they made any serious effort to protect your life? Even your companion?”

The swordswoman shook her head in mute denial. The Kirito she knew would never “let” anyone die; if there was anything that truly frightened him, it was failing to save the lives of those around him. She'd seen it, time and again, just as she'd seen his anguish when three of the Moonlit Black Cats fell, one after another.

Yet—she couldn't speak to deny Tilnel's assertion. In the dreams, Kirito was not so skilled as she knew him, and in some of them he and his unfamiliar allies... they seemed almost to be expecting her fall, in the end. They stood with her against the Forest Elf knight, but pressed the attack with none of the brilliant determination Asuna had possessed in the “true” version of events.

Even Kirito, in some versions of the dream, seemed more resigned to an inevitable fate than truly fighting to win. As if he believed only her sacrifice would bring victory…

“No,” she whispered. “If that's what it would mean for them to be 'true', then those must be nothing but dreams. I can't believe that Kirito would… would accept such a thing…”

“He is human, Sister,” Tilnel reminded her, not unkindly. “The Swordmasters seek to free
themselves from this Castle; you know that better than any of our people. You have seen with your own eyes how all too many of them aid even the humans of this world only for the rewards they will receive, increasing their own power and the chances of their own survival. Is it really so hard to accept that your own companion would be so different, when aiding our people has granted him great rewards?"

Kibaou, the rough-spoken, hot-tempered Swordmaster who'd endangered even some of his own people in his zealous pursuit of “fair” advancement of all Swordmasters. Lind, Diavel's would-be successor, who projected an air of nobility, yet seemed convinced it was his place to dictate, not merely lead. Morte, Kirito's attempted murderer, who seemed to seek nothing but chaos…

“There are people of true nobility among the Swordmasters,” Tilnel said now, as if sensing the wavering in Kizmel's heart. “That much is true. Yet their own people will, must, be their priority. How can our people truly expect to trust them, in the long term?”

Kizmel wanted to deny that. Even as she recognized the truth in her sister's words, something in her refused to accept that Kirito, her partner, could possibly be like that, yet she couldn't find the words. A conviction as solid as anything in her soul, yet one based as much on emotions she herself still struggled to understand as any kind of logic.

Looking back into Tilnel's sad eyes, the words wouldn't come. There was an answer here, she was certain of it, yet how could she justify it to her sister, who had died without any Swordmaster ever lifting a finger—

Sad eyes. I've seen that expression before… in my dreams…

The dreams. The “beta test”. Kirito always looks like that, as my consciousness fades. What did he say about the “test” that some of his fellows went through, before coming to the true Aincrad…?

“…He didn't know.” Shaking herself, Kizmel met her sister's eyes, feeling herself on firm ground once again. “Tilnel. Those dreams always end with Kirito looking so very sad… and he told me he didn't know that this world would be real. That the people here would be real.”

Something shifted in the specter's expression. “Can you truly believe that, Sister?”

“I can,” she said firmly. “I always wondered, before we spoke of it, why the Swordmasters seemed such a strange mix of people, why they seemed so completely unprepared for this world. Why they'd come here to ‘save’ it, only to seem to need saving themselves.

“Kirito's words, that this was not what they expected to find, explains much of it. And, Tilnel… since the day he and Asuna saved my life, Kirito has always been a steadfast companion, no matter the risk.” A memory of a few hideous moments of combat, against the twisted Fallen Elves, flashed through her mind, and it was her turn to smile sadly. “Even when, to save me, he had to make a terrible choice.”

Tilnel tilted her head. “That does still leave questions,” she pointed out. “I have seen the Swordmasters, even Kirito, and to this day few, if any of them, truly accept this world as real.”

“I know. There are still mysteries, I know, but…” Kizmel shook her head. “I don't believe it's malice, Tilnel. I believe there are things here that I don't understand, that I can't understand yet, but if it is anyone's fault, it is Kayaba's. I know Kirito still has questions of his own about this world—but I truly believe he sees me as a person, not a dream. Even if there are still questions, that answer I do have.”
For a long moment, Tilnel simply stood there, regarding her silently. Then, slowly, she smiled, looking strangely proud. “I believe you have the right of it, Sister. You have found one answer—and you and your companion are both seeking the others. The truth, I believe, is somewhere between you—and it is knowing where to look that is the true wisdom, not knowing what lies at the end of the path.”

Tension flowed out of Kizmel's shoulders, leaving her briefly lightheaded. “That's... what I think, too, Tilnel,” she whispered. “So, you truly believe this is the right path for me to walk?”

Her sister stepped to one side, gesturing at the glass doors silently swinging open. “The powers that judge this Trial seem to think so,” she said dryly. “But myself, personally... Yes, I do. It is not the path I might have expected either of us to follow, but I believe it to be a good one.” She paused. “You should understand, though, that the answers you seek cannot be grasped as you are now.”

Kizmel started for the chest, her eyes still focused on her sister's shade. “I'm beginning to see that, yes. Kirito and I come from very different worlds; I can tell simply from how he struggles to explain himself, sometimes, that there are entire concepts we do not share. I'm willing to chance learning things I would rather not, for the sake of knowing the truth.”

“For knowing what Kirito's world is?” Tilnel chuckled softly. “That is good, Sister. After all—you have already begun to change, have you not?”

Hands poised to open the chest, the knight paused. “Tilnel?”

“Have you not noticed, Sister? Your very speech shows the path you have taken. Your words are as much of the Swordmasters as they are of our people, now.”

Kizmel blinked, thought back on her own half of the conversation, and realized her sister was right: Kirito's more casual way of speaking had begun to rub off on her, without her even noticing. The words were much the same as her own people's but the way she said them had changed somewhere in the months she'd spent with the young Swordmaster.

Abruptly, she shrugged and lifted the chest's lid. “Well,” she said, reaching for the sapphire pendant within, “I think there are worse people to take after, don't you? At least I have not begun speaking like Guildmaster Kibaou.”

That got a genuine laugh out of Tilnel. “Yes, the man is quite difficult to understand, is he not? Kirito is assuredly a more suitable companion for you, Sister.” She was beginning to fade now, still smiling. “You have found the true path ahead, Sister, and proven your Wisdom. Take the symbol of it, and return to your companion's side.”

Settling the pendant around her neck, alongside the Bravery Pendant, Kizmel watched her sister fade from sight with a lump in her throat. “Tilnel,” she asked suddenly, “will we... meet again?”

The blue flare of a teleport began to whisk her away, but she still heard the shade's reply. “In another world, perhaps, Sister... but for now, your path is beside those living in this world. Where you go from here... is your own choice...”

When the teleport released her, Kizmel found herself at the base of the stairs outside the Trial of the Wise. It was as peaceful and free of monsters as when she'd gone in—but not quite empty. Almost the first thing she saw, after the blue light faded, was Kirito pacing just a few steps away, sword in hand, face tense and anxious.

He obviously heard her arrival, though; he quickly spun to face her, and a relieved smile replaced the
tension. "Kizmel! I was starting to get worried. I tried to go back in as soon as I got here, but without your cloak to get through the—oof!")

Taking time only to see that he, too, wore a blue pendant around his neck, Kizmel cut him off with an impulsive hug. "I'm fine, Kirito," she said into his ear. "I passed the Trial. I've no intention of going anywhere."

"Um… okay…?" Obviously bemused, Kirito took a moment to sheathe his sword, then awkwardly returned her gesture. "Kizmel… did something happen in there?"

"…I don't think this is quite the place to talk about it." She held onto him a moment longer, reaffirming her own conviction—reaffirming that whatever dreams might say, this was real—then let go, stepping back a pace. "The Trial was… a little trying, that is all. Perhaps we can discuss it later. At Fort Renya, maybe? I don't know about you, but I think I would rather unwind from this somewhere the likes of Lind will not be."

Kirito nodded ruefully, scratching the back of his head. "Yeah, you've got a point there. Especially since we're going to have to wade through all that mud again, with no lake or flooded dungeon on the other side to wash us off."

"That, too." She grimaced. "I hope conquering this floor will not require us to pass this way again."

There was little left to be said after that. The sooner they departed the Trial's island, the sooner they would pass through the swamp, and the sooner they could find somewhere private to clean up, and take stock of the day's trials, both of the body and the mind.

Returning to the water's edge, Kizmel noticed Kirito's hesitation with some amusement. She knew perfectly well what his problem was, and that it had nothing—well, very little—to do with the impending cold. When she dismissed her armor, using the pale shadow of the human Mystic Scribing the Dark Elves possessed to replace it with a thinner garment far more suitable for swimming, she watched her partner from the corner of her eye.

She didn't miss the way he watched her for a few moments, before abruptly turning away to don his own swimwear. Nor, when they'd crossed back to the mainland, his distracted gaze when she shook herself off. Not that she objected in any way; it was silly, she thought, to be so concerned about being seen exposed by not merely a fellow warrior, but her trusted partner, with whom she'd shared living space for so long now.

Actually, Kizmel enjoyed it, just a little. Partly out of vanity—but mostly, these days, because it was proof Kirito did see her as "real". A dream, he might've admired without shame; his obvious embarrassment said his spoken assurances weren't meaningless words.

Besides, she mused, as they put their battle gear back on, fair is fair, isn't it? It wasn't like she wasn't getting an interesting view herself, after all.

When they'd gotten back on the road returning to Mydo, Kirito cleared his throat. "W-well," he said, "I guess we're making good progress on this quest, huh? Two dungeons in two days."

"Indeed. From what Countess Ryella said, we have but one more Trial to face before the way to the Reliquary is opened." Kizmel reached up to grasp the paired stones resting against her chestplate, proof of what they'd accomplished so far. "Of course, it seems likely the Reliquary itself will provide its own challenges…"

"Probably," he agreed, sighing. "I'll be surprised if we don't run into trouble just trying to get to the
Distracted by the conversation, Kirito's foot caught on something hidden beneath the swamp—a tree root, Kizmel suspected belatedly—and toppled face-first into the mud. He choked, flailing against the muck; she hurried to his side, caught him by the collar of his leather coat, and hauled him up.

For a moment he leaned against her, sputtering as he tried to clear his mouth of the mud. The sight was such that she had to stifle a laugh—made easier by the knowledge that she was going to be nearly as dirty herself before long—before she could say anything with a straight face. “You have first call on the bath, Kirito,” she said, when she was sure her voice wouldn't crack.

“…Thanks, Kizmel.” Spitting out a last mouthful of dirty water, Kirito lifted his head to glare at the sky, hidden by the floor above. “This, I almost hate more than the whole 'tricked into risking out lives' thing. Fighting’s one thing; this is sadistic.”

Fort Renya, while a more solid fortification than the forward camp on the Third Floor, still wasn’t anywhere near as elaborate or well-appointed as Yofel Castle on the Fourth. Still, while the Fort's bath chamber was small, it was nonetheless better than just a tent with wooden tubs; this was smooth stone, and there was even an actual door, even if it had no lock.

Kirito was just glad that the Fort Renya elves were as accommodating of a human guest as the forward camp and Viscount Yofilis' castle, graciously allowing him bathing privileges. He wasn't Asuna, who used them for fun, but after the trip through the swamp he wanted desperately to be clean. As Argo had warned, the mud didn't just wear off.

Fortunately, the soap Agil had sold did seem to be up to the task. He wasn't quite sure how he was going to reach parts of his back—the swamp water had gotten everywhere, soaking clear through cloth and leather both; which he’d also had to remove and soak separately—but everywhere he could get to, it was working wonderfully.

Mud, and a Water Temple, Kirito thought, sinking into the tub in the faint hope that a long soak would get his back clean. Did Kayaba get stuck there when he was kid, and decide to take it out on players of his “game” all these years later? Not to mention getting put through the ringer by a “ghost” at the end of it…

He still didn't know what to make of Diavel's so-called ghost, especially with how well it copied the original. Even so, he had to admit the shade had given him a lot to think about. It was giving him a headache, and he wasn't sure he liked all the implications, but he couldn't deny there was some hope in there that he hadn't considered before.

We're all going to be here awhile, Kirito reminded himself, scrubbing the last of the mud off his arms; one break from reality he was grateful for was the way the muck simply dissipated into fragments, rather than dirtying the tub. Even if we keep up the current rate of clearing… it's going to take a long time. We have to think about what we can do day by day…

Lost in the thoughts Diavel's “simple question” had stirred up, he almost didn't notice the bath chamber's door opening. He did clearly recognize the next sound, though. “Ah, Kirito. I’d hoped you'd still be here.”

Urk! He forced himself not to turn to look at the last moment, remembering what had happened the first time she’d walked in on him in the bath; as it was, he was grateful he’d had the presence of mind to wear a towel this time. “K-Kizmel! What’re you—?!”

Kizmel chuckled. “Oh, relax, Kirito. I have learned some things about Swordmaster society—even if
I question the necessity. It's safe to look.”

Her definition of safe wasn't one he was prepared to trust, in this context, but when she moved to slip into the tub beside him, he found himself unable to resist. Fortunately for his blood pressure, though, he found that she was telling the truth: this time, she was wearing a towel herself. The water quickly soaked it to the point of hugging her form more closely than he was comfortable with, but it was something resembling modesty, at least.

Even so. “Uh… Kizmel…?”

“I was hoping you might wash my back,” she told him. “I fear I can't quite reach, and… I'd rather not ask a stranger.”

Um. Well, Kirito could understand that much, at least; Kizmel hadn't seemed any more comfortable around Fort Renya's soldiers than he, and she was still as mud-drenched as he'd been. She did look like she needed the help…

“Also,” she continued after a moment, “I… wanted to talk. About the Trial.”

He told himself quite firmly that it was sheer practicality that led him to agree, and that the only reason he watched so closely when she slipped the towel away from her back to hold it against her chest was curiosity as to how she'd done it, in a world where manual adjustment of clothing was generally impossible. Just as clothes could only be put on or taken off by menu commands, towels, in his experience, were either wrapped securely or not at all.

When Kizmel had moved in front of him, half-submerged, and he'd knelt behind her with scrub brush in hand, Kirito ventured, “I take it you saw… a person, in the Trial?”

She nodded. “I did. When I emerged in the Trial chamber alone, I was worried for a moment… but then she appeared.” Kizmel paused, using a nearby bucket to dump some of the bath water over her hair. “My sister, that is. Or… her spirit, at least.”

Beginning to scrub at the mud coating her back, he winced. Not that he was surprised, exactly, after seeing the facsimile of Diavel; just concerned. Kayaba… you'd do that to her? Diavel was bad enough; this is her sister we're talking about here!

He kept it to himself, though. Explaining Kayaba's true nature was still something he wasn't remotely ready to attempt; even if he thought there was any chance she'd truly understand it. So he only sat silently, scrubbing, waiting for her to continue.

“I don't know what question you faced, Kirito,” Kizmel said after a moment, rubbing shampoo into her hair. “But Tilnel… she asked me about the dreams I've had of you. What I thought of them. And then… she asked me if I truly trusted you.”

Kirito's breath caught, and his stomach clenched. The dreams. The ones she has about the beta test?

“She said… that you let me die,” she told him, very softly. “Three versions I've seen of our first meeting, that did not match what happened in the waking world. Three ways I die, with your sword and your companions’ doing naught to save me, when yours and Asuna's were enough to grant us victory themselves. Tilnel suggested that… it made you no different from other Swordmasters, such as Lind or Kibaou.”

He swallowed, scrubbing brush forgotten against her shoulder. That wasn't really so different, he knew, from his own self-reproach after they had saved Kizmel. Which meant he couldn't even
deny the suggestion—not convincingly. He could say that he'd realized the error of his way afterward, but why should she believe that?

Kirito was startled from his bitter thoughts by Kizmel's hand reaching back, holding his against her shoulder. “That, of course, was the test, Kirito: to see if I could find the flaw in that argument. Because I do trust you.”

“Y-you do?”

“Of course.” She turned to look back at him, smiling. “You told me yourself, the night we defeated The Commandant: none of you knew what you were getting into, when you came to this place. Certainly, many of your fellows still treat Aincrad as a dream world, and I know you cherish doubts yourself… but since the day we truly met, you've always treated the people here as if they were as real as your comrades.” Kizmel squeezed his hand. “And much as we both may regret the consequences, I haven't forgotten that you chose to save my life that day, over a Swordmaster.”

He let out a shaky breath, feeling a wave of relief, and belatedly resumed washing her dusky back. “That's more trust than I probably deserve, Kizmel. I told you before, I didn't even think about it…”

“Exactly.” Kizmel leaned back into his ministrations, eyes drifting closed. “We come from different worlds, Kirito, and I know there is still much I don't understand about yours, and what you believe about this Steel Castle. Even so, you've been a true companion—and my most trusted friend.”

Kirito glanced away, feeling his face flush with embarrassment. “Well, I… I'm doing my best, Kizmel. And… well, you're one of the only friends I've ever had, so… er…”

She laughed, but said nothing more, only gracing him with an understanding smile that made his stomach feel strangely queasy. The elf only went back to washing her hair, while he rubbed the brush as low as he dared down her back, dislodging the last of the stubborn swamp muck.

After he'd finished in the companionable silence that had fallen, Kizmel wrapped the towel around herself again. “Your turn, Kirito,” she announced.

He blinked. “Um. What?”

“I'll wash your back as well, of course,” she said, as if it were obvious. “Doubtless you've as much trouble reaching the worst of the filth as I.”

Kirito protested, but only weakly, utterly unable to come up with a logical objection. Soon enough, he was the one kneeling in front of her, while she took the scrub brush to his back. Okay, he thought, fighting vainly for calm, this is… different. I mean, it's nice, too, but, uh… Wow. Really good thing Asuna isn't here to see this. A chill ran down his back. Or Argo. Eep, I shouldn't even think that…

“So tell me, Kirito,” Kizmel began, either oblivious to or unconcerned by his discomfort. “What question was asked of you, in the Trial of the Wise? …Actually, come to think of it, there was something else I was wondering, first.”

He was almost afraid to ask. “What's that, Kizmel?”

“Nothing serious, I suppose,” she admitted. “But I was wondering about something Argo offered to sell. Exactly what did she mean by 'three sizes'? Sizes of what?”

“Urk!”

October 7th, 2023
It had taken three days since the discovery of the field boss' location for the full raid of Swordmasters to be ready for it. Three days of upgrading equipment, mapping territory, and training up their skills and physical abilities according to their odd numerical standards.

One of those days had, for one particular pair of clearers, been lost to a quest to find a particular kind of soap. Kizmel had not been amused to learn the mud that had so stubbornly clung to their bodies had required even more stringent methods to remove from metal armor.

Now forty-eight clearers—forty-seven Swordmasters and a single Dark Elf—gathered on the south side of the single large clearing on the floor, directly opposite a veritable army of mobs. Roughly two-thirds of them wore the dark armor of the Divine Dragons Alliance; of the remainder, a scant handful wore a motley assemblage of non-uniform equipment typical of solos, while the rest were clad in the white and red of the Knights of Blood.

Kizmel wasn't especially surprised that Guildmaster Heathcliff's distinctive red and white armor was absent. While the man they called the Paladin was always present for Pillar Guardians, often as not he delegated command of lesser battles.

Despite his absence, there was no real question as to who the raid leader was. Lind stood at the head of the DDA contingent, looking dissatisfied, while at the forefront of the entire raid stood Vice-Commander Asuna, cool and radiant in the afternoon light.

One hand resting on the hilt of her rapier, the chestnut-haired girl faced the raid as a whole. “The final scouting reports have come in,” she said, sounding every bit the calm and collected leader despite her youth. “An exact count is difficult, but it's estimated that there are around two hundred and eighty enemies in the army in front of us—approximately six times our number.” There was some murmuring among the clearers, but she continued on evenly. “Their levels, fortunately, are lower than the average for this floor, so each of us killing at least six of them isn't as impossible as it may seem.”

Kizmel nodded at that. Exchanging a quick glance with Kirito, she saw that he shared the sentiment: to the Swordmasters who felt no pain, so long as their flesh was stronger than the enemy's muscles, six to one odds only meant more targets.

“Don't get careless, though,” Asuna warned. “The mobs are a mix of Forest Lizardmen and Wood Goblin Warg Riders; according to reports, the Warg Riders have poisoned blades, and the Forest Lizard Knights can inflict paralysis. In this kind of battle, either one can be… bad.”

“That's an understatement,” Kirito muttered, just loud enough for Kizmel to hear. “Go down here, and you'd be trampled before anybody could heal you…”

Lind cleared his throat. “And the boss itself, Vice-Commander?” His tone, the elf noticed, was a mix of resentment and respect. He obviously still wanted the top spot, but even he wasn't immune to the mystique of the Flash, apparently.

“That's more difficult,” Asuna acknowledged. Her free hand gestured at thin air, and with a few strokes materialized a sheet of paper, which she briefly consulted. “It's called Forest Lord: The Hobgoblin, and it's mounted on a giant Warg. It's armed with two shields, which according to reports are large enough to effectively cover it from frontal attack. Its cursor also indicates it's much stronger than its army. Not as much as most field bosses, though.”

“That's going to make it trickier,” Kirito noted. “Too bad bows don't work in Aincrad…”

Kizmel nodded in silent agreement. One of the most vexing things about the Steel Castle, she
sometimes thought, was that its very nature seemed to make any ranged weapon more sophisticated than a throwing knife go astray. According to the old tales, in the days before the Great Separation archers had been an integral part of most armies; in Aincrad, they were useless.

Though her partner hadn't spoken loud enough to be heard by the raid at large, Agil quickly voiced the same concern, and Asuna nodded in acknowledgment. “Trying to get through the shields probably isn't going to work—unless one of you has gotten their Throwing skill higher than you've bothered to mention?” After a brief round of chuckles and sounds of derision, she continued, “So we're going to use overwhelming force: hit The Hobgoblin from all directions, with as many Swordmasters as will fit.”

“That's going to be difficult, with an army of adds distracting us, Vice-Commander,” Lind pointed out.

Asuna smiled. It was far from the friendliest expression Kizmel had ever seen on her face. “That's true, Lind. Which is why we're going to kill every single one of them, first.”

Asuna hadn't been kidding about her battle plan. Despite there being nearly three hundred monsters waiting for them, she simply assigned each of the eight parties to a section of the battle line, and ordered a full assault. It was a brutal, straightforward approach that against a Pillar Guardian, or even other field bosses, would've been suicidal.

The DDA members, Kizmel could tell, thought that it still was.

Kirito, though, seemed unperturbed as he fell naturally into leading their own group of six unaffiliated clearers toward the east flank of the enemy line. “Look,” he said, as they started running across the hundred-meter gap between them and the mobs, “their cursors are practically pink. Sure, we're outnumbered six-to-one, but at those levels, this is more like a Musou game than a usual boss' adds. We probably won't even get much XP from these guys.”

Agil, one of four merchants who'd ended up teamed with them for the battle, nodded thoughtfully. “Okay, I can see that… Heh.” He grinned, spinning his axe lightly as they ran. “When you put it that way, guys like me should be the MVPs, right?”

“Mind explaining that in ways the rest of us can understand?” A brown-haired girl with a heavy mace, whose name Kizmel hadn't quite caught, rolled her eyes. “Some of have barely even heard of that series, y'know. I play MMOs, not hack and slash!”

…And sometimes, I still don't understand half of what they're saying, Kizmel thought ruefully. Though at least now I know why they speak so much of games.

“Means they're so weak each of us could probably take at least ten,” Agil told her. “And us big guys with polearms can make out like bandits with AoE.” He shot the girl another grin. “Hey, don't look so glum! You may not have the reach, but that mace'll knock 'em dead, you watch!”

“It better,” she grumbled. “Can't believe I was crazy enough to join this, but she said the drops were supposed to be really good mats…”

Kizmel wondered briefly who “she” was, but didn't have time to dwell on it. They'd crossed a lot of territory during the banter, and now they were just reaching the first rank of Lizardmen. With a yell, she drew back her saber and charged, the red streak of her Reaver cutting across the chest of one of them at the same time Kirito ripped into another with a quick Horizontal Arc.

To one side, Agil waded right into the fray with his axe, a wide, spinning sweep sending three
Lizardmen flying clear off their feet. The two other combative merchants who rounded out their group drove into the gap, one stabbing with a spear, the other dancing in with a wicked dagger.

When the macer darted in to smash Kizmel's own first target in the head with her warhammer, the elf felt a brief, painful moment of déjà vu. If Agil had used a staff instead of an axe, this would've been so much like...

No. The past is gone. Done is done. All we can do is make sure the sacrifices were not in vain.

Yelling again, Kizmel left the first Lizardman to the macer and followed Kirito in. “Switch!” she called out; he broke away from his foe, continuing on to the next, leaving her an opening to take the tall reptile in the throat. Gurgling, it staggered back, tried to rally, then succumbed to blue shards when her next thrust caught it in the snout.

She blocked the next Lizardman's Vertical with her shield, shoved at it, moved to take advantage of the momentary opening; fell back a pace, hissing in pain, as another got through and tried to take off her sword arm at the elbow. The offender soon flew back from the impact of a mace to its chest, though, and Kizmel quickly realized the injury was minor.

Kirito is right. They're weak. The only advantage they have is sheer numbers!

The next few moments were a blur of spinning steel, the ringing of swords-on-shields, and occasional high-pitched shattering. Here and there, there was a grunt or cry of surprised impact from her companions, and more than once she found herself wincing as a Lizardman got through her defenses, but armor and flesh both proved more than a match.

How the battle was going on overall was difficult to judge, busy as they all were. Through a brief gap in the fighting, though, Kizmel did see Asuna's team efficiently tearing apart a group of Warg Riders; nimbly dodging the jaws of one such monstrous wolf, her friend leapt clear off the ground to launch a midair Linear at its rider, while her comrades took the flanks. The simple but efficient—and blindingly-fast—thrust catapulted the Wood Goblin off its perch, slamming into the ground well behind with enough force to shatter it.

Beyond that, Kizmel caught a glimpse of Lind's party, which despite its leader's best efforts had gotten surrounded, having pushed too far, too fast. They were giving as good as they got, as individually superior to the goblins and Lizardmen as any of them, yet for every one they killed, it seemed as if there were two more, and the other DDA groups were too far out of position to help.

Somewhere in the midst of finishing off her group of Warg Riders, Asuna apparently saw the same thing, and raised a shout. “KoB Team B, reinforce Lind! Team C, help the solos at the east flank! KoB Team A will continue the advance!”

Lind will not be happy about that, Kizmel mused. I'm glad for the help, though. Returning her attention to her own battle, she bashed a dying Lizardman to the side, giving her room to unleashed a spinning Treble Scythe on a Lizard Knight that was bearing down on the brunette macer.

Skipping back a pace, the girl gave her a nervous smile. “Thanks for the save!”

“My pleasure.” The Lizard Knight was falling back, bleeding red particles, but it wasn't quite dead. As her skill's delay released her, Kizmel drew back her saber to finish the job—

“Gah!”

Kirito's cry of anguish changed her plans in an instant. Seeing her partner falling back from another Lizard Knight's yellow-dripping blade, limbs rigid, she felt a rush of anger. “Agil—!”
The axeman was by her side in a moment, heading for her current foe. “I got it, go!”

She didn't need to be told twice. Before Kirito could hit the ground, Kizmel charged in, saber held low to her left, pointed straight forward. Ignoring the sting from a passing goblin's blade against her cheek, she let the skill's charm take her as soon as she was close enough: the blazing crimson thrust of an Oblique, stabbing low and deep into the Knight's stomach, below its light chest armor.

Her blow finished what Kirito had obviously started, sending the reptile to the next life in a shower of azure shards.

Kizmel hardly noticed its death, nor that they'd managed to clear a gap in the enemy's lines. She just dropped to her knees by her partner's side, digging into a belt pouch as she went. *Oh, how I wish I could see vitality directly, as the Swordmasters do!* “Kirito! Are you all right?”

He actually managed a small grin, looking up at her. “Yeah… that thing didn't hit that hard. I, uh… just can't move. They really do have paralysis attacks…”

“Just a moment, then.” She finally found what she was after, and pulled the antidote bottle's cap with furious haste. Carefully lifting Kirito's head with her free hand, she poured the drink into his mouth.

It wasn't as prompt as the effects of the still-rare crystals she'd sometimes seen Swordmasters use, but in just a few moments Kirito's limbs slackened from their rigor. “That's better… Thanks.” He glanced up at something she couldn't see, then, and his smile vanished. “Kizmel! You're poisoned!”

“Eh?” Kizmel blinked, only then noticing the faint burning in a line across her face, spreading deeper into her body. “Ah. That goblin—”

“Take five, guys. We got time.” Agil shouldered his axe, leading his fellow merchants and the macer girl over. “KoB's coming to help; we can take a minute for POT rotation. Take care of that poison, first.”

She nodded, and with a brief moment of focused will the ring on her finger flared brightly, its charm cleansing the poison before it could eat further at her body. “Ah. That gooblin—”

“Take five, guys. We got time.” Agil shouldered his axe, leading his fellow merchants and the macer girl over. “KoB's coming to help; we can take a minute for POT rotation. Take care of that poison, first.”

She nodded, and with a brief moment of focused will the ring on her finger flared brightly, its charm cleansing the poison before it could eat further at her body.

Something flew toward her, and she reflexively reached up to catch it: a potion bottle, tossed by the macer who was now opening one for herself. “I owe you for earlier,” the girl said. “Thanks again… Kizmel, right?”

“Yes.” Kizmel took a long drink from the medicine, realizing only then that as weak as their foes were, she had taken a number of minor wounds in the last ten minutes or so. The sudden absence of stings and aches was very welcome indeed. “I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name…?”

“Lisbeth,” the macer said, dropping inelegantly to the ground. “Master macer and blacksmith.” She glanced over at the continuing battle, her gaze lingering on The Hobgoblin, who so far had remained at the rear of the enemy force. “Those shields… supposedly, that's some great metal for smithing. That's what I'm here for.”

“Better hope it drops them, then. Besides, first we have to actually kill it,” Kirito pointed out.

“We just smashed like a full raid party of the adds ourselves,” Lisbeth retorted. “I think we're doing pretty well. Besides…” Her eyes turned to the slight figure in white and red, directing the center of the assault. “*She's* leading the attack. We'll beat it.” The macer's eyes flashed. “So let's hurry and get back on our feet! I don't wanna miss out the drops because we didn't even land a hit on the boss!”
The battle had, so far, been less frightening than Kirito had expected. Not that he'd been worried about getting through it himself, exactly—this many floors up, field bosses were a known risk—but when Asuna had casually assigned him and Kizmel to a party that included a couple of people who hadn't previously been clearers at all, his first thought had been of the Black Cats.

She'd more or less given him a peremptory command, though, and there hadn't been time before the battle to argue. And so far, he thought, sword whirling in a Horizontal Square against one of the last Warg Riders guarding The Hobgoblin, it seems to be working out okay.

After all, this time it wasn't just him and Kizmel with a team of low-level players. Agil and another of the merchants had been participating in clearing since the very first floors, and the feisty macer girl was more than pulling her own weight. Even the last of the merchants—whose name Kirito still hadn't found time to look for, despite being in the same party—was holding his own with his spear.

*We just need to hold on a little longer,* he thought, as Lisbeth smashed a goblin right off its mount with a simple but brutal Hammerblow to the chest. *We're almost—there!*

“Teams KoB and DDA A, advance on the boss!” Asuna shouted over the din of battle. “Solo team, you're with us! Everyone else, hold off the remaining adds!”

Lind tore the head off a Lizard Knight with a vicious Horizontal Arc from his scimitar, then whipped around to look at her. “Why split our forces now?!” he demanded. “Better to concentrate them—”

“We can only hit the boss from the flanks!” she snapped back. “Too many of us, and we'll just get in each other's way; we need to take turns, and there's no sense putting everyone in the rotation!”

Kirito could see that the DDA guildmaster didn't like that, but he personally agreed. Against a floor boss, it would make sense to rotate everyone in and out, to better keep up with healing needs; against a field boss, especially one whose true strength was in its adds, it was better to use the extra manpower to keep from being surrounded.

*Lind is just mad his people get less of a chance at glory, that's all.* Ignoble thought, but for all that he believed Lind was sincere in wanting to lead the players to victory for their own sake, he was also pretty sure the man was as much a glory hound as Diavel had been, just in a different way.

He was following orders anyway, though, and soon the player teams that had started to converge dispersed again, leaving only the lead groups of each guild and Kirito's motley crew of solos advancing on The Hobgoblin directly.

Mounted on a Warg even bigger than those used by the Wood Goblins, The Hobgoblin was itself like a Wood Goblin scaled up to match: dark green, seemingly made of muscles, wearing a hodgepodge of metal armor plates and an ugly smirk made uglier by its goblin-ish face. So far, the hideous monster had been content to let its minions take on the Swordmasters—and die in droves.

Now that they were approaching it directly, though, The Hobgoblin suddenly kicked its Warg with both heels, spurring the giant wolf into motion. It leapt forward, jaws snapped at Asuna; she dodged nimbly sideways, but at the same time, The Hobgoblin itself swung its shields out to the sides.

She managed to duck under. Hafner of the Divine Dragons wasn't so lucky, taking one of the huge, round pieces of steel in the face. With a yelp, he went flying back, bowling over another of his team along the way.

The Hobgoblin had to bring its shields back in right after that, though. Asuna had recovered from her evasion, and with a shout unleashed the four rapid thrusts of Quadruple Pain into the Giant Warg's
flank. At the same time, Kirito and Kizmel tore into it from the other side; the elf's Reaver cut a long red line in the Warg's side, while Kirito's Sonic Leap drove his blade into The Hobgoblin's back.

With a cry of “Switch!” Lisbeth darted in, daring to smash at The Hobgoblin herself—only to be rebuffed when, recoiling from the last hit, the brute swung around to interpose one of its huge shields. A loud clang heralded the meeting of mace and shield, and she was flung back by the recoil.

Agil's axe swung into the gap then. Not even trying to get past The Hobgoblin's shields, he aimed for one of its legs, the head of his axe biting deep; it howled in pain, and he was forced to leap back from the snapping jaws of the Warg.

Those jaws were rebuffed in turn by Agil's lancer friend, and in the moment of time that bought them their knife salesman jumped in to nick the beast's ear. He was promptly swatted with a shield the size of a table, but managed to roll with the blow, unlike poor Hafner.

It was quickly clear to Kirito that the reports had been right: The Hobgoblin's real strength was in the size of its army. Once enough of the adds had been cleared away to let the players focus on the main target, it was swiftly overwhelmed by numbers in turn.

Here Kirito himself lunged in with a Snake Bite, trying to take off one of the Hobgoblin's legs; there, Kizmel and Lisbeth teamed up to batter the Giant Warg, while from the other side members of the DDA and KoB jostled for position and unleashed their own skills where there was time and room.

The HP bars of both wolf and rider were sizable, despite their relatively low levels. Even so, after a few minutes of relentless pounding, chopping, and stabbing, the Giant Warg let out a howl, made a last half-hearted effort to bite Lind's hand off, and collapsed. After a death rattle that Kirito found entirely too convincing, the beast shattered to pieces.

A moment before its mount succumbed, though, The Hobgoblin let out a roar of its own and leapt clear, landing on the ground with enough force to send Swordmasters stumbling. The shield in its right hand started to glow a bright azure, and it drew back its arm—

*Not good!*

On the bright side, Kirito reflected as the world spun around him, he now had empirical evidence that he was at a high enough level to attempt the labyrinth clearing, when they got that far. The flung shield that had sent him rolling across the ground had only taken off around a quarter of his HP; not nearly as bad as he'd feared.

Besides, now he had a *great* view of Asuna and Kizmel trying to stab the brute to death, while Lind and Agil took turns keeping the sword it had drawn in check, and Lisbeth did her dead-level best to smash its remaining shield to the ground.

The fact that pretty much nobody else could find an opening to get attacks in of their own *almost* made up for the fact that, by the time Kirito shook off the Tumble and sprang back to his feet, there was no more chance to get the LA Bonus himself. He rushed back to the fight as quickly as he could, but he could see The Hobgoblin's last HP bar draining fast, overwhelmed by so many attacks from all angles.

Poor Lisbeth was sent reeling from another rebuffed Hammerblow, but that was The Hobgoblin's last gasp at vengeance. Kizmel took the chance to actually jump *on* the shield, using it as a platform from which to drive her saber in a brutal Fell Crescent to the face.

The Hobgoblin froze in place, while the elf gracefully back-flipped off the shield to land lightly on
the ground. Then, with a mournful groan, it followed its mount into fragmented death.

In the aftermath of the battle, with evening falling, the raid gathered around a large bonfire in the center of the clearing. With everyone worn out by the battle, and a fair bit of meat dropped as loot by the lesser monsters, it was decided that a giant barbecue would be a good way to unwind, while they all took stock of the various rewards from the battle.

Kirito wished that Asuna could’ve spent some time with his party, but she ended up having to mediate several disputes between the KoB and DDA players; at the same time, the two merchants he didn't know very well had gone off with a handful of crafters who'd turned up after the battle to discuss the merits of the drops they’d gotten.

That did still leave him with Kizmel, Agil, and the macer Lisbeth, at least, and Argo had shown up as well—to kibitz, as nearly as he could tell, but that was Argo.

“That wasn’t as scary as I thought it'd be,” Lisbeth commented, sitting cross-legged as she checked over her own share of the raid’s rewards. “I’ve been training up to come to the frontlines, ’cause I heard some really good stuff is starting to show up, but man… I was worried.”

“The front's no place for amateurs,” Agil agreed, around a mouthful of roasted Warg meat. “I think you did pretty good, though. Just gotta learn more about fighting guys with shields.”

“Like it's my fault that one had shields as big as my dinner table?” The macer shook her head. “Eh, I don't care… I got the metal I wanted, anyway.” She directed a grin at the group at large. “Any of you guys in the market for a new weapon? I can't wait to try this stuff out.”

“I believe I'm doing well enough for now, thank you.” Kizmel lifted the glittering saber she'd gotten as Last Attack bonus to the dying sunlight; it had a simpler hilt than some swords she'd wielded, but the Damascus-like wavy patterns in the blade spoke well of its quality. Kirito suspected that the “Eldhi Arc” would last at least a couple of floors—maybe more, if properly upgraded.

_I guess the most important thing is that it gets us through the Reliquary quest_, he thought, lying back on the grass, head pillowed on his hands. _There's still the Trial of the Strong, and I can't imagine getting to the Reliquary itself is going to be a piece of cake. Not if I'm right about what we're going to find at the end of it._

...Well, if we do, I certainly won't be jealous about missing one LA bonus. Not much. ...Hm? That's strange. Argo hasn't said anything yet... Why is she grinning like that?

“Ah, Kirito,” Kizmel began, before he could pursue his unsettling realization. “I meant to say this as soon as we claimed victory… Happy birthday.”

“Eh?” Kirito sat up, blinking. “Wait, is it…?” He thought about it, and blinked again. “I guess that is today… Thanks?”

Lisbeth glanced between them, seeming only now to notice that Kizmel wasn't exactly a normal clearer. “Speaking of things that maybe should've been said earlier,” she started, “uh… am I missing something…?”

“Wait a second,” Kirito interrupted, too distracted by another thought to pay much attention to her question. “Kizmel… How did you even know about that? I mean, I probably should've mentioned it at some point, but it completely slipped my mind…”

“Ah, that.” Kizmel shrugged. “I bought the information from Argo, of course.”
Of course. Not that I have any idea how she knew that either, but she's the Rat; I probably slipped up and said something ages ago, and never noticed... Hey, waiiiiitt a second...

“...How did you pay for it?” he asked warily. “You don't use Cor...”

“Perhaps 'bought' isn't the right word,” she admitted with a casual shrug. “Rather, Argo said she owed me a single answer, in return for... how did she put it? Ah, yes, a 'prime opportunity'.”

Feeling a sudden sense of sheer dread, Kirito turned, very slowly, to face Argo. “…What kind of 'opportunity'?”

The Rat grinned broadly—the look of someone who'd been just waiting for a punchline to go off—and withdrew a small object from a belt pouch. Shaped like a diamond with a red light near one point, Kirito had seldom seen the item type before, but he knew a recording crystal when he saw one. “Y'know, Kii-bou, you really oughtta get Kii-chan a bikini sometime. That lake would totally have been more fun that way, dontcha think?”

“...Argo....!”

Chapter End Notes

Ghosts and squids and a Water Temple, oh my... Who can say about Kayaba's reasoning in-universe, but my own bad experiences with Zelda dungeons certainly heavily influenced this one.

Don't suppose anyone recognizes the name of Kizmel's new blade?
“Well,” Kirito remarked, staring at what awaited them in the final chamber, “I… guess I should've expected something like this. Kind of.”

“It is closer to what you assumed would be at the end of the first Trial,” Kizmel agreed. “And the inscription outside was blunt about what quality would be needed here.” Drawing her new saber, Eldhi Arc, she shot him a rueful glance. “I suppose we were lulled into complacency?”

The path to the Trial of the Strong had been a straightforward one, with none of the swamp nor awkward swim of the route to the Trial of the Wise. Out beyond Ilden, where they'd first gotten word of the quest from Argo, the mobs along the way had been strong, but the two of them had leveled up and improved their equipment enough for it not to be as dangerous as the first trip.

Kirito should've been suspicious when they reached the Trial's dungeon. A simple tower, reaching a full seventy-five meters into the air—taller even than the dungeon that had ended the Black Cats—the inscription before its now-familiar barred gate had spoken plainly that strength was what would be important inside, not wits. True to the warning, they'd found nothing more confusing than locked doors during the ascent—locked doors, and some of the strongest mobs Kirito had fought outside of a full party quest.

Foolishly, he'd still assumed that, after passing through the Swordmaster and Dark Elf-specific doors at the top, they would once again be met by ghosts asking questions, which while emotionally difficult wouldn't have been life-threatening.

Instead, at the center of a circular room altogether too similar to the one which had held The Commandant, a giant knight in black armor stood before them. At least three times Kirito's height, its head was bowed over hands clasped on the pommel of a sword big enough to walk on, and the name beneath its blood-red cursor—just above a full three life bars—was The Gatekeeper.

“Look on the bright side,” Kirito said now, drawing his own blade. “At least we don't have to argue with this Trial, right?”

Kizmel shook her head. “To think the day would come when I would prefer a battle to the death…” She was smiling, though, and she added, “But prefer it, I do. Let's go, my friend.”

“Right with you.”

Resolutely, they advanced on The Gatekeeper at a cautious pace, unsure of when it would take notice of them and attack. At first, it seemed oblivious to them; only when they passed within five meters of the armored giant did its head lift, and fiery red light flared to life behind its helmet's visor.

“At last, you've come,” it rumbled, the voice about making Kirito jump in the air. “Untold years have I waited here, for those who would seek to uphold ancient treaty. Come here, have you, to claim the final key?”
“We have,” Kizmel replied, far less ruffled than her partner. “We are here to prove our strength, and open the path to the Reliquary.”

“Hah! A bold claim, Knight of Lyusula. Well, to have come this far, you've proven your wit, and your willingness to sacrifice for victory. Fine, then. Test your swords against mine, Elf and Swordmaster, and see if you've the right to the legacy of the ancients!”

The Gatekeeper lifted his sword then, swinging the heavy blade with frightening speed up to salute them. Kizmel brought up Eldhi Arc in return, followed belatedly by Kirito. The pose held for a moment—then The Gatekeeper took two long steps forward and swung his sword down, a heavy diagonal blow aiming to cut down both clearers in an instant.

They leapt to the sides at once, then charged forward together. “Kizmel, remember the Black Knights!” Kirito shouted, bringing his blade up to begin a simple Slant. “I don't know if we can knock his armor off, but the basic idea—”

“Understood!” Kizmel had likewise drawn back her sword, and together they unleashed their skills on The Gatekeeper's legs; Kirito's Slant taking the knight in the right knee, her Fell Crescent biting into his left thigh.

Both blades rebounded after penetrating only a short way through the heavy armor, but it was enough to make The Gatekeeper stagger. Improbably, once the brief wobble had passed, he actually chuckled; a deep, booming sound that sent a chill down Kirito's spine. “Yes, very good! But—do not be too hasty, young knights!”

It wasn't hard to guess what was coming next, and as large as he was, The Gatekeeper's every move was telegraphed before he made it. Even so, Kirito was startled by the sheer speed with which the huge knight spun around; had he and Kizmel not kept right on going after their first attack, they would've been instantly hit by The Gatekeeper's sword as it whistled through the air.

As it was, they were pushed back just from the pressure of the blade swinging close, prompting them to dodge back several paces, then break to either side to get around him again.

*He only has the one sword,* Kirito thought, hurriedly ducking as The Gatekeeper's sword came around again and nearly took off his head. *If we keep to either side, he can't go after both of us at once. We just need to watch out for AoE—and if he uses usual Two-Handed Sword skills for that, I'll be able to predict him.*

It was a trick that had worked for him before, after all. It hadn't saved Diavel, but no one else had died after Kirito began anticipating Illfang's pattern.

He and Kizmel had gotten in another solid hit each to The Gatekeeper's legs when the knight suddenly crouched, zweihander held out low to one side. Unlike the wide swings he'd used before, this careful stance lit up his blade with gleaming red, the clear sign of a Sword Skill about to be unleashed.

“Fall back!” Kirito yelled, instantly aborting the pre-motion he'd begun for a Vertical Arc. “He's starting a Cyclone—!”

His warning was a little late. Though he managed to leap back himself, Kizmel's blade had already lit up, past the point of canceling her attack. Yet instead of trying to pit her slender saber against The Gatekeeper's zweihander—trying to use her own skill to cancel out his, as Kirito might've done—she lunged forward, adding her own motion to the skill. The normally stationary Treble Scythe took her two steps toward The Gatekeeper, the spinning of her blade adding to her own momentum.
Against an opponent of equal height, it just would’ve gotten her smashed around by The Gatekeeper's arms instead of his sword. Given his sheer size, though, those two steps took her under his attack entirely, while simultaneously increasing her attack's power by striking both legs, effectively doubling the number of hits from the skill.

The Cyclone whirled The Gatekeeper's blade around in a complete circle an instant later, missing Kirito's face by a comfortable half-meter and going completely over the Dark Elf's head. She didn't get off completely unscathed, though; the full spin meant his legs were moving, too, and the circling step tripped her, then sent her sprawling to the side with a grunt of pain.

"Kizmel!" The moment the Cyclone was over, leaving a brief interval in which The Gatekeeper was immobile, Kirito charged back in, resuming his interrupted Vertical Arc. With the knight still crouched, the down-then-up slash carved a V into The Gatekeeper's torso; though more heavily armored than his legs, the location allowed for a more satisfactory chunk of his first HP bar to vanish.

"I'm all right!" The words came out in a cough, but Kizmel had already rolled away under her own power and made it up to her knees. “The injury is not serious!"

Taking a moment to glance at her HP in his HUD, Kirito was relieved to see she was right. It shouldn't have even surprised him, really, given that it was only a minor impact, but he was jumpier than usual; this battlefield reminded him entirely too much of the one that had killed three of his friends.

He didn't have much time to brood, though. The Gatekeeper had recovered as swiftly as Kizmel, and Kirito found himself having to hurriedly sidestep an Avalanche that would've cut him clean in two. Snarling wordlessly, his response was the vicious side-to-side of a Snake Bite; only half of the rushed skill managed to connect, tracing a deep red line in The Gatekeeper's arm, but Kizmel's Linear from behind more or less made up for the lack.

“Clever!” The Gatekeeper boomed, sounding as jovial as he had at the start. “I see that my squires would have been no match for you, as you climbed my Tower! But—how long can you endure, young knights?”

The next moments of frantic slashing, cutting, dodging, and parrying made that a question Kirito was wondering about, too. The Gatekeeper was so large that it was nearly impossible for the clearers to miss with any attack, but by the same token the boss' strikes, while easily predicted, were simply so large as to be difficult to avoid.

And, like Illfang all those months ago, The Gatekeeper was far faster than anything his size had any right to be.

Direct hits from The Gatekeeper's sword would've been fatal in just a few blows. They managed to mostly avoid that, but on the occasions when he had to block instead of dodge, Kirito found himself worrying almost as much; catching and turning aside another Avalanche on his sword, he winced at the way his HP was ground away.

He did more than wince when The Gatekeeper took one hand off his sword's hilt to drive his elbow back into Kizmel. Having just finished carving up his back again with another Treble Scythe, she'd been caught in a recovery period; she came out of it in time to roll with the hit instead of taking it full-on, but it still sent her reeling, HP dropping down into the yellow.

Kirito's response was to leap onto The Gatekeeper's sword to slash the inverted triangle of a Sharp Nail into the huge knight's helmet; though the boss' own stumble forced him to jump awkwardly back to the floor, it was enough to buy Kizmel time to get back on her feet and down a healing
potion. She kept back to the edge of the room for several moments then, letting her health creep back up to safe levels while Kirito kept The Gatekeeper busy.

It was a good call, Kirito was soon certain. Before long it was her turn to run interference for him after a botched parry against a Horizontal Crush left him flying across the room, HP dropping alarmingly. Then, right about when they were both back in comfortable health again, they managed to finish off The Gatekeeper's first lifebar.

By this point, Kirito was really hoping this would be the last boss of the Reliquary quest. As soon as they were into the second lifebar, The Gatekeeper's tactics changed, throwing more Martial Arts skills into the mix; the sword skills had been bad enough before they started having to worry about being kicked at bad moments.

Somehow, they still endured. The Gatekeeper was powerful, but clearly balanced for a two-person party of about their level. While it had gotten a little faster along with the changed moveset, the actual skills used were nothing Kirito hadn't seen from other enemies in the past.

Even if having his Savage Fulcrum countered by the truly improbable sight of a several-meter-tall armored knight pulling off the Crescent Moon's backflip startled Kirito into momentary immobility from sheer disbelief. The way Kizmel took the wind out of The Gatekeeper's sails by catching him in the back with a Fell Crescent midair, dropping him with a resounding crash to the stone floor, made it all worth it.

They endured. Half an hour into the battle, they even took The Gatekeeper down to his last lifebar—at which point he let out a loud, booming laugh. "Yes, yes! Excellent, young knights! You are so close—so let me give you one final challenge!"

Naturally, that was when two Black Knights, “only” wearing their lighter chainmail armor and slimmer swords, burst into the room through concealed side doors.

…I'm really starting to hate this quest.

The second Black Knight's head flew away, shattering into oblivion, and Kizmel took the brief moments of immobility following the fatal Sword Skill to catch her breath. Missing the heavy armor that the pair they'd fought days before had worn, these two had been much easier to deal with, but between them and The Gatekeeper, she was beginning to tire.

This is supposed to be the last trial, she reminded herself, turning back to face The Gatekeeper. At the least, we should be able to rest for a short time after this—once we've finished him, at any rate.

She and Kirito had spent the last five minutes in a mad dance around the room, whittling down the Black Knights while trying not to be flattened by The Gatekeeper's enormous blade; once each, they'd had to pull back and use potions to recover again. Just now, with one Black Knight remaining, Kizmel had been dealing with it, while Kirito kept The Gatekeeper occupied. Now they could refocus on the greater threat.

“Almost got him!” Kirito yelled out to her as she ran back to join him. “Just—a little—more!”

Not for the first time, Kizmel found herself envying the Swordmasters' ability to judge a foe's life force at a glance. For now, though, she took his word for it, and launched into a Fell Crescent to cover the last of the distance while he countered an Avalanche from The Gatekeeper with a strong skill of his own. The leaping skill took her high enough into the air to slash her saber in a deep cut along the knight's chest, then carried her on past just ahead of an elbow strike.
Kirito's skill had won out against the Avalanche, and in the moment before The Gatekeeper could recover, he darted ahead to hit the back of the knight's right ankle with a brutally-quick Horizontal Arc. At the same time, Kizmel spun around from where her last attack had landed her and drove a Linear deep into his other leg, trying to match her partner's hamstringing attack.

Somewhat to Kizmel's surprise, The Gatekeeper let out a loud grunt and dropped to his knees, bracing himself against the floor with both hands. Kirito took immediate advantage, using the opportunity to trace the Savage Fulcrum's gleaming “4” into The Gatekeeper's stomach; wasting little time herself, Kizmel threw herself into the Treble Scythe's spin to inflict a similarly deep set of wounds into his back.

The Gatekeeper choked. “You are powerful indeed!” he got out, breathing audibly labored now. “Perhaps you are indeed worthy of the final Key! But—it is not over yet, young knights!”

Shoving himself up, The Gatekeeper unexpectedly spun while still on one knee, a low, whirling kick that forced both clearers back; Kizmel took it on her shield, but was still staggered, while Kirito turned it into an awkward leap that he only barely managed to land from with any semblance of control. Then, propped up on one foot and one knee, The Gatekeeper swept his sword out to the side, parallel to the floor, where it took on a bright golden gleam.

Kizmel didn't recognize the motion, and from the look on his face, neither did Kirito. Probably, she thought, it would've been akin to the Cyclone The Gatekeeper had used earlier, only stronger—if he had had the chance to unleash it.

The strike the massive knight had clearly intended to buy time for it, though, hadn't been quite good enough. Before he could release the power he was building up, Kizmel was using the distance his own attack had forced on her for the run-up to a Flashing Penetrator. Likewise, Kirito had simply immediately rebounded from his awkward landing, and came down on The Gatekeeper's sword again, his own blade already glowing; he'd barely touched down when he was leaping forward again, drawn by the charm channeled through his blade.

Kizmel's Flashing Penetrator drove hard into The Gatekeeper's back, hitting a single point with such force that his armor cracked and broke apart. Kirito's Sonic Leap carved a bright red line in an arc down his faceplate, taking part of the helmet clear off.

They each landed more or less where the other had started, and for a moment there was only silence. Then the golden glow faded from The Gatekeeper's sword, and he slowly began to chuckle. “…”

Eons I have been here, waiting for someone to try and fulfill the ancient pact. Ages of nothing but waiting… and now my duty stands complete. Your strength is impressive, young knights—and your bond more so. Two in less than harmony could not have bested me.

“This victory is yours, young ones. Take the proof of your Strength, and seek the Reliquary. What you find there will have its price, but you have proven your ability to shoulder the burdens. … Farewell, young knights.”

With a last, quiet laugh, The Gatekeeper shattered into azure shards, scattering to the edges of the room and vanishing. Left behind was nothing but silence, and a pair of pendants that slowly sank to the floor where the huge knight had ended his long duty.

Heaving a deep sigh, Kirito flourished his sword and slid it back into its scabbard. “Well, that was a bit more exciting than I expected,” he remarked. “So… which of us got the Last Attack bonus?”
Kizmel sheathed her own blade, shaking her head. “You worry about this now? Your priorities are sometimes very odd, my friend… I think you struck the final blow, barely, although I'm unsure if that had any significance in this battle. The real reward, after all, lies before us.”

“True.”

The two of them walked up to where The Gatekeeper had been, and each picked up one of the ruby pendants that had been left behind. Simple, unadorned jewels, yet Kizmel could feel a subtle power from them; The Gatekeeper had referred to them as keys, and she could easily believe their power would open some final lock.

“I doubt there is anything more to be done here,” she said, slipping the chain of her Strength Pendant around her neck. “Shall we return to Fort Renya, and consult with Countess Ryella?”

“Yeah.” Kirito frowned, sweeping his hand to bring up his ethereal map. “We're probably close to finding the boss room in the labyrinth; the sooner we find the Reliquary, the better. I don't want to be late for a Floor Boss.”

“Nor I.” Kizmel raised her hand for the Swordmasters' traditional “high-five”, and smiled as his hand met hers. “Let's go then, Kirito, and finish this quest—before it finishes us.”

Though they'd visited Fort Renya briefly since beginning the quest, in order to wash off the muck they'd accumulated during the conquest of the Trial of Wisdom, this was the first time they'd been back to the central tower in those five days. The office at the top was bathed in afternoon light from its wide windows when the two clearers entered, and Countess Ryella was waiting for them.

She stood as they entered, gaze immediately going to the pendants they wore. “Welcome back, Lady Kizmel, Swordmaster Kirito. I see your efforts have brought you victory over the Trials. Congratulations on passing them; I suspect they were not easy.”

Kirito shrugged his shoulders uneasily, remembering the questions that had been directed at both himself and his partner in the first two trials. If he was honest, as irritating as The Gatekeeper had been, it had still been less of a pain to face something they could just stab until it died. “We managed, Milady,” he said simply.

“Obviously. Well, now that you have returned with proof of your worth, the time has come to fulfill the last of my duty here.” Ryella gestured for them to sit, lowering herself back into her own chair as they did. Resting her elbows on her desk, she clasped her hands under her chin and continued, “How much have you learned about the Reliquary, during the Trials?”

“Very little,” Kizmel admitted after a brief glance at Kirito. “The Trials themselves gave only vague warnings of what price we might be expected to pay for the Reliquary's contents. Kirito tells me that Swordmaster legends suggest a powerful weapon lies within, but those legends have proven to be… imprecise, at best.”

Ryella nodded, apparently unsurprised. “There is truth in both, but that is far from the full story. There is, indeed, a powerful weapon kept within the Reliquary: the Baneblade, a sword forged in the days before the Great Separation by Dark Elven smiths for the Swordmasters of the day, during a time when our peoples were allied. Even after all this time, I expect it remains quite strong—but be warned, Swordmaster Kirito. The nature of its power is likely to draw attention to you, possibly very unwelcome attention.”

Why can't anything be simple? I should've known “Diavel” wasn't just spouting flavor text… “What do you mean, Milady?” Kirito asked aloud, not at all sure he wanted to hear the answer.
“The Baneblade is a well-made sword in its own right,” she told him. “Even without invoking its ancient magic, it is deadly against the monsters that roam the Steel Castle. However, it was forged as a weapon specifically against evil, and so it is linked to the charms that protect human lands from their own criminals. According to my family's lore, the Baneblade's edge will be felt most keenly by those who have been marked as outcasts by those charms.”

He mentally translated that into game-logic, and found himself wincing. In other words, this "Baneblade" has a damage bonus against orange players. It's a PvP weapon—in a game where PvP is literally murder. She's right, if people find out I have something like that…

Well, there were some who'd probably approve; after all, orange players were criminals, right? “Nice” people didn't turn orange at all, and those who did were dangerous, so it would only help if there was someone who had an advantage against them… That was probably how certain people would see it. And at the same time, it'll make me the target of every orange player there is.

A double-edged sword, for sure. Yet Kirito remembered Morte, and the murder of Naga, and couldn't bring himself to try and back out of the quest now.

Ryella seemed to see something in his eyes—or maybe her AI was just programmed to accept silence as an adequate response in that context—because she nodded slowly, and turned her attention to Kizmel. “The Baneblade is not, however, the only artifact within the Reliquary. Tell me, Lady Kizmel, have you ever heard tales of elves granted the charms of Swordmasters?”

“Viscount Yofilis mentioned the idea to me some months ago, yes,” Kizmel replied, tilting her head thoughtfully. “Though he was unsure if there was any truth to it, and if so, how it might've been accomplished.”

“Well, the tales are indeed true. I do not believe it has occurred since the Great Separation, but ages ago such alliances were indeed made.” Ryella leaned forward, a small smile playing at her lips. “There were, in those times, two ways in which a Dark Elf might receive Mystic Scribing, and all it entails—the first being to marry a Swordmaster.”

Kirito choked. MARRY?! I know what I said that one time, but it was just the only thing I could think of to say instead of what I was really thinking, and it was just as stupid then, and…! He shot a glance at Kizmel, and immediately regretted it; though she was amply covered by her armor just then, he couldn't help but remember what she looked like coming out of a lake in just her singlet—not to mention the times they'd shared a bath, the first of which having been before she had any clue about human standards of modesty.

Then there was her casual ease with physical contact. Though she'd once mentioned, not long after they met, that her people didn't touch often, Kizmel had shown no issues at all; from early on, it had been the elf girl's habit to hug him and Asuna both, in greeting and farewell.

He'd have been lying if he claimed he hadn't enjoyed it, even if—as close to a hikikomori as he'd been before SAO—he still had trouble getting used to it. And she was certainly a lot of fun to be around, on top of being a reliable battle partner—but—

MARRY?! That's—I'm only—urk!

Realizing he was getting completely off-track—and staring—Kirito wrenched his eyes away from his partner; although not before he caught a glimpse of her looking briefly at him, a faint but noticeable blush on her face. “Ah,” Kizmel began with a cough, “I believe that would require Her Majesty's permission, Milady. Unless you've already heard from the capital…?"
He was saved from having to wonder about her odd tone of voice by Ryella's quiet chuckle. “You are correct, Lady Kizmel—mostly. In any case, that method is no longer available; no Swordmaster remains with the knowledge to invoke the charm in such a ceremony. There is, however, another way: the invocation of the Treaty of the Three Races.”

Desperate to get the subject far away from marriage as quickly as possible, Kirito hastily put in, “Treaty of the Three Races, Milady?”

“A treaty signed between the Nine Kingdoms of Man, the Forest Elves, and the Dark Elves,” Ryella explained, “when the Fallen became a threat to us all in an ancient era. A small group of warriors chosen from all three were gathered, and granted the powers and weapons of each. The Baneblade dates back to this conflict, and within the Reliquary lies a copy of the original manuscript. When the oath recounted there is sworn, the ancient Treaty is invoked, and the elf is granted the Swordmasters' power.”

Kizmel leaned forward, literally on the edge of her chair. “Such a thing exists, Milady?” she said, sounding more eager than Kirito had ever heard her.

“It does, Lady Kizmel. However,” Ryella cautioned, lifting a hand warningly, “as with the Baneblade, invoking that treaty is not without cost. If you do so… you will no longer be counted as a Pagoda Knight, nor indeed a Knight of Lyusula at all. You will still be welcome within our borders, but you will be counted as a Swordmaster—a friend, yes, but only that.” Her gaze and tone were both somber, staring deep into Kizmel's eyes. “If you seek power to aid the liberation of the Steel Castle, Lady Kizmel, you will find it in the Reliquary. You must, however, be prepared for the cost.”

For a moment, his partner was still, and silent. Then she took a long, deep breath, and settled back into her chair. “I understand, Milady,” she said quietly. “I… had suspected such a thing already, actually.”

_She had? Oh, right; that was what her test back in the first Trial was, wasn't it? But… is she really okay with this? Of course, it's not like she's even suggested taking a break to go home since she teamed up with me, but still…_

Ryella considered the two of them for a moment, then nodded once more. “In that case, I have nothing further to say on the matter. Lady Kizmel, Swordmaster Kirito, you will find the Reliquary on the northwest edge of this floor, beyond the Lethe Forest. Once you have found your way through the forest, the pendants you bear will open the final locks. Then you must make your choices. For myself… my duty ends here.”

“Thank you for your assistance, Countess Ryella,” Kizmel said formally, coming to her feet. “We'll take our leave, then.”

Kirito echoed the sentiment and went to follow his partner out of the office—but just as he was about to step out, Ryella called out to him one more time. “Swordmaster Kirito? If Lady Kizmel does, indeed, choose to walk the same path as the Swordmasters… please, take care of her.”

“Oh, of course,” he said, without hesitation. “She's my friend. I won't let anything happen to her. I promise.”

_October 9th, 2023_

When they passed through Mydo again the next morning, heading northwest for the Lethe Forest, Kizmel could see that she and Kirito weren't alone in believing that the battle to completely clear the Thirty-Seventh Floor would soon be upon them. There were more Swordmasters in town than usual,
and the merchants were doing brisk business; Agil in particular, she noticed, was making quite a profit, his wares' quality attracting customers despite his cutthroat practices.

Perhaps more telling, she caught sight of the blacksmith girl they'd worked with against The Hobgoblin's forces with a long line at her stall, many Swordmasters obviously wishing to prepare themselves for what was to come.

*Kirito and I should probably seek her out as well, when we've returned from the Reliquary,* Kizmel thought, sparing Lisbeth a quick nod as they passed. *My new blade is still fresh, but Kirito's hasn't been maintained since we began this quest…*

An idle thought, though important, but she knew she was using it to distract herself. She kept her focus on her surroundings anyway, for as long as she could; after they'd passed Lind and his Divine Dragons at the northern edge of Mydo, though, and passed onto the trails leading to more dangerous places, she had to admit to herself the truth.

Watching the Swordmasters go about their business, readying themselves for battle, was simply easier than facing up to the choice she was going to have to make, when they reached the Reliquary. It was something she'd known in her heart was coming from the moment Diavel's shade hinted at it, and she thought she'd already made her decision, but actually facing the reality was proving to be harder than she had believed.

Kizmel could tell that Kirito was preoccupied, as well. As they turned from the trail leading to the labyrinth onto a side path to the northwest, he'd still said almost nothing since they'd set out. Even when they were attacked midway by a pair of Sabertooth Jaguars, the only sound he made was a wordless battlecry, before cutting the first clean in half.

After they'd finished the now-minor foes and resumed their trek, Kizmel finally cleared her throat, unwilling to let the silence continue. "Do you have any idea what this 'Lethe Forest' is likely to have in store for us, Kirito? You looked as if you recognized the name, when Countess Ryella brought it up."

Kirito started, then looked at her with a rueful smile. "Eh? Oh… Kind of. I've never heard of 'Lethe' as a forest, but it's also the name of a river in the underworld of a human mythology. It's supposed to make anyone who drinks it forget… well, everything. Put together with everything else that's been going on, I've got a pretty good idea of what kind of problems we'll have with this forest."

She thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "Ah. Much like the Forest of Wavering Mists, then. We should expect some difficulty finding our path?"

"Pretty sure, yeah," he agreed. "Depending on the version of the story, there's a trick to finding the right path… which I hope we can figure out soon, because I think we're here."

Kizmel stopped as soon as he did, seeing the stark difference between the forest they'd been walking through and what lay ahead of them. The dark wood of the trees behind them was a fairly normal mix; ahead, divided by an invisible but obvious boundary, the trees were all a pale white, bearing leaves of a strangely metallic silver.

The Lethe Forest was also filled with a deep white mist, making it nearly impossible to see very far despite the bright morning light. *And… why do I seem to be hearing a faint melody…?*

"…I should've known it was going to be this bad," Kirito said after a moment. "With our luck, my map isn't going to work in there, either."
“It won’t, Kii-bou. Already been in there m’self, actually, and it’s as bad as you think.”

This time they both jumped, whirling to see a figure melting into view, leaning against a tree beside the path. The first thing Kizmel noticed was the grin, one that would've put a cat to shame, followed by whiskers, on a face framed by a brown hood.

She took her hand off the hilt of her saber, sighing. “Argo. Sneaking up on people like that isn’t very polite, you know.”

“Aw, and here I came all this way to help ya guys, Kii-chan!” Argo stepped away from the tree, her continued grin belying her complaint. “Figured your quest would take this way sooner or later, so I checked it out. Wanna buy a guide?”

Kirito eyed her suspiciously. “Didn't you just say maps don't work in there, Argo?”

“I also asked if you wanted a guide, not a guide book, Kii-bou. Place like this, maybe you want some help finding your way through? I got a couple of ideas.” She lifted both hands palm up, looking defensive, when they both gave her narrow looks. “I haven't tested ’em yet ’cause it's kinda spooky in there solo—and the first time I went in, I had to use a teleport crystal to get out. But c’mon, guys, you know you want me with you.”

“And your fee, Argo?” Kizmel asked warily. The last time she'd “bought” something from the info broker, it had been in exchange for accidentally providing blackmail material on her partner; while she'd personally enjoyed the incident, she wasn't especially inclined to give the Rat another opportunity.

Or to share, if there was one.

“Don't look at me like that, Kii-chan,” Argo admonished her cheerfully. “My fee is the info about what all is in the Forest, that you'd otherwise be selling me afterward—if you found your way around at all. Fair enough?”

Kizmel exchanged a silent look with Kirito, who shrugged helplessly. At her resigned nod, he said, “Deal, Argo. Not sure what you're going to get out of it, though—and I don't think you'll be able to come with us into the Reliquary at the end.” Even so, he brought up the “party invitation”, triggering a matching image in front of the info broker.

“That's okay, Kii-bou. I've got barter for the story you'll have for me from that already, if things go the way I think they will.” Before either of them could question that ominous remark, Argo accepted the invitation and casually sauntered ahead of them to the mouth of the trail leading into the Forest. “So… Lethe, eh? Greek, usually translated as 'forgetfulness'… but I think here it's more like 'oblivion' or 'concealment'. Let's go find out, yeah?”

There were a lot of different gameplay conventions that irritated Argo. Even if <i>SAO</i> hadn't had the hazard of real death, the usual annoyances of escort missions, status effects, and block puzzles would've gotten to her as much as always. But if there was one thing that got to her professionally, as Aincrad's premier info broker, it was the one that pertained most directly to Lethe Forest.

Even in the Forest of Wavering Mists on the Third Floor, the map had at least recorded the general path a player had actually crossed. Lethe, on the other hand, stubbornly remained a giant blank space, which meant that even if she found the right way, Argo couldn't sell the exact path.

<i>Be worth something if I can find the trick to this place</i>, she thought, following closely behind her clearer friends. <i>Still. Unless there's something besides this “Reliquary” around here, nobody's gonna</i>
care enough to buy even that. Stupid, non-standard quests... The hell are ya playing at, Kayaba?

Oh, well. It would still be worth something, in the end. Just the chance to get more blackmail material was almost worth getting lost. Especially if she was right about what they were going to find in the Reliquary.

“I have to admit,” Kizmel commented after they'd been wandering Lethe's paths for a good fifteen minutes, “I'm not certain it was truly necessary for Countess Ryella's soldiers to be guarding the Reliquary all this time. Even if someone managed, somehow, to acquire the proofs from the Trials, this forest is proving a formidable barrier itself.”

“I'm trying to remember the last time I visited a place this confusing myself,” Kirito said, peering uselessly into the mist ahead of them. “I know I haven't been in a maze like this in Aincrad before… Hey, didn't we pass that fallen tree five minutes ago? Is the forest actually turning us around, or are we just having that much trouble keeping track?”

“Could be either one, Kii-bou,” Argo told him, glancing quickly back the way they'd come; something was making the hair on the back of her neck twitch, and she didn't like it. “Gotta admit, I'm used ta being able to rely on the map, but it's just as likely the forest messing with us. Remember the story with the forest kids?”

For a second, she wasn't sure he would; the original version had come out a decade before he was born, after all. Still, there had been that remake back in '11; she'd played it herself when she'd found it in a used bin a few years later, and she wasn't that much older than Kii-bou.

After a second, he nodded with a grimace. “Oh, yeah. That one. Take any path except the right one, and you'd end up right where you started… I haven't thought about that in years.”

Me, either. I was waitin' for the VR version of the Wild when we got stuck here... BGM for the woods was nice, though. Argo snorted irritably. There isn't any here at all. C'mon, Kayaba, if you were gonna flout copyright anyway, why not give us some good music with it?

Aloud, she said, “Look on the bright side, Kii-bou. All we gotta do is keep track of what we've seen before, and sooner or later we'll find all the right paths.” At least that was possible here; the one bone Lethe had thrown them was that the undergrowth was too thick for it to really be possible to go off the beaten paths, just like in the old games.

Following Kirito down the next randomly-chosen path through pale woods, Kizmel shook her head wearily. “I suppose that method will work, but I admit I would prefer to avoid the hours that's likely to take.”

Argo grinned. “What, you got somewhere you'd rather be than a stroll in a forest with Kii-bou? Or am I third wheel on your date?”

As she'd hoped, Kirito choked, flushing red. “This isn't a date, Argo!”

Less expected, but no less welcome, was the way Kizmel's dusky skin turned a shade or two darker. “This is purely business, Argo,” she said, affecting a dignity at odds with her face—which, Argo noted with amusement, was not turned in Kirito's direction. “In any case, Pagoda Knights are forbidden from such relationships without specific permission from the Queen herself.”

Argo snickered. “Sure. Keep tellin' yourselves that.” It might even have been true, for all she knew; she never had been able to get all the details out of those two about the elf's duties and responsibilities. Doesn't mean it's always gotta be that way, though. Kii-chan ain't a regular NPC,
and if the system isn't messing around with them, I'll quit being an info broker and take up sewing…

Her nerves twitched again, and as they rounded a bend in the path—coming across that same fallen tree again, she noticed absently—she took a long look back. Technically, she knew, there was no way to “feel” anything in SAO except through the basic five senses, which only told a player what their stats were high enough for the system to allow them to know. Argo knew that, but she also had an increasing number of reports from high-level players about somehow feeling an ambush just before it happened, even when Searching didn't find anything.

Some of those players she trusted a lot, and in a place like this she was inclined to err on the side of superstition. Only thing is, Lethe Forest doesn't seem to have any mobs… unless…?

“Do either of you hear that?” Kizmel asked suddenly, drawing Argo's attention forward again. “It sounds like… music? It is faint, but…”

Argo exchanged a surprised look with Kirito. Kii-chan's hearing BGM? That's… weird… And there wasn't any BGM before. So why… Oh, I'm an idiot!

Abandoning her rearguard position, she stalked past a startled Kirito and strained her virtual ears. “Can't believe I forgot that,” she grumbled. “Oi, Kii-bou! A couple of the stories had that, remember? If you can hear the music, you're on the right path. I think the stories were right.”

He stared at her, then slapped his forehead. “Right… I should've remembered that, too. Well, that should make this easier.” Kirito turned to his partner. “Your ears are better, Kizmel, you'd better take point.”

The elf girl smiled. “Of course. Let's be going, then, and leave this maze behind us.” She took off at a jog, long ears twitching; Kirito followed closely behind.

Argo snickered again, trotting after the pair. “Wow, Kii-chan. Don't think I've ever heard you get that frustrated with… well, anything. You okay?”

Kizmel glanced over her shoulder at the info broker. “Over the past week, Argo, I've faced emotional turmoil, been covered in mud, and faced more tentacled monsters than I ever feared could possibly exist. Now we're in a forest more difficult to pass through than the one in which I met Kirito. Believe me, I will be quite pleased to leave this place behind me. Although,” she went on, voice softening, “I admit I'm also eager to see the reward at the end of this quest…”

Yep. Definitely something important. Following the Dark Elf through the mist-filled forest, no longer passing the same trees over and over as the melody gradually grew louder, Argo chewed on the hints her friends had dropped. Whatever they're after, Kii-chan's looking forward to it more than Kii-bou, so it's not just some nifty bit of gear. So… She snickered under her breath. This'll be fun.

Even with the trick to Lethe Forest worked out, it still took another half hour to see anything but more white trees. Eventually, though, a stone wall loomed out of the fog, heavily damaged by age but still standing. A tall double gate was set in the middle, looking to be in marginally better condition than the rest of the wall.

Ominously, in front of it lay a large pile of bones, mixed with broken pieces of armor, two swords, and a pair of shields.

Seeing it, Kirito laid a hand on Kizmel's shoulder, pulling her to a halt before she could head straight for the bones. “Hold on,” he said. “I think I know what these are.” He drew the sword from his back,
casting a baleful gaze on the hapless remains.

Argo checked her own claws and crouched low. “Yep. After everything else? No question what we got here.”

Lifting one curious eyebrow, Kizmel drew Eldhi Arc. “At this point, I'm not even surprised… Well, they are between us and the Reliquary. Shall we spring this trap, my friends?”

“Of course,” Kirito agreed. Argo only grinned, and when the two swordsmen stepped carefully forward, she followed right along.

After everything, she was completely unsurprised when, at their approach, the bones shook, rattled, and levitated, snapping together with a series of disturbing cracks. In seconds, what had been a pile of bones and battered armor had become a pair of Skeleton Knights, wielding chipped and notched—but still obviously sharp—swords.

_Two Skeleton Knights, three Swordmasters_, Argo thought, bearing fangs with her grin. _Well. Two Swordmasters and an elf, but what's the difference now? “C'mon, boneheads!”_ she called cheerily. _“Come and get us!”_

She didn't actually get to find out if they could be successfully taunted; just as she spoke, Kirito launched himself at the left Skeleton Knight with a Sonic Leap, while Kizmel charged the right with Fell Crescent. Both attacks rebounded off shields, but the Skeletons were pushed back half a step themselves, left off-balance.

In that moment of vulnerability, Argo catapulted into the fray with an Acute Dive, the charge-type claw skill getting her in under Kizmel's target's guard. There was a hideous screeching noise of metal on bone, and then she was past, skidding to a stop on the wild grass in front of the Reliquary's gate.

The post-motion freeze on Acute Claw was brief, and she was quickly spinning on her heel and rushing Kirito's opponent with the blinding speed that kept her fragile info broker's build alive. As he hit it from the front with a Horizontal Arc to the ribs, she ripped into its spine with the X-shaped double slashes of Fatal Claw.

_Heh; either this ain't balanced for three, or it didn't count on Kii-bou or Kii-chan. It's not at all about numbers, after all!_ Bouncing away from the Skeleton Knight's attempt to spin and gut her, Argo leapt back to her first target, currently recoiling from Kizmel's Treble Scythe. _You wanna beat us, bring some friends!_

After all, Kii-bou and Aa-chan had once brought her in on taking out a Floor Boss with just twelve people. Three-on-two on a couple of elite mooks was nothing.

Argo did have one bad moment when she launched a three-hit Fury Claw on one of the Skeletons just in time to take a Horizontal to the nose, taking off a larger chunk of health than she was comfortable with; unluckily for the pile of bones, her friends took that as an invitation to hit it from both sides at once. Before it could adapt to the change in attack patterns, Kizmel had lopped off its sword arm, and Kirito's vicious Snake Bite sent its head flying to bounce off the Reliquary's gate and shatter into a million azure shards.

_Vengeance was the Rat's, in any case. The remaining Skeleton Knight tried to take advantage of the distraction to hit Kirito in the back, at which point Argo rushed it from behind in turn, slashing its spine from right to left, back, and back again in a more successful Fury Claw. With a clattering of teeth, like a dry imitation of a death groan, it fell back into a pile of bone and blew to polygons._
With both gate wardens gone, Kirito spun in a quick circle to make sure nothing else was coming, then straightened from his combat stance. In a quick flicker of motion, he swept his sword up to the left and back down to the right before smoothly sheathing it on his back; watching with a curious expression, Kizmel abruptly slashed a quick “X” in the air before slipping her own Eldhi Arc back in its scabbard.

Observing the silent byplay, Argo snickered, ostentatiously flicking the nonexistent blood off her claws. *Yeah, we're good. See that, world?*

“Well,” she said then, turning her attention to the large double-door leading into the Reliquary, “I think this is probably where I split, guys. I'm betting you've got the only way to open the door, right?”

“I suspect so, yes.” Kizmel approached, peering close to examine an inscription scrawled across the place the doors met, over a pair of round depressions. “Hm... Yes. To open the way, we must present proof of our Wisdom. That most likely means…”

“Right.” Kirito moved to join her, pulling one of the jewels he wore from his neck. “Wisdom, huh? Well, we did have to get through a maze to get here.”

Together, Swordmaster and Elf placed sapphire gems into the insets, and after a moment’s pause the doors ponderously swung open, leading into a place with much better lighting than the misty Lethe Forest. Natural light, if Argo was any judge, suggesting whatever was on the other side wasn't in any better shape than the ruins her friends had reported before.

“Okay, then. I'll leave the rest to you guys.” Grinning, she waved them toward the opened path. “Just remember to tell me what you find inside!”

“Not for free, Argo,” Kirito retorted, walking in step with Kizmel through the doorway. “Especially not after that stunt with the recording crystal the other day.”

“Don’t worry, I got your payment together already. Trust me, you’ll like it. Just watch yourselves in there, ’kay? Who knows if there’s still a boss waitin’ for ya.”

“We will be careful, Argo,” Kizmel promised. “Till later, then.”

Argo watched them vanish into the Reliquary, and her grin slipped. *Something ain’t right here,* she thought, glancing warily about. *I dunno what, but... I don’t like it.*

She couldn't actually see anything amiss, but she wasn't going to ignore it when her instincts were shouting at her. Trying to retrace the path out—which, with the way this quest had gone, would probably have the Reliquary door as the reset point, instead of the Forest entrance—just did not feel safe to her.

*I mean it, guys. Be careful. Whatever's gonna happen next, I think it's up to you.* Digging into a belt pouch, Argo withdrew a shimmering blue crystal and held it high. “Teleport, Mydo!”

A quick flash as a sphere of azure light whisked the Rat away, and the Reliquary's entrance stood silent and undisturbed... and still open.

Kirito could recall from memory at least six variations of the area he believed served as the basis for the Reliquary. Conditions ranged from a pristine, ornate temple, to just a pedestal in a forest clearing, with no sign that any larger structure had ever been there. They all had one unifying element, one that Countess Ryella's words had confirmed also existed here, but beyond that he wasn't prepared to
guess what they'd find.

When he and Kizmel emerged from the passage through the Reliquary's thick outer wall, they found themselves in a place mostly open to the air. Many, if not most, of the walls of a temple still stood around them, broken but still forming the outline of rooms and hallways, yet the ceilings and roof beyond were long gone.

Stepping onto a marble floor, broken in places to let vegetation grow through what had obviously once been a grand entrance foyer, the two paused. “This place… I can almost feel what it was once like,” Kizmel murmured, looking about with an expression approaching reverence. “It's in ruins now, but you can still see what it was before, somehow.”

Kirito nodded slowly. Soft, warm sunlight filtered through the mist above the Reliquary, but he felt a chill in his bones anyway. The Full-Dive entry in the series hadn't come out yet when SAO launched, so he only had an old, flat-screen knowledge of the temple the Reliquary was based on. Being there, he was learning, was a very different experience.

A recognizable, not-quite-lawyer-friendly remix of the appropriate music acting as BGM added to the sheer sense of unreality.

“I've seen artwork of what this place might've looked like when it was intact,” he said softly. “This is… almost as impressive, actually.” Giving himself a quick shake, trying to dispel the sense of nostalgia the Reliquary had wrapped him in, he laid a hand on his partner's shoulder. “Come on. What we're after is probably in the center of the Reliquary.”

Kizmel twitched, took a long breath, and nodded. “Yes, of course. Let's go.”

Across the foyer, up the stairs, and through the first door they went, finally entering the Reliquary proper. Other than the soft BGM and distant bird calls, it was eerily quiet; the only consistent sounds as they navigated the ruined halls were those of their own boots on stone. Between the open roof and the mist above, even that was muffled, adding to the sense of the place being not quite real.

There were no mobs to be found, which on the one hand Kirito was grateful for—he didn't really want to be delayed by fighting, after all the time they'd invested in this quest already—but on the other, he found the total absence of life other than intruding plants more than a little spooky.

Trying to distract himself from that as they passed through a wide chamber with a ruined fountain in its center, he glanced at a mural still visible on one wall. He'd seen several like it in the Trial temples, but had never really had a chance to examine them in any detail. Now that he did…

Noticing now that there was something just a bit odd about the people depicted, in what otherwise seemed an unremarkable painting of some ancient battle, Kirito shot a curious glance at his partner. “Hey, Kizmel? Do you have any idea what that's supposed to be about?” Probably just Aincrad background lore, nothing of any importance, but in SAO he could never tell for sure; either way, it was likely to be interesting.

She paused mid-stride, turning to look at the artwork herself. “…I've no more idea than you of the events depicted,” she said after a moment. “If you're referring to the fact that the humans and elves have wings, however, I do know something of it. Well, old stories, anyway; legends even to my people, much like other tales of the world before the Great Separation.

“It is said,” Kizmel continued, as they resumed their trek into the next hall, “that in the old world the magic of your people and mine alike was such that we could even fly in the sky on ethereal wings. Indeed, it was supposedly one of the simplest uses of magic, as natural to the people of that era as
Kirito blinked. “Flying was that easy for them? Must’ve been nice.” Right off the top of his head, he could think of at least a dozen times just clearing Aincrad where being able to fly would’ve saved a lot of trouble, leaving aside the possibility of just going right to the Ruby Palace.

Which is why we can't fly in SAO, he reminded himself ruefully, stepping over a fallen marble statue. Besides, I'm not even sure how that would work, in Full-Dive...

Kizmel nodded in agreement, sighing wistfully. “Indeed. Alas, the stories say that it was also deeply tied to the source of magic which was left behind in the Great Separation, more so than most spells. In Aincrad, there are not even frail imitations in the minor charms that remain to us.”

“That's too bad.” Rounding a corner to a staircase leading higher up, Kirito came to an abrupt halt. “Yeah… really too bad. We could really use wings right about now.”

The stairwell was still there, at least. So were some of the stairs—jutting out from the walls in small ledges, at irregular intervals, between which was a drop whose bottom was lost in shadow, suggesting it was too far even for clearers of their levels to survive.

Kizmel eyed it warily. “…Perhaps there should’ve been a Trial dedicated to proving our agility?”

In the end, the Reliquary did seem to be truly empty of mobs, but Kirito felt the place made up for it by involving more platforming than any place he’d yet seen in SAO. Fortunately his and Kizmel’s strength and agility stats proved to be up the challenge, but by the time they finally reached a door requiring the second set of pendants—Strength, this time—he was sure his real-world body was drenched in sweat. His avatar certainly was, although by grace of system limitations it was evaporating fast.

Pushing open that door, Kirito was mostly unsurprised by what lay before them. A large space with a marble floor, very similar to the Reliquary’s entrance, with columns of the same stone set at regular intervals to the sides. Around half of them had fallen; possibly fortunately, there was no sign at all of the ceiling they’d once supported.

The chamber was otherwise empty save for a pedestal with an ornate chest on top, with an inset obviously meant for the final pendant—and in front of the pedestal, a small dais with another, much shorter pedestal, a sword thrust point-first into it.

“That must be the Baneblade,” Kizmel murmured, walking in step with Kirito to cross the chamber. “And behind it, in that chest…”

“Yeah. Must be.” Kirito was focused on the blade itself as they approached, though. As they got closer, he could tell it wasn’t quite what he’d been expecting: the hilt was silver, as was the wing-shaped hand guard; that guard was folded up against the edges of the blade.

The blade itself was visibly rusted, chipped, and notched; the very image of a weapon that had really had been left unprotected against the elements for who knew how many years, not the nigh-indestructible weapon he’d honestly been expecting.

Doesn't mean it isn't worth anything, though, Kirito reminded himself. There's no way that a quest this big is going to end with a joke weapon. Besides, don't I remember one version was—

They were almost to the dais when a chuckle came out of nowhere from behind them, making both of them jump in surprise. “Now, now, Black Swordsman! I think that's far enough.”
Kirito whirled, hand going to the sword at his back, and quickly spotted the owner of the voice. A lean man in a poncho, carrying a dagger whose edges gleamed a sickly green; he rippled out of the shadows as a Hiding effect stronger than Kirito's Search skill was broken.

His blood ran cold. He'd seen this man before, more than once. It had been several months, and they'd only come face to face once, but Kirito remembered all too well the man's efforts in the past. “It's you… Morte's boss.”

Kizmel inhaled sharply at his side. “The 'player-killer'?” she said, the unaccustomed gamer-speak coming a bit awkwardly from her.

“Yo. It's been a while, hasn't it?” The PKer grinned under his poncho's hood. “I told you we'd meet again, Black Swordsman. It's about time I paid you back for interfering. You cost me a clean sweep on the Fifth Floor—not to mention a guild wipe a couple months ago.”

Kirito's blood turned icier still, then the heat of rage started to war with it. “You don't mean—!”

The air beside the man wavered, and suddenly there was someone else standing there. He wore fairly standard gear for a player at or near the frontlines, mostly unremarkable—except for the sword he wore at his side, a long blade even narrower than Asuna's rapiers, and the skull-like mask covering his face, through which all Kirito could see was a pair of bright red eyes.

“Hey, boss,” the newcomer said, his voice oddly deep and staccato. “This is, the guy? The one, who ruined, Johnny's little trap?”

“That's him,” the player in the poncho confirmed. “The Black Swordsman… and his NPC pet. You can call me PoH, boy,” he called to Kirito; his grin was showing teeth, like a macabre parody of Argo. “You might say I'm the 'Prince of Hell'… and I've been looking for you.”

“How?” Kirito demanded hotly. “How could you even know to come here?” His gaze flicked up to the pair's cursors—both of which, he saw now, were a bright orange. The color of criminals. “Argo wouldn't sell to orange players. And if 'Johnny' is who I think he is, he can't be your conduit anymore, either—”

“The Rat sells to plenty of other people, though, Black Swordsman,” PoH told him. “Including other info brokers, who aren't as particular. Wasn't hard to find where you were going, and then you were nice enough to open the doors for us.”

“What do you hope to gain here?” Kizmel demanded. “From what Kirito has said, your aims are greater than a mere two clearers. And if you believe you can defeat us both—”

“Be quiet, you fake girl.” The masked player's fingers tapped at the hilt of his blade. “We kill you, then we take, that sword.” His mouth twisted in a smile as ugly as his leader's. “We can guess, what it is. Can't let the clearers, have it.”

“Yeah, that,” PoH agreed. “And you… you may act like any old solo, Black Swordsman, but you've been in the right place at the right time a little too often. It's about time you left the stage—especially before you pick up at that sword.”

Kirito's fingers tightened around his blade's hilt. The PKers were overestimating him; he'd just gotten lucky a few times, and he was more than a little afraid that the Baneblade would be more trouble than it was worth. Its nature reminded him all too much of another item he'd gotten stuck with, which still remained in his inventory even then. If anything, the implications of the Baneblade were likely to help PoH's cause along.
“They were behind Joe's false information,” Kizmel murmured in his ear. “They've struck us before—and they mean to kill us now, Kirito. Whether they speak the truth or not, their intentions are obvious.”

He took a deep, steadying breath. Right. Doesn't matter what the reasons are, does it? There's only one thing these guys ever do.

“C'mon, nothing's gonna happen if we just stand here staring at each other!” PoH flung back his poncho, spinning his dagger in one hand. “Get ready, XaXa!”

The masked “XaXa” drew his blade—Kirito recognized it now as an estoc, a weapon even more specialized for thrusting than most rapiers—with a flourish even the Black Swordsman was unwillingly impressed by. “Two of us, against one. And his doll. Too easy.”

“Right on. Black Swordsman—it's showtime!”

Kirito’s blade came out in a flash, ready to meet PoH's charge. At the same time, Kizmel drew Eldhi Arc in a blur and launched herself at XaXa, intercepting his blinding-quick lunge at Kirito. “I am no doll,” she said through gritted teeth, slashing the estoc aside with her blade. “I am his partner!”

“Hah! Just what I'd expect, from a program, like you! Get out, of my way!”

The two with lighter blades fell off to one side, saber and estoc tangling in a blur so fast even Kirito had trouble keeping up with it—and then he had no time to try, as PoH came in and did his best to drive his poisoned dagger into Kirito’s ribcage.

Somehow, he got his sword in the way in time, his parry deflecting the tainted blade just before it could reach his shirt. He managed to segue the parry into the pre-motion for an Uppercut, the quickest move he knew from that position; but PoH was even faster, jumping back as soon as Kirito's blade started to glow. The sword's upward arc missed by a pair of centimeters, and then PoH was lunging in again.

Only the brevity of the post-motion from such a simple skill kept Kirito from being stabbed in that instant. PoH was fast, faster than any mob Kirito had ever fought; his thrust came in so quickly Kirito's dodge still left the edge of his coat to be ripped by the dagger. Dodged instead of parried, the failed blow did leave PoH over-extended for a brief instant, which Kirito took full advantage of to rip a Slant down at the PKer's neck.

PoH reacted instantly, spinning on his foot like a dancer. The Slant, instead of inflicting a critical on his throat, only traced a shallow cut down his chest, and he laughed as he whirled farther out of reach. “Too slow, boy! You don't have the will to kill!”

Chilled, Kirito suspected he was right; he'd realized months before the difference between a duel in a game, and a duel in *SAO*, along with mindset required for the latter. With the understanding that victory meant more than just bruises in this world, those who were truly willing to kill had an inherent edge over those who weren't.

But it's not just that, he thought, launching a Snake Bite only to see the back and forth slash be dodged with almost contemptuous ease; while he was held in place for an instant after, PoH snuck in a light slash across his cheek, ratcheting his tension up another notch. He's attacking during pre- and post-motion, with normal strikes; he's not using any Sword Skills at all!

Every player knew that sometimes, it was better to use a weak strike delivered by their avatar's
virtual muscles, unaided by a Sword Skill's system assist; if the enemy only had a sliver of health left, it just wasn't worth it to risk the post-motion freeze of a skill, especially in a melee against multiple opponents. Even so, Kirito had never known anyone who could do more than a crude slash or two. Very few players had any real knowledge of how to use any kind of blade for real, after all; that was why Sword Skills existed in the first place.

The way PoH whipped his knife around, aiming for vital spots with frightening speed, was something Kirito had never seen before. It was like the Pker actually knew what he was doing with his chosen weapon, and it was becoming clear that the extra speed the “manual” style gave him made up for missing out on the boost in attack power a Sword Skill granted.

*Especially with a poisoned blade,* Kirito realized, hastily abandoning an attempted skill of his own to deflect a thrust at his kidney the hard way. *My stats are high enough compared to his weapon that the poison hasn't procceed yet, but that's not going to last!*

On top of all that, he was worrying about his partner, too. He was too busy holding off PoH to see much, but from the mad whirl of light to his left, XaXa was keeping up with Kizmel frighteningly well. The masked Pker was using Sword Skills, but he was doing so with the smooth speed of someone who'd practiced them endlessly.

*I have to be faster!* Taking a chance, Kirito lashed out with his foot, not even a real Unarmed skill, and caught PoH in the shin. Surprised, the Pker stumbled, giving him an opening to unleash the full three hits of a Savage Fulcrum.

All three slashes struck solidly this time, tracing a bright blue “4” in the air. To Kirito's dismay, though, it only dropped PoH's HP by around a tenth—and the man's reaction was to grin. “That's more like your rep, Black Swordsman! The question is—can you keep it up? We're only just getting started!”

In a race between knockback and post-motion, PoH won out by a hair, and Kirito felt the muted *thump* of a knife ramming solidly between his ribs. It withdrew just as quickly, having made only a small dent in his health—but the sickly glow that suddenly outlined his HP bar told the real threat.

Poison, and a high-level one at that. Immediately, Kirito's HP started draining away, and there was no time to go for an antidote.

“Tick-tock, Black Swordsman,” PoH told with a grin, falling back into a crouch, twirling his dagger between his fingers. “You're on the clock! Can you finish me before the poison gets you? C'mon, let's have some fun!”

*I have two minutes before this kills me,* Kirito thought, the world seeming to blur around him. *My Sword Skills hit harder than he does, but I can't hit him solidly enough. I have to try something else, but what—?*

A flash of memory, long forgotten. A very basic stance, not meant for his chosen blade, but one of the first things taught to beginners; something practiced so many times as to be carved into his mind, even after all these years. Something from a time he'd hated, but all the clearer in his memory for it.

*PoH... isn't the only one who knows something about fighting without System Assist.*

Gripping the hilt of his one-handed sword with both hands, Kirito lifted his blade in a stance Klein would've felt more at home with. *I... I have to be faster!* With a wordless yell, he leapt across the distance to PoH, slashing down in the most basic overhead strike taught in kendo.
Kizmel had never actually fought one of the Swordmasters before. Even when training the Black Cats, they’d always avoided actually sparring; as Kirito had explained once, the implications were disturbing enough that Swordmasters in general tended to be reluctant to take up arms against one another even for practice. Otherwise, since rejoining Kirito on the Twenty-Sixth Floor they’d never encountered hostile Swordmasters quite willing to take up arms against them.

The masked man called XaXa was clearly different from the average Swordmaster, and Kizmel suspected only her own experience fighting Forest and Fallen Elves kept her from being swiftly overwhelmed. Despite his thin blade, his strength seemed easily a match for the Forest Elf Kirito and Asuna had saved her from that fateful day, and he was astonishingly fast.

*Kirito's reflexes are better,* Kizmel thought, her Eldhi Arc countering a blinding-quick Linear with a hasty Reaver, *but I believe the only Swordmaster I've ever seen whose strikes are faster is Asuna. If I'm not careful—!

To her consternation, what could be seen of XaXa's expression was a strange mix of amusement and irritation. “Never thought, a simple, NPC, could fight, like this! I'd be, impressed, if you weren't, in my way!”

“I believe that is my complaint,” she ground out, sidestepping another Linear to return one of her own; somehow XaXa twisted around to let it under his left arm, but she did leave a graze under his shoulder. “We've done nothing to provoke you!”

“Hah! Don't think, a doll, like you, can understand! Just a, parrot who doesn't, understand what, she's even, saying!” He pirouetted in an elegant move that belied his blood thirst, one Kizmel recognized just in time. The swift thrust toward her head she caught on her shield, and she nimbly stepped sideways around Diagonal Sting's lower blow.

*I cannot let this last.* Kizmel drew back in her sword in the moment it took XaXa to recover from his own attack, letting her saber glow with restrained power. *Kirito needs my help! She only had time for the barest glimpses, but she could tell he was harder-pressed by PoH than she by XaXa.*

Not that XaXa was by any means slow or weak. He began his next attack before she'd quite launched hers, and the angled slash of a Streak rushed out to meet her own; the two skills collided, canceling each other out with a brilliant flash and a concussive *boom,* blowing both of them back from the recoil.

Kizmel winced from the bruising pressure, but rallied swiftly. As soon as she regained full control of herself, she threw herself into a spin in place, expecting XaXa to come rushing in again the moment he recovered; if she was right, the triple blow of the Treble Scythe would serve her better than a more aggressive thrust at that moment—

XaXa's surprised grunt as the swift charge of his Shooting Star was met by a whirlwind of steel instead of something more precise proved her suspicion. The way he flew back several paces and hit the stone floor with bone-bruising force was deeply satisfying.

*Treat me as a mere figment of a dream, will you?* Kizmel thought coolly, rushing to press the attack the moment she could move again. *Fine, then; I'll not object if you underestimate me!*

He was already rolling to his feet when she reached him, angling a Rising Sting at her throat from a crouch. She instinctively snapped her shield in the way, but by defending she sacrificed the initiative, giving XaXa time to recover his footing.

The next few moments were a confusing blur of slashes and thrusts, each trying to slip a blow past
the other's guard, and amidst the occasional hiss of pain as his blade found its mark and grunt of impact as hers struck true, only the long months of combat and years of training kept Kizmel remotely aware of what was happening. XaXa was, she realized, a more skilled swordsman than even Viscount Yofilis, or any of her instructors in the Pagoda Knights.

“Well, now, maybe this, will be, fun, after all,” XaXa rasped out, grinning beneath his mask. “Not so, bad, for just, a program!”

*This is the true threat the Swordmasters face,* Kizmel realized, feeling a thrust strike home in her gut even as she landed a blow on XaXa's sword arm. *As powerful as the monsters that infest this castle may be, traitors within their own ranks are so much stronger...!*

At last, she found an opening: a fraction of a moment when XaXa was overextended from a missed Triangular, forced to carry through all three hits despite the error. In that tiny space, she hit him with another Treble Scythe, slashing into his knees, stomach, and chest. The most solid hit she'd managed yet, it once again tossed him across the chamber, his arc ending with a hard impact against one of the fallen marble columns.

Visibly dazed, it took XaXa until Kizmel was halfway across the gap before he even began to recover—at which point, once again, he grinned. “Not bad! But do, you really have, time for this? Your precious, partner, is in trouble, you fake!”

She skidded to a halt, head whipping around to look. At some point Kirito had switched to a style that seemed completely at odds with his own weapon, oddly abandoning Sword Skills entirely; now, though, there was a bright crimson glow flaring to life. *That's—no!*

XaXa's grin vanished in a look of open-mouthed surprise just before Kizmel's flung shield hit him in the face, startling him into falling over again, and she launched herself toward her partner's battle. “Kirito!”

One-handed swords, Kirito had found, *really* weren't very suited to two-handed styles. It was working, barely—technically, he supposed the sword he currently using would probably be considered a hand-and-a-half sword—but the moves weren't coming out nearly as smoothly as with a shinai or true katana.

*Or maybe I'm just way too rusty,* he thought, his awkward backhand catching PoH's right arm just above the wrist; not a wasted hit, but he'd been trying to cut the man's hand off, hopefully taking that poisoned knife with it. *I never thought I'd regret giving up on kendo back then!*

“Better, boy,” PoH complimented, flipping the dagger to a reverse grip, the blade folded back against his forearm. “Maybe you do know some good tricks... This is getting fun!”

“Only someone like you—would call this—fun,” Kirito got out through gritted teeth. He reversed the sword in his hands, bringing it back in a forehand strike meant to cut down across PoH's chest; just a breath ahead of him, the PKer darted inside his reach and slashed the green-edged knife along his arm, leaving another gleaming red line to join the others.

PoH's dagger was a much weaker weapon than Kirito's sword, going by raw attack power, but a knife was a weapon either for precise, decisive blows to weak points, or gradually bleeding; worse, the PKer obviously knew it, and the poison gave him a nasty edge on top of that.

*Kendo isn't the right style to fight him with, either,* Kirito thought grimly, gaze flicking up to his own steadily-decreasing HP; he was already down to half, and still falling. *I know a few moves without using System Assist, but two-handed is just too slow for this...*
I have to be faster!

Clenching his jaw, he called on every reserve his system-governed avatar had, and focused every bit of his attention on the enemy in front of him. If he could just be fast enough, he could take out PoH in a few good hits; all he had to do was be quick and accurate enough to strike the right place. Even if he couldn't bring himself to kill, even PoH would have to pull back if he was hit hard enough—

With another wordless yell, Kirito lunged for PoH, swinging his sword with all the power and speed his arms could bring in. Faster, dammit! PoH ducked under the blade, driving his dagger in once more, but this time Kirito was ready for it. He lashed out with his foot again, even though it cost him his own balance; PoH saw it coming and jumped, yet his attack was still cut short.

Kirito’s own attacks threw him completely off-balance, toppling him over, but he’d known it was coming. He turned with the fall, rolled, and came up with his sword dragging up from the ground with him. Faster! He turned with his arms, with his torso, and with his legs as he rose, his blade tearing across faster yet; this time, PoH ducked away just a little too slow, taking the full brunt of the slash across the chest.

Either knockback or surprise slowed PoH’s reactions by just a sliver, and Kirito took advantage of it, whipping his sword down, across, and back in a flurry of attacks, dropping the PKer’s HP close to the halfway point. Just a little more! Just a little more, and even he'll have to run for it—!

“Now this is making it all worth it, Black Swordsman!” In the brief opening between one attack and the next, PoH leapt back, his grin still wide and wild. “You're in the way, but it wouldn't have been any fun if you just gave up and died! But…” The grin shrank to a smirk. “Playtime's over, boy. It's showtime.”

For the first time, PoH's dagger took on the red glow of a Sword Skill. Kirito didn't know daggers well enough to guess from the pre-motion which skill it was, but it left him uncertain and wary; from that distance, he ought to have plenty of time to intercept it. Even with the poison, there was simply no way PoH could kill him with a single Sword Skill, and gripped by System Assist the PKer had no hope of dodging Kirito's retaliation.

He's trying something tricky, Kirito thought. In that case—I'll just have to hit him with the best I've got! Abandoning his awkward two-handed grip, he pulled his blade back, starting the pre-motion for a Sharp Nail. It ran the risk of killing PoH outright, if he critted just “right”, but at this point Kirito didn't think he had much of a choice. With the poison, and Kizmel still occupied with XaXa…

His skill released just as PoH's pulled the PKer into a rush, and for just an instant Kirito thought he'd won; his skill was clearly going to hit. A moment before the clash, though, he suddenly realized PoH's dagger wasn't aimed for his body at all.

Its point was driving straight into the flat of Kirito's sword, a few centimeters above the hilt. In the instant the two Sword Skills met, there was the usual loud sound and bright flash—and the sword's blade snapped off just above the guard, spinning off to clatter loudly on the marble floor.

For a second, all Kirito could do was stare at the remains of his sword in sheer disbelief. That wasn't the first time he’d had a sword break in the middle of a fight; his beloved Anneal Blade had perished in the defense of Yofel Castle, the previous Christmas. But that sword was almost at its limit anyway! This one was still close to half-strength, and—did he target a weak point on the sword? On purpose?!?

PoH's smirk turned back into a lazy grin. “Didn't know that trick, did you, Black Swordsman? Too bad. There's a lot of things you still ought to learn about this world. Things I could've maybe taught
you, if you weren't such a goody-two-shoes.” Shaking his head, he started toward Kirito, the young swordsman still frozen in surprise. “It's funny. I get the feeling you understand this world better than almost anybody, but there's one little thing you don't get.”

His health was ticking down close to the red now, Kirito noticed, ice racing through his virtual veins. With no sword to parry with, if PoH got in just a couple of good hits in the right places—and the man obviously knew exactly where to aim—he was a dead man.

No. I can't... I can't let it end here! Tossing aside the broken remnants of his sword, Kirito readied himself to try Martial Arts skills instead. “What is it I'm missing, then?” he demanded of the PKer, trying to stall for just a little more time.

“The simplest thing of all, Black Swordsman,” PoH told him, never losing that disturbing smile. “This is a death game, right? Then death is exactly what we should be giving out. If you're not killing or being killed, you're denying the very essence of Aincrad, boy.”

The reply was so completely incomprehensible that Kirito didn't have the least idea how to respond, and PoH took that moment to set up for another Sword Skill. His poisoned dagger taking on a crimson glow again, he was clearly preparing the same skill as before, and this time Kirito had no defense at all—

“Get away from him!”

PoH started to turn in surprise. “What the—?!” he began, only to be knocked off his feet by a charging Dark Elf.

“Quickly, Kirito!” she shouted to him, wrenching one arm free of the tangle she and the PKer had ended up in. “Take it, and get the sword!”

Kirito caught the antidote she flung his way without even thinking, opening and downing it in a flash. The meaning of her other words was a moment longer sinking in, but then he was whirling around, hand tugging at the chain remaining around his neck.

“Get off me!” PoH snarled, levity vanished. He wrestled with Kizmel for a moment, got most of his body free, and viciously kicked her away, forcing a cry of pain from the elf. “You're not getting away so easily, Black Swordsman!”

PoH was fast. Kirito, maybe because those running for their lives were always just a bit lighter on their feet than those just trying to take them, was faster. Two steps ahead of his would-be murderer, he reached the dais, hurriedly slapping the emerald Bravery Pendant into the slot he'd suspected would be at the base of its pedestal. One step ahead, he gripped the battered hilt in with his sword hand, and pulled.

Light flared, the rusted Baneblade slipping from the stone with ease belying its worn appearance.

Turning the act of drawing the sword from its resting place into a spin, Kirito segued right into the pre-motion for an Uppercut just as PoH tried to stab him in the throat. This time, there was no chance for the PKer to even try to evade, committed as he was to the attack; the skill tore deep into his right hip, arcing up and out through his left shoulder.

Still as light on his feet as ever, PoH sprang back as quickly as he could. Unlike before, though, there was no trace of humor on his face at all; beneath his hood, his face twitched in a way Kirito could tell meant he was checking his HP—the HP that had just taken more damage from one hit of Kirito's new weapon than four or five from the old.
There was a rustle to Kirito's right, and Kizmel was suddenly by his side, Eldhi Arc pointed unwaveringly at PoH's face. At some point she'd lost her shield, and her cloak was as tattered as the battle had left Kirito's longcoat, but she otherwise seemed in better shape than he was, and her expression was murderous.

In the silence, XaXa came up to PoH's side in turn; unlike his boss, the estoc user was still smiling. “Well. The girl, might really, be something, after all,” he said. “What now, boss? Shall we, keep going?”

Staring hard at the PKer duo, Kirito almost wished they would. “If you want to end this now, go ahead,” he said, hardly recognizing his own voice. “Want to try us again?”

“…Continuing now is pointless,” PoH finally said, tucking his dagger under his poncho. “You'd better watch your back, Black Swordsman. You're only alive because of that sword—and it won't help you so much against mobs, will it?”

“Too bad.” XaXa spun his estoc in a blurred flourish and sheathed it. “It was, just getting, good. But maybe, next time, will be better.”

The two of them turned and walked back toward the chamber's entrance. Kirito watched them closely the whole way, until just before the door they both vanished under Hiding, just as they'd arrived.

After a few moments, Kizmel glanced at him. “Do you think they're actually gone?”

“Probably. They've lost a lot of their surprise, and I'm actually better equipped now than when they got here.” Kirito finally allowed himself to relax; though the first thing he did was dig into his pocket with his free hand to pull out a potion, getting a quick start on restoring his HP. He'd come all too close to the red, this time.

Only when he'd drunk the whole potion did his partner begin to relax, slipping her saber back into its scabbard. “I did not expect that,” she admitted, shoulders slumping wearily. “To follow us in here, and make such a direct attempt at murder… I knew your stories of the ‘orange’ Swordmasters, but even after what happened to the Black Cats, I never suspected this.”

“Neither did I.” But I should have. After what Argo said about Naga… I should've known something like this would happen eventually.

“We survived, Kirito,” Kizmel said gently, laying a hand on his arm. “We survived, and we've found what we came for. If, perhaps, not quite as we expected.”

Kirito glanced down at the Baneblade, still clutched in his right hand, still as rusted and weathered as when he'd drawn it. “It's still pretty sharp,” he pointed out. “And like Countess Ryella said, it hurt PoH pretty bad. I'm willing to bet there's a way to restore it to its true form, too.”

 Probably another quest, he mused, finally sheathing the blade with his usual flourish. Special item, probably has a special way to upgrade it… Well, there's no way that quest is on this floor, so no need to worry about it now. The real issue is...

As if following his thoughts, Kizmel also followed his gaze to the chest on the pedestal behind the Baneblade's resting place.

By rights, a murder attempt by two rogue Swordmasters should've eclipsed everything else that had happened that day. The greater degree of threat they posed than previously suspected was a change
that needed to be discussed in detail, and with more than just her own partner.

Yet despite the fear and pain only now ebbing away, Kizmel's attention was drawn back to what had brought them to the Reliquary to begin with. To the Baneblade Kirito now carried on his back, and to the unopened chest that still remained, a small hollow for a jewel where a keyhole might normally be.

After all, she thought, in many ways, that represents a change far more fundamental—certainly one far more personal.

Slowly, Kizmel stepped up to the chest, slipped the Bravery Pendant from her neck, and placed it in the hollow. With a soft click, the lock released, allowing her to lift the chest's lid, and withdraw its contents.

It was a simple book, bound in green-dyed leather, so aged as to concern her she would destroy it simply by opening its cover. On that cover was etched simply, Record of the Alliance of the Three, written in the same ancient script as the inscriptions around the Trial temples and the Reliquary itself.

When she turned back to her partner, holding the book carefully in both hands, Kizmel found Kirito looking at her with an unusually serious expression. “Kizmel… are you sure you know what you're getting into, if you open that book?” His voice was soft, filled with concern.

“I began to realize it when Swordmaster Diavel first spoke to us in the Trial of Bravery, Kirito,” she replied. “Even before Countess Ryella spoke of it, it seemed clear invoking the charms of the Swordmasters might well strip me of my Knighthood. …Though I admit, I had not thought through that I might truly be made a stranger to my own people, as well.”

“There's that, but… that's not exactly what I mean, Kizmel.” He bit his lip, dark eyes reflecting a struggle to find the right words. “This is so hard to explain. The Swordmasters… we really don't experience the world the same way you do, Kizmel. There's more to gaining our powers and senses than just being able to make writing appear in the air or seeing hidden paths and objects.”

“That much has been obvious to me for a long time, Kirito.” She tucked the Record under her arm, meeting his somber gaze with one of her own. “I know you've said your perspective on the world is very different from that of my people, or even the humans native to this world.”

“Yeah, but there's more to it than that. It's… almost more basic, but more… I don't know, more comprehensive, maybe?” Kirito made a sound of frustration. “Okay, let me try again… Kizmel, if that book really makes you like one of us, then you're literally going to see the whole world differently. You'll see descriptions when you look at things, symbols above people's heads, and… call it status reports in the corners of your vision. All the time. You won't be able to look away from it, ever, even if you close your eyes.”

That much did sound disconcerting, Kizmel admitted to herself. She didn't quite grasp the specifics—it sounded much like trying to explain to a Swordmaster her own instinctive perceptions of the world, come to think of it; the sort of thing that could only truly be grasped through experience—but the general point seemed clear enough. “Like seeing your Mystic Scribing at all times?” she suggested.

“Exactly!” Kirito looked relieved for a brief moment, before the seriousness came back again. “You'll always be seeing some of that, no matter where you look. Probably in your dreams, when you've had it long enough; honestly, I think I'd be confused now if I didn't have it…” He shook his head. “And Kizmel… I don't know exactly how close your senses are to working like ours otherwise, but I know you feel pain. Swordmasters don't. I'm not sure if you really understand what that means.”
“I don't,” she acknowledged at once. “But I have thought about it, Kirito. I remember what you've told me, since the night we left Sachi with Klein. You Swordmasters, too, made a transition when you came to this world. You learned to see the world differently, and what it was to feel no pain. These powers are no more natural to you than to me, are they?”

“Well… no, they're not,” he conceded. “In the world we came from, we're close to some of it, maybe, but… no, most of what we can do here, we could never do in our real bodies.”

As she'd thought. Only the past week or so had the possibility of finding a means to use the Swordmaster's charms been within her reach, but Kizmel had been thinking about it for some months now. Ever since she found herself considering seeking out her human friends again, she'd thought about the implications of Mystic Scribing and the other Swordmaster powers; the more so since she'd begun to learn more about those powers, and the nature of their wielders.

Kirito had not raised a single point she hadn't already considered some time before. Which was far from saying that the decision before her was an easy one, however simple it appeared; until Countess Ryella said it outright, Kizmel had not truly considered how deeply she might be changing her relationship with her own home and people.

Even so…

“Kirito,” she said, stepping close enough to lay a hand on his arm. “Have you wondered why it is I want to do this in the first place?” When he blinked, frowned thoughtfully, and finally gave a slow shake of his head, she continued, “Because I want to know your world, Kirito. Your people. Do you know what I've seen in my journey with you?

“The variety of foods. The multitude of different styles of your buildings—I was particularly intrigued by Taira, the city you mentioned was similar to your own ancestral lands. The sheer diversity of culture, represented throughout the human settlements of Aincrad. Even among the Swordmasters themselves,” she added with small smile. “I rather doubt Guildmaster Kibaou's dialect comes from quite the same background as your own.”

Kirito coughed, smothering a surprised chuckle. “Well, almost,” he muttered. “Not quite, but close.”

“Which is still more diversity than among my own Dark Elves. Kirito, I didn't truly understand this myself until I spent months with you, occasionally mingling with other Swordmasters, but when we came to Fort Renya, I realized that your people are, in some ways, simply more vibrant than mine. Do you recall the guards at the gate there?”

He nodded uncertainly, a strange look in his eyes.

“They didn't understand a simple question, Kirito, because I did not ask it the same way I once would have.” Kizmel remembered the moment well, brief though it had been. Ordinarily it might've slipped her mind after meeting the much more imaginative Countess Ryella, but she'd seen even some humans acting in much the same way, now that she knew to look. “The Swordmasters are different, Kirito. Different in a way I want to see more of, to understand more. To find that understanding, I realized months ago that I needed to see the world through their eyes.”

Kirito swallowed, worry still obvious in those dark eyes. Worry, and… sadness? “…You may not like everything you learn, Kizmel,” he whispered. “I've told you before, there's things you may never forgive us for… and even if you do this, someday we'll all…”

He couldn't finish the sentence, but she knew what he meant. Someday the Steel Castle would be cleansed, clear to the Ruby Palace at its peak. If the Swordmasters were right, that would be the
moment they would all be free to leave, and it was obvious they believed they would never return.

Rather, their minds would leave, and no body native to Aincrad would accompany them. However much some might want to.

“I know,” Kizmel said simply. “I know you're afraid of what I may learn, but I believe it's better to know the truth, however painful. And whatever may come after... well, time remains for us to solve that problem, as well. I believe the risk is worth the reward, my friend.”

She took the book from in hand again, and carefully opened the front cover.

“You'll be a target, too, you know,” Kirito pointed, with the air of someone trying to convince someone for their sake, not his own. “What happened today—and the Black Cats. From the sound of it, that might actually have been meant to kill me...”

“Then you clearly need someone to watch your back, don't you? Certainly that's worked well enough so far.” Smiling, Kizmel lifted the book to eye level, read quickly over the first lines of ancient script, and recited, “I am Kizmel, Royal Guard and Pagoda Knight of the Kingdom of Lyusula! By ancient law and treaty, aided by Swordmaster companion, I come to honor ancient alliance! Let my sword aid my people's ally, as once theirs aided us!” She brought her gaze back up to her partner's. “Is my pledge to be honored?”

Kirito was quick-witted, as he always was where “quests” were concerned; and though his eyes were still troubled, he didn't hesitate. “It is, Lady Kizmel,” he said simply, voice stumbling only very slightly with the formality.

Light blazed from the book, brighter even than when the Baneblade had been drawn, and Kizmel fell to her knees. Something in her was changing, she could feel it; a twisting pain-not-pain, as if her very essence was being reshaped at the most fundamental level.

Sparks flared in her mind, a moment of agony that felt both eternal and over so quickly it might never have been there; distantly, she heard Kirito calling her name in panic. Static followed in her ears, darkness consuming her vision, a brief sensation of something melting away on her hand—and then it was gone.

“...Kizmel! Kizmel, answer me!”

Breathing heavily, Kizmel found herself still on her knees, head touching the ground. “I... I'm alright, Kirito,” she managed, slowly pushing herself to sitting position. “I am not sure what...”

...Is that music I'm hearing...?

Slowly, she began to realize things really had changed in those few moments of chaos. In the upper-left corner of her vision, she could see two colored bars hanging in the air, her name below one and Kirito's below the other, numbers of unknown meaning below them. To the upper-right, another set of numerals, whose meaning she could not even begin to guess at.

Looking up at Kirito, Kizmel saw a bar over his head matching the one hovering in her vision, and above it a strange, inverted green pyramid, spinning slowly in the air.

Trembling now, she brought the first two fingers of her right hand together as she'd seen Swordmasters do—noticing belatedly, with a distracted pang of sorrow, that the ring that had once been a token of her station as a Knight of Lyusula had vanished—and moved them straight down.

Just as with any Swordmaster, something akin to an ethereal sheet of paper sprang into being beside
her hand. The meaning of the words written on it were obscure to her, but she recognized it instantly as the same thing that appeared whenever a Swordmaster invoked Mystic Scribing.

...This is how Swordmasters see the world, Kizmel thought numbly. I don't understand any of it—not yet. But this is really...

Kirito reached a hand to her, a strange smile on his face. “I guess it worked, huh? You okay, Kizmel? I know this is a lot to take in…”

She took his hand, letting him pull her to her feet—then threw her arms around his neck, pulling him in close. “It worked,” she said giddily. “This… this is how you see the world, isn't it, Kirito? These numbers, bars, strange symbols… This is how Swordmasters view this world?”

“Um. Yeah.” Obviously caught completely off-guard, he hesitantly returned the hug. “Er… it's going to take a little while to explain what all of that means; you don't have the same frame of reference to begin with…”

“It will be worth the effort,” Kizmel said firmly, tightening her grip. “If it gives me greater insight into your people, my friend, it will all be worth it.”

Yes. I want to know your world better, Kirito. The strange, wonderful place I've seen only glimpses of. The place that sent you here...

Chapter End Notes

Next major milestone of the story here, and probably the most critical up to this point.

Two major continuity errors as well, I must confess, though in my defense one of them is because the volume contradicting it hadn't yet been written, let alone released. Per Volume 5 of Progressive, certain things from his confrontation with PoH shouldn't have surprised him, but that volume only came out even in Japan over a year after this chapter was originally written.

More glaringly, I'd forgotten Kirito already knew precision attacks could break weapons well before their durability ran out. My bad.

So. Is it too obvious Ocarina of Time and Twilight Princess are my favorite Zelda games?

And for the record, I really hate using XaXa. That speech pattern of his is incredibly annoying to write.
Still wrapped up in Kizmel's unexpected embrace, Kirito found himself very much at a loss. He'd known going in that any quest involving Dark Elves at this stage—especially one that was suspiciously specific to their situation—was going to be complicated, but the full extent had caught him very much by surprise.

An attack by PKers, a sword that's all too likely to kill them, and now Kizmel's… well…

After a period of time which Kirito couldn't decide was too long or too short, Kizmel slowly released him, stepping back a discreet couple of steps. As she turned her gaze on their surroundings, a look of wonder still on her face, he focused his attention on a point just above her head: on the glowing cursor that had been there the whole time he'd known her.

Most of that time, it had been the yellow of a quest NPC. Now, it was the pure green of a non-criminal player—something that to Kirito's knowledge shouldn't even have been possible.

I need to talk to Argo. There's a lot going on here that's completely outside normal gameplay, and if anyone has any ideas, it'll be her.

Hesitantly, Kirito cleared his throat. “We should probably be heading back to town,” he said. “I think we've finished everything to do with the Reliquary, and I'd rather we got our equipment repaired before we risk getting into combat again. That last battle was a close one.”

Kizmel blinked, visibly drawing herself out of her trance-like state. She glanced over her own armor, grimacing at the visible dents in her breastplate and rough tears in her Mistmoon Cloak; a quick look to one side where the shattered remnants of Kirito's previous sword had disappeared, and she sighed. “You're right, of course,” she said. “Especially since the battle against the Pillar Guardian will doubtless be soon.”

She almost said more, but while motioning to banish the menu she'd still left up, Kizmel's gaze flickered across her right hand. Hidden by her armored glove, Kirito couldn't see any change there, but after their experience in the Trial of the Brave, he could guess what was probably missing now.

“Are you all right, Kizmel?” he asked gently. “I know that ring was important. And, well, I know what it being gone means…”

“I made a choice, Kirito,” she told him, lowering her hand. “I knew what I was doing, and I don't regret it. It will just… take some getting used to, I suppose.” Shrugging, Kizmel smiled again, the happiness of the moment chasing out the sadness. “Shall we go? Doubtless Argo is waiting for the news, however little use it may be to her. I don't think I've ever known someone so eager for gossip.”

“That's because she makes money from blackmail material,” Kirito muttered, bringing up his own menu now. A few quick gestures, and the shimmering azure of a Teleport Crystal fell into his hand. “Teleport: Mydo!”
Having been born with the heightened senses of a Dark Elf, accustomed to them her whole life, Kizmel had seldom experienced anything resembling sensory overload. Even if the Swordmasters made for towns more bustling than she was used to, her exposure to them had been gradual enough that she'd never found herself overwhelmed, even on the occasions she and Kirito had rested in the more populous towns.

The return to Mydo was a different story. With the perception she'd just now obtained, Kizmel found herself briefly wondering how Swordmasters managed, seeing so many markers everywhere they looked. Above every head, a symbol like the one hovering over Kirito, either the green of Swordmasters or a simple yellow she took to denote the native humans of Aincrad.

*Kirito was serious when he said this would change the very way I looked at the world,* she realized, following in his wake in something of a daze. *If this is how they always perceive their surroundings, and those in them, it's little wonder they have difficulty accepting this world as real.*

Trying to take it all in, at the same time puzzling over the persistent scripts and symbols in the corners of her vision, Kizmel was just as glad that Kirito seemed to know where they were going. *She* was certainly having a little trouble keeping track, under the circumstances.

The way some of the more observant Swordmasters were looking at her in turn didn't help. Most were hurrying along Mydo's streets on their own business, paying little heed to anyone else, but the few who really looked at her were notably startled. From that, Kizmel suspected something about her had changed visibly, as well, though she herself could see no difference.

When they reached the inn at Mydo's southern edge, though, and slipped into an upper room, the one waiting for them there looked not at all surprised. Indeed, Argo had a smile that more closely resembled a cat at that moment than a rat.

“Too bad this was too juicy for me to talk about just for a bet,” she said whimsically, waiting for the pair to sit opposite her at a small table. “Cause I totally woulda won it. Congrats, Kii-chan, and welcome. You've just joined a crazy lot, but you've been with Kii-bou for months, you know that already.”

“Thank you, Argo… I think.” Kizmel leaned gratefully back in her chair, suddenly feeling every bit of the day's exertion. “It's going to take some getting used to, I believe, but I'm glad to be joining you.”

“As you should be. We're crazy, but we're awesome, too.” The Rat leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, and her smile became a grin. “So c'mon, guys, gimme the dirt. What happened in there?” Kirito started to open his mouth, but she just waved one hand in front of her face. “I got payment for it that you'll like, trust me. Now spill!”

He started to speak again, paused, then slumped with a sigh. “Something tells me that's both true and something I'll regret anyway, but… Well, you really do need to know all this. Things didn't exactly go according to plan, when we reached the Reliquary's treasure room…”

Kirito went over the whole story, from the PKers following them in to the recovery and nature of the Baneblade. Kizmel picked up the end of the tale, explaining as best she could the change she herself had undergone upon invoking the ancient treaty stored with the Baneblade. Lacking a full understanding even then of how her perceptions had been altered, she had some difficulty getting across some of it, but the Rat seemed to grasp it all well enough anyway.

By the end of it, Argo's expression was grimmer than usual, and she'd begun absentminded tapping her fingers on the table. “Damn,” she said finally, shaking her head with a grimace. “To be honest, guys,
I thought somethin' wasn't right when I left the Forest, but I didn't see that coming. Prince of Hell, huh…? Guy's upfront about what he is, I'll give 'im that.”

“He also seems to live up to his name, as skilled as he was,” Kizmel said, troubled. “A pseudonym, obviously; I suppose someone like that wouldn't be brave enough to act under their own name. Though in his case, I'd expect it not to matter to him, given his criminal status keeps him out of normal society anyway…” She trailed off, noticing the odd looks both her companions were suddenly wearing. “…Did I say something strange?”

Argo coughed, looking torn between amusement and chagrin, while Kirito looked away uncomfortably. “Ah, Kii-chan. This PoH guy probably picked his moniker 'cause it sounds scary, but the truth is… Well, we're kinda all usin' fake names. Kii-bou's told ya this was s'posed ta be a game, right? Part of bein' somebody else is using a different name, too.” She smiled, a distinctly bittersweet expression. “Course after this long with nobody around to call us by the real ones, I guess the ones we got here might's well be real, too.”

The elf girl blinked, settling back in her chair. Looked at in that light, suddenly another thing that had occasionally confused her about the Swordmasters made a great deal more sense. She'd never been able to find any semblance of pattern in their names, nothing like what would normally be expected in a single culture as the Swordmasters themselves seemed to come from.

If they're all self-chosen… Interesting. I wonder if that means they all chose names personally meaningful to them? Kizmel shot a quick glance at Kirito, wondering what significance there might be to his name—and, for that matter, what he'd been called in his own world. The blush on his face, though, and the memory that the Swordmasters preferred not to speak much of their normal lives kept her silent.

Across the table, though, Argo recovered her usual grin. “Wouldn't advise ya to ask around too much, Kii-chan; some of us got names that play on the real ones, and that's kinda personal. Here's a freebie, though: mine means 'Swift', in the same language that gave us Lethe Forest.”

“Ahh,” Kizmel said, nodding. “That suits you well, Argo.” Although… why does Kirito look sheepish?

“Why, thankee, Kii-chan.”

It was Kirito's turn to cough into his hand. “If we could get back on topic?” he said. “Kizmel's right, though, PoH's good. I've never seen somebody fight so well without using Sword Skills.” He frowned down at the table. “Though honestly, what worries me more is that they were able to follow us into the Reliquary at all. I know it wasn't an instanced dungeon, but the fact that we needed special keys to open it at all makes it seem like it shouldn't have been that easy.”

Argo sobered again. “That bothers me, too,” she admitted, lacing her fingers behind her head and swinging her feet up onto the table, heedless of how crowded it suddenly made the surface. “I can kinda guess, though. I mean, it's obvious the whole questline was manipulated, right? Like a certain somebody was taking a personal hand.”

“…It did occur to me,” he said quietly. “Things went a little too conveniently, especially since Kizmel and I were pretty much the only people who could do it.” Kirito clasped his hands together, looking more troubled than Kizmel was used to seeing. “Honestly, I've felt like it a few times before, the last few months.”

Kizmel frowned, feeling a chill. She didn't completely understand what they were getting at, some of the terms still unfamiliar to her, but she could grasp the implications well enough. She didn't like
them, nor what they further suggested about the person she suspected they were speaking of.

“Are you suggesting,” she began warily, “that the sorcerer who imprisoned you here has been meddling in our journey? …Does he really have that kind of power?”

“To nudge us in the direction he wants, putting us into situations that fit whatever plan it is he has?” Kirito nodded unhappily. “Yeah, Kayaba could do it. Actually, he could probably do a lot more, but I think he's trying to be subtle about it.”

“If it makes ya feel any better, Kii-chan,” Argo continued, turning a sympathetic eye on her, “I don't think Kayaba had anything to do with you and Kii-bou meeting. Prolly not even you teaming up again back in June. I'd bet he thought it was interestin', though, and there's a bunch of things he coulda done to, say, 'nudge' the Fallen Elves. And maybe tweak the Trials you guys just went through.”

…Suddenly, Kizmel felt an even stronger urge to meet the sorcerer Kayaba with steel in hand than before. Previously, it had been for the sake of her new friends who had been betrayed, and that remained a strong motive for her; now, though, the idea that he was also meddling in the conflict that nearly destroyed her people, not to mention the very trying tests of virtue they'd so recently endured…

“My guess is that most of the conflict, and what we dealt with in the Trials, was real enough,” Kirito said, continuing where Argo had left off before Kizmel could descend too far into doubt. “But things went in just the right way to make an interesting 'story' a couple times too many.”

“Exactly,” Argo said with a nod. “Anyway,” she added with a shrug, “the point here is that I think he was either tryin' to make Kii-bou test out the Baneblade, or just plain screwed up the locks on the Reliquary by accident. Even big-time sorcerers screw up when they're makin' things up on the fly.”

Not being familiar with large-scale magic, Kizmel decided to defer to the Rat's judgment, particularly when Kirito nodded his agreement. Of course, as far as she knew they had little experience with magic either, but they did seem well-enough versed with whatever Kayaba had done.

“So!” Argo said now, moving on. “PKers, and darn good ones… Guess that explains Naga.” She winced. “Think I maybe oughtta give that one to Lind as a freebie; even I'd feel bad selling that. 'Specially if you guys are right about what happened to the Cats, too. Good thing you got that nifty sword out of it.” A roll of her eyes, now; Kizmel couldn't remember ever seeing the girl's mood swing so fast or often. “Even if it's about as obvious as it gets… Genuine bonus damage to evil, eh?”

“A little too much, actually.” For all that the Baneblade had saved his life, Kirito didn't look very happy with owning the weapon now. “In a half-finish duel with an orange player, I don't think I'd even have to try very hard for a crit, and…”

“Not like they don't have it coming… but I know what ya mean, Kii-bou. None of us wanna cross that line, even if they deserve it.” Argo eyed the battered hilt protruding over his shoulder with an expression Kizmel found difficult to decipher. “I can see why else ya might be worried, too. You've gotten flack for the Beater thing for less, and with the PKer plague we got going, this could be about as bad as the mess with that flag back on the Fifth Floor… Ya still got that, by the way?”

Kirito nodded ruefully. “I thought about giving it to the KoB when they started up, since the ALS left the frontline anyway, but with Lind still the way he is…”

“Uh-huh. Guy still thinks he oughtta be Diavel's heir apparent. Well, dunno what to tell ya there, Kii-bou, 'cept maybe you should get yourself another sword when ya can. And keep that one, just in
In case PoH returns, with reinforcements, Kizmel thought to herself, feeling a chill at the thought. He and XaXa alone were formidable, and we know there are at least two more of them. By now, who knows how many have taken up their twisted ideology.

From the look on his face, Kirito wanted to disagree, but obviously could not.

Before the lull in conversation could get too oppressive, Argo suddenly clapped her hands together, dropped her feet back to the floor, and grinned. “Enough about that! Scary stuff can wait for the next big guild meeting. The important thing is, Kii-chan's officially a Swordmaster, yeah? That's awesome! If Aa-chan weren't busy, I'd say have a party.” She snickered. “On the bright side, I can't wait to see her face.”

Kizmel found herself smiling, the change in topic rescuing her spirits as well. “I'm rather pleased by it myself, Argo. Truthfully, I've been seeing this for some months now… though now that it is done, I suspect it will take some time to fully sink in. I don't even understand most of the information and skills I now have, to be honest.”

That was definitely a plotting grin that appeared on the Rat's face now. Kizmel had learned long since what it meant when Argo so closely resembled a cat about to pounce. “Figured as much, Kii-chan. And that is my payment for the wonderful dirt—ah, important information you've given me.” Conjuring up her own menu, a few deft motions dropped a small book into her hands, which she proffered to the elf girl with a flourish.

Taking it warily, Kizmel was relieved to see its cover simply read, *Don't Worry, It's Argo's Guide to Mystic Scribing!* A guidebook, then, akin to those the info broker routinely published detailing new floors of Aincrad. Although…

She glanced up, raising one curious eyebrow. “Swordmasters don't refer to it as Mystic Scribing among themselves, in my experience. Just how long have you been expecting this, Argo?”

“Since you showed up on the Twenty-Sixth Floor,” the Rat said promptly. “Figured something like this was bound to happen eventually, and even without today's story, I do kinda owe you guys a lot. So c'mon, take a look! I've spent months figurin' out how to translate things for ya. Let me know if there's anything I missed.”

“…Why do I suddenly have a very bad feeling about this?” Kirito muttered. He, too, looked better now that the subject had turned to lighter things, yet he also bore a look Kizmel recognized as, in his own words, Impending Argo Doom.

Well, it wasn't like she was entirely relaxed either, with Argo looking so amused still, but she opened the guidebook anyway, taking a chance that the other girl's need for a reputation for honest information would keep her in check.

To Kizmel's relief, that appeared to be the case. The explanations the guide gave were as irreverent as might be expected of the Rat, but they were also informative, carefully breaking down the specifics of “menus” into terms a Dark Elf could recognize well enough. In places it did seem to skirt certain details, much as Swordmasters often did with her, but far less so than usual. Argo, it appeared, had gone out of her way to try and explain, rather than approximate as Kirito was all too often forced to do.

Several minutes of reading later, though, Kizmel did come across an expression that seemed under-explained. Looking up at her partner with a frown, she asked, “Kirito? What exactly is an 'Ethics
To her surprise, he shrugged, looking as puzzled as she did. “Never heard of it. Which is weird, because I thought I did know pretty much everything in the main menu…”

“That's 'cause it ain't in the main menu, Kii-bou,” Argo said, grin widening so much Kizmel feared for the girl's face. “It's deep in some otherwise pretty pointless sub-menus, prolly to hide it from the easily-scarred youth. I'll tell ya later, for a price, but Kii-chan gets it as part of the package deal. C'mon, girl, come closer.”

Curious, a faint tingling of foreboding going down her spine, Kizmel leaned halfway across the small table. Argo crossed the other half, getting close enough to whisper in her ear so quietly even Kirito likely couldn't make it out.

A few moments in, Kizmel's face flushed as brightly as her dusky skin could. “…Argo…!”

The meeting wrapped up hurriedly after Argo's whispered explanation. Whatever it was she'd said, Kizmel was obviously rattled enough to want to finish things quickly, and after a very brief overview of a few of the more important menu functions, Kirito found himself standing back out in the hall with his partner.

Even if Argo hadn't still been chuckling when they left, he wouldn't have asked what it was all about. The last time he'd seen someone literally steaming from the ears had been when Sachi was hit by Argo's insinuations about harems, which hadn't even made Kizmel blink. If she was reacting like that, he most definitely didn't want to know what was going on.

Still, it was only after they'd returned to their own inn room that Kirito remembered something else. “Y'know, Kizmel,” he said, flopping down on his bed, “now that you've got full player privileges, we don't actually have to share a room anymore. You should be able to rent one yourself, with your share of the Cor we've saved up.”

That was one thing they had taken care of before escaping the trolling Rat. If Kizmel was treated by the system as a player now, it was only fair for her to take half of the money and mats they'd accumulated since teaming up.

The elf girl had just tapped at her shoulder when he spoke, and was beginning to frown in confusion that nothing had happened. After a moment, though, realization seemed to dawn in her eyes, and the blush that had started to fade suddenly resurfaced; it took a moment more before she seemed to realize he'd said anything at all.

“Ah, I suppose I could, yes,” Kizmel managed after a short pause. “At this point, though, I'm not sure there is any reason to. We've shared for so long, it would honestly feel strange to change it. Although…” She coughed, turning her face toward the wall. “Since other things have changed, you may want to look away for a moment. Not that I have anything to hide, of course, but I know human standards are at least as different in the bedroom as the bath…”

It took Kirito a second to figure out her meaning. When he did, it was his turn to blush, and he whipped his head around to face the opposite wall. “S-sorry! I didn't think of that—”

If she's got player menus, then of course her equipment follows the same rules. Oh, man, I hope Asuna doesn't find out about this... I know Argo must've realized it right away. Crazy troll probably even figured Kizmel wouldn't think of it 'til the most awkward moment...

Instead of the brief chiming noise Kirito usually associated with Kizmel changing clothes—an instant
swap from one outfit to another, the method by which a particular outfit was chosen something he'd never quite figured out—he heard several menu-selection sounds, and two distinct shimmering noises of equipment being switched. He tried very, very hard not to picture what the other side of the room looked like in the interval between sounds.

“As I said, Kirito, I have nothing to hide from you,” Kizmel told him. “I know it makes you uncomfortable, however, so it's something we should remember to take into account in the future.”

Then, and only then, did Kirito risk looking her way again. Despite her words, she looked noticeably more bashful than usual in her typical—at admitdently not exactly very opaque—nightgown, and she slipped quickly under the blankets. Even so, she was smiling, so he figured she couldn't be too far out of her comfort zone.

*Unlike me. This is really going to take some getting used to.*

Hurrying to change the subject, he cleared his throat loudly. “All that aside—how are you taking it all, Kizmel? The changes, I mean. I tried to warn you how different things looked to Swordmasters, but it's really something you can only understand by experiencing it yourself…”

“It will take more than a few hours to really grow accustomed to it, I believe,” Kizmel admitted, blush fading as a thoughtful expression settled on her face. Letting her head sink into the pillow, she continued. “For one, I admit to being relieved the— cursors?—are not visible indoors. That was probably the most immediately disorienting change, besides the vitality and time markings in my vision.”

Kirito nodded at that. “Yeah, that even gets to us, sometimes. It's kinda distracting when you're just trying to have a conversation with somebody… It can save your life in the field, though. Helps to know how strong a mob is relative to you—or if you should treat another player as a threat on-sight.”

“Like the two this afternoon, of course.” She grimaced, but pushed past the reminder. “Otherwise… perhaps the most disconcerting thing is that I feel tired of thinking, yet I realize now my body is not fatigued at all. I'm starting to understand better how Swordmasters can keep fighting for so long. If you feel neither pain nor exhaustion…”

“That mental exhaustion can catch you at really bad times,” he warned her, remembering a long-ago dungeon and a flash like a shooting star in the dark. “You'll be able to fight for days on end if you have to, but it's better to keep a regular sleep schedule anyway, just in case. And you'll really need to keep an eye on your HP, if you're used to pain telling you when you're injured.”

At least, that was how it was for humans. The pain part he was pretty sure applied regardless, but Kirito honestly had no idea how closely the workings of Kizmel's AI mind resembled those of a human. Given that her reasoning was so similar, though, he figured it was better to be safe than sorry.

“I thought as much,” she agreed. “I wish now we'd reached the Reliquary sooner; we'll not have as much time as I would like for me to practice before confronting the Pillar Guardian.” Idly, she brought up her menu again, poking through it seemingly at random. Still marveling at the novelty, he suspected.

Kirito was somewhat puzzled by the fact that she'd left it in visible mode. Players didn't usually make their menus visible to others at all unless showing them something specific. A player's stats, after all, were some of the most critical secrets they had in this world, not something to be shared lightly.

*Guess she means it when she says she's got nothing to hide from me,* he mused, finally unequipping
enough of his own gear to make sleeping easier without risking his modesty. Not that I've got anything to hide from her, either, on that score… And at least now I've got one question answered.

One thing Kirito had long been somewhat perplexed by was the way Kizmel's fighting style seemed to use skills from more than one weapon type. Tonight, when he'd gotten a look at her stats during the discussion with Argo, he'd noticed her weapon skill was listed as “Elven Blade”; an apparently unique skill that combined Sword Skills from One-Handed Curved Sword, Rapier, and regular One-Handed Sword.

Either that was one thing that hadn't changed when she gained player status—much as she retained the Mistmoon Cloak, however tattered it had gotten in the fighting—or it was another of the rumored skills Argo had mentioned the week before. With how everything had been going lately, he wasn't prepared to bet either way.

“Well,” Kizmel said presently, banishing her menu again, “we should have another two days, at least. We should make the most of them.” She drew the blankets up to her chin and turned a smile in Kirito's direction. “Good night, my friend.”

“Night, Kizmel.” He pulled up his own covers and made ready to go to sleep himself; before closing his own menu, though, he decided to check his own skill status. With the kind of fighting they'd been doing lately, he figured he'd probably upped his One-Handed Sword levels a bit more, and probably his Battle Healing, too…

When he got to the list, though, and started to scroll through it, he suddenly froze. If there was one thing Kirito was very careful about, it was stat point and skill slot allocation; the latter in particular was so limited that he planned their use well in advance. Partly because of that, he also knew exactly when new skill slots became available.

So why do I have nine skills instead of eight…?

October 11th, 2023

If someone had told Asuna just a year before that there would come a time when she would be sitting at the head of an enormous table in a veritable war room, she would've called them a liar. Well, more likely she'd have thought it silently, unwilling to actually speak so plainly, but the sentiment would definitely have been there.

In the town of Eisha, the settlement closest to the Thirty-Seventh Floor's labyrinth, she now found herself in just that position. The building the clearing group had co-opted for large-scale meetings seemed to have been left behind by some local—apparently now-defunct—order of knights, and in one large room it contained a rectangular table with exactly forty-eight seats, most of which were now occupied by the players who would be participating in the next boss raid.

Forty-eight, Asuna mused, watching with calculated impassivity as more independent stragglers filed in for the meeting. I doubt that's a coincidence. Just the right size for a full raid… and I'm the master of ceremonies. When exactly did this start to feel normal?

A year before, she'd never touched a VR game in her life. Eleven months before, she'd been a solo just learning the ropes; four, and she'd been teamed with the most notorious player in the game, and an outcast by association. When the Paladin Heathcliff had invited her to join the nascent Knights of Blood, it had never occurred to her that he'd intended her to be his second, yet now, here she was.

Judging from the look on the face of the blue-haired, self-styled knight sitting at the center of another coalition of players, there were still some who disapproved of that. Lind, though, wasn't likely to
make any kind of fuss at this late date, and not just because Heathcliff himself was standing at the wall behind her.

\[\text{Second-in-command, and Leader only acts as one if a battle goes badly. I should be scared, not... confident.}\]

Asuna was, though. Partly because the KoB as a whole had become a well-oiled unit, partly because for all Lind's arrogance his Divine Dragons Alliance was still a powerful force in its own right; even, partly, because Asuna now knew of another trump card, one that could make a significant difference in the upcoming battle.

\[\text{But also because of the real heroes. ...And what took them so long, anyway? Argo had slunk in and taken up a position in a particularly shadowy corner early on, but most of the regular raid members had taken seats well before the last pair arrived. Even a lot of the clearers who just help with mapping got here before they did. I know Kirito-kun likes to stay low, but being fashionably late isn't much better than being the first to arrive.}\]

She gave a mental shrug and reminded herself to talk to Argo about it after the meeting. The pair had arrived in time; for now, that was the important thing. That in mind, Asuna lightly rapped her knuckles on the table. “It looks like everyone we're expecting for the raid is here, so let's begin. First of all, we have the final results from the scouting party. Shivata-san, if you'd care to present your report?”

Shivata had, long months before, been part of an impromptu boss raid of twelve, and in the wake of that victory had remained a reliable member of the clearing group. So had his girlfriend Liten, a tank who'd switched from the ALS to the DDA when the former group retreated from the front. Both of them had not only contributed heavily to many boss raids since, but were often part of the initial scouting parties, as well.

This time, though, Shivata hesitated at being called on. “Actually,” he said, exchanging a quick glance with Liten, “there's something our guild wanted to address before that, Vice-Commander…”

Lind abruptly stood up, rescuing his subordinate while simultaneously raising Asuna's hackles just from the expression on his face. “Yes, I'm afraid there's something I believe does need to be discussed, Vice-Commander. If you'll all indulge me, I think this concerns the clearing group as a whole.”

Kirito and Kizmel looked at each other, briefly but noticeably, at those words. Asuna wondered why; the two of them had been particularly elusive lately, so she couldn't imagine what they might know about the guildmaster's intent. “If you think it's that important, Lind-san, please, go ahead,” she said, watching the two out of the corner of her eye.

The DDA's guildmaster cleared his throat, looking grim. “Thank you, Vice-Commander. To begin with, I suspect you're all aware that the Divine Dragons Alliance lost a member soon after the last boss fight?”

There was a stir through the room, among the raid members and the mappers alike. It was Agil, sitting with his small merchant contingent, who gave direct voice to it. “Yeah, the news has been making the rounds. Word is Naga got PK'ed, actually. That right, Lind?”

“...I had hoped to keep the details quiet until we'd had more time to investigate,” Lind replied with a grimace. “But yes. This is the first confirmed direct PK since we were trapped here—we have witnesses—which leads me to my main point: Naga was the first, but he won't be the last... and the truth is, we all know he wasn't the real first murder. MPKs and duel PKs have been going on for
months—most notably, perhaps, the near-total destruction of a small guild early last month.”

Asuna winced, both at the words themselves and at the visible flinch from the two survivors present from that very incident. *I hadn't realized the details had spread so far. Not that he's wrong, unfortunately.*

“It's something we're all gonna have to be on the lookout for, yeah,” Agil said, nodding unhappily. “Honestly, though, I don't think any of us really wanted to believe anybody'd be crazy enough to push things this far.”

“I didn't either,” Lind told him. “Unfortunately, it has, and Naga wasn't even the only intended victim on this floor. Right, Kirito?”

Surprised, Asuna turned her full attention on her old partner, just in time to see him direct a very wary look at the guildmaster. “…How do you know about that, Lind?”

“How' doesn't really matter right now, Kirito,” Lind said, meeting the look with a hard one of his own. “Obviously it's true though, isn't it? That you were attacked by two PKers—while doing a rather unique quest, at that. One that rewarded you by giving your companion player privileges, am I right?”

Surprise turned to shock, Asuna's gaze falling on the heretofore silent Dark Elf in their midst. “Kizmel-chan? You—”

“There's no need to ask,” Lind interrupted, looking impatient. “You can test it for yourself easily enough, right, Vice-Commander? Cursors may be invisible indoors, but I'd think a simple friend request would settle the matter.”

She glared at him, but when Kizmel only smiled in her direction, looking resigned, Asuna obediently opened her menu and did as Lind suggested. To her further surprise, the request went through; and when she'd accepted it, Kizmel went on to open a menu window of her own, hesitantly navigating unseen options and carefully typing something.

A moment later, Asuna heard the chime of a friend message arriving. [*Not how I was planning to tell you, my friend.*] It said. [*But yes. I'll tell you the story later—though no doubt you'll buy the details Kirito and I leave out from Argo.*]

*Kizmel-chan has player status now? But—how? Ooh, I am so getting the full story from Argo later!*

She wanted to grab Kirito and wring it out of him right then, actually, but Lind wasn't done. “Truthfully,” he said, cutting through the murmuring that had started among the other clearers, “I bring up Lady Kizmel's status more to draw attention to the fact that I suspect the quest involved is non-repeatable.”

“So?” Agil asked, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair. “Unless you know another elf who hangs out with us players, I don't see how it matters. I think her and Kirito nearly getting PKed is kinda more important.”

“Certainly—which is why the nature of the quest matters, because I believe the sword Kirito also received from the quest is the reason they survived.”

Asuna looked over at Kirito again. She hadn't even realized he was carrying a new sword; and at first glance, she wouldn't have thought it mattered. The hilt looked old and decrepit, the sort of thing she'd have expected him to have taken only as an emergency measure until he could get a new one.
From the look on his face, though, Lind was onto something.

“…I was hoping no one would notice that,” Kirito said finally. “But if you’re going to push it, Lind… Here’s what went down at the Reliquary.”

The explanation of the “encounter” was brief and to the point; the details of the Baneblade, its power, and Kirito’s belief that it was currently incomplete was somewhat less so. A PvP weapon in a game where PvP meant a literal duel to the death, it was both a powerful defense for its owner, and a heavy responsibility.

No wonder Kirito hadn’t wanted to even reveal it existed. If there was anything more likely to revive the cries of “Beater”, with the possible addition of “murderer”, Asuna couldn’t imagine it.

When Kirito finished the story, Lind nodded slowly. “Thank you, Kirito. That matches what I’d heard, and proves my point that this is something the entire clearing group needs to know about—and make a decision on.”

“Not so fast, Blue Boy,” came a dry interjection. Eyes were immediately drawn to Argo, who had actually stepped halfway out of her shadowed alcove. “Somethin’ Kii-bou asked, and you still haven’t answered: where’d ya hear all that? ’Cause I sure didn't tell ya. Fact is, all I’ve sold anybody ’bout the Reliquary quest was the dungeon locations. I don't trade in info nobody else can use.”

Lind opened his mouth again—probably to claim again that it didn't matter, Asuna thought acidly—but Kirito beat him to it. “From the PKers themselves, obviously,” he said evenly. “Or rather, whatever information dealer they use.”

The DDA leader frowned at him. “That's an unwarranted conclusion, Kirito—”

“It's the only possibility,” he said, cutting Lind off this time. “The only people who were present were Kizmel, me, and the killers. Argo was the only one we told, and you as know as well as I this isn't the kind of information she sells.” He fixed Lind with a hard gaze. “I'd say you should take a closer look at your source, Lind, because they're obviously dealing with some bad people.”

Lind looked back at the Black Swordsman for a long moment, obviously wanting to disagree, but in the end he only let out a slow breath. “…Perhaps you're right. But if PKers are themselves beginning to make use of info brokers in such a way, that only strengthens my point. This problem is growing, and measures must be taken—and not by individuals.”

On the one hand, Asuna couldn't actually disagree with him. She'd seen the very beginning of the player-killing crisis, had seen firsthand the devious manipulations the group led by the man now identified as “PoH” had inflicted on the clearing group. Three times in the first two months alone, they’d nearly thrown back clearing by months without directly striking a blow.

Now they've killed Naga, nearly killed two of my friends, and if Kirito-kun and Kizmel-chan are right, did kill most of a guild. They are getting bolder. Still... I don't like where Lind is going with this.

Aloud, Asuna said, “I take it, Lind-san, you have a suggestion?”

Lind shrugged. “Obviously, this is going to take much discussion, most of which will have to wait until after this next boss. That said, there’s a first step that can be taken right now, which I believe would be beneficial for all involved.” He turned back to the duo at the heart of the discussion. “Kirito, you've nearly been killed while supported only by an NPC, and have acquired a unique weapon whose use is, really, the concern of the players as a whole. Don’t you think it’s in your best
interests, and ours, if you bring that—and your unique ally, of course—into a guild?"

It took all of Asuna's self-control not to either bury her face in her hands, or challenge Lind to a duel. *Seriously?! After all this time, now of all times, you're bringing that up again?!!*

Oblivious to her reaction, Diavel's self-styled successor continued earnestly, “Surely, Kirito, you have to agree that the Baneblade's disposition is everyone's business, given its deterrence potential against PKers. In turn, you've been a solo ever since your partner joined the Knights of Blood, with only an NPC for backup. The recent attack should be evidence enough of how dangerous your current status is.” He spread his hands. “I'm sure any guild would be glad to have you, especially with the ALS no longer on the frontline…”

*And the most galling thing of all, Lind, is that I don't think you even realize how condescending you're being.* Asuna bowed her head, thoughts racing as she tried to compose a rebuttal. *Almost as bad is that I'm more worried about him than you are, so I can't even say you're completely wrong…*

She finally opened her mouth to speak, intending to at least say something to stall for a little time, but someone else beat her to the punch. “Why should he, Guildmaster?”

Lind looked to Kizmel in surprise. Up to now, he'd been mostly ignoring her, as was his usual practice; Asuna had noticed long before he had less patience with “playing along” with Kirito's partner than most, and she could see his dismissive attitude even now. Even so, he obviously hadn't expected a direct question. “I beg your pardon, Lady Kizmel?”

Kizmel rose to her feet. “I asked why Kirito and I should consider joining a guild at all, Guildmaster Lind. Guilds certainly have not impressed me with their treatment of him before.”

Kirito winced. “Kizmel,” he began, “you don't need to—”

“Yes, I do,” she said firmly. “If you will not, someone has to.” She returned her challenging stare to Lind. “I've heard what happened when the first Pillar Guardian was killed, Guildmaster. How Kirito was forced to make himself look worse than his own fellows to spare them from danger—after you, specifically, accused him of letting Sir Diavel die.”

It was Lind's turn to flinch. “I spoke hastily, not understanding the situation,” he said after a moment. “Later, you may be aware, I was one of those offering Kirito a place in a guild—”

“On the condition that he separate from his partner, one of the few people treating him well at the time,” Kizmel interrupted. “Because together they were 'too strong'. Yes,” she added when his eyes widened in surprise, “I was watching then, Guildmaster. Just as I watched Kirito repeatedly play the role of a villain for the sake of keeping peace between your guild and Kibaou's. Kibaou, who at times seemed not to acknowledge Kirito's efforts solely because politics prevented it.”

Asuna suddenly found herself hiding a smile at that one. Kibaou had always been the more belligerent of the two guild leaders, but he'd also been the more honest, in her mind. From the way Lind's face twisted, she suspected he didn't like that insinuation one bit.

Any amusement Kizmel felt at the sight quickly vanished, a very somber—sad, really—expression taking its place. “After all that,” she said softly, “we spent some time with the Moonlit Black Cats—the very guild you mentioned was destroyed last month. And after everything we did to help them, we were the ones Guildmaster Keita blamed for their deaths. Nor did he attempt to persuade his only surviving guildmate to stay with him, or go with her when she chose to keep fighting.

“So tell me, Guildmaster Lind,” Kizmel said, folding her arms. “When your 'guilds' have never
treated my partner as anything more than a pariah or a weapon—and your emphasis on the Baneblade and my 'power' suggests today is no different—why, exactly, should we consider joining one now? It's true, I've earned the right to call myself a Swordmaster, and I treasure that right, but the truth is my people—whom you would dismiss as mere phantoms in a dream—have been kinder to Kirito than you ever have."

If she hadn't felt a need to maintain the dignity of her position as Vice-Commander, Asuna would've stood up and cheered at that. After all the high-handed lectures she'd had to endure from Lind back when she was Kirito's partner, all the times his clashes with Kibaou had threatened the integrity of the clearing group, it was deeply satisfying to hear someone finally call the self-styled knight out on his self-righteousness.

The look on Lind's face fully lived up to her hopes, a slack-jawed incredulity mixed with a flush of indignation. She wasn't sure if it came from being called out in the first place, or that it was a “mere NPC” doing it—probably both, she thought—but either way, it was satisfying, and she suspected she wasn't alone in that opinion.

A sudden clang, caused by Liten's heavy gauntlet hitting her boyfriend's armor, suggested the feeling may have actually been shared by some of the DDA themselves. Not many of them, though; even Hafner looks a little irritated. Too bad.

Before Lind could recover his poise enough to respond, Agil rapped his knuckles on the table. “Lady's got a point,” he said mildly; unlike many of the other clearers present, he seemed completely unperturbed by Kizmel's very un-NPC-like behavior. “Guilds and Kirito don't exactly have the greatest history. On the other hand, Lind's got a point, too.” The big merchant didn't look happy admitting that, but he did so unflinchingly. “Right now, I don't know that that sword means anything. If things keep going the way they have, though, it might be important someday. If there really is a whole group of PKers—call 'em a red guild, I guess—Lind's right that things could get a lot worse.”

Asuna wished she could disagree with that. She did still disagree with Lind's solution, but she could see the writing on the wall as well as anyone; she'd seen it coming as long as Kirito had. But deciding how to deal with the Baneblade—assuming they really had any right to try and take it from Kirito in the first place—wasn't as simple a question as Lind wanted to think.

Despite being so called out, Lind did seem to be about to press his case further. Just as he was opening his mouth, though, another calm, quiet voice spoke first. “I agree that there is merit to Guildmaster Lind's position,” Heathcliff said from behind Asuna's chair. “However, I believe there's prior precedent for this situation which might be taken into consideration. Correct, Vice-Commander?”

At first, she had no idea what he was talking about. Then, suddenly, Asuna recalled that she had been in this position once before—as had Kirito. And Lind, if he'd just admit it. Even now, he's still playing his power games.

Taking a breath, she mentally apologized to Kirito for what she was about to do, and stood. “The Commander is correct,” she said evenly, sweeping her gaze over the assembled clearers. “Many of you weren't in the clearing group at the time, but on the Fifth Floor, the boss dropped an item that would've greatly altered the balance of power between guilds. No one could decide who should have it, so in the end it was decided a neutral party should retain custody of it for the time being.”

She could see Kirito hide a wince, but he made no move to interrupt her. She'd known he wouldn't, of course—which didn't make her feel any better about what she was doing. If anything, that just made it worse.
“The Baneblade is not as significant as that item was,” Asuna continued. “Not as things stand today. But Lind-san and Agil-san are right: the PKer problem is getting worse, not better. If things do escalate that far, we might need that weapon—and as with the guild flag, it’s clear no one will be able to agree which guild ought to have its power.

“Kirito-kun,” she said, addressing him directly now, “if you were to join any guild, the Knights of Blood would be glad to have you. I’m sure the Commander would agree with me on that. But Kizmel-chan is right, too, and if you do still want to avoid guilds…” Asuna looked out to the group at large again. “I propose, at least for the time being, the same solution as for the guild flag: leave it in the hands of a neutral party, who we know is neither a PKer nor aligned with any one guild.”

After all the times she’d watched Kirito willingly play the villain, she hated herself for being the one to suggest it now. She saw little choice, though, if the integrity of the clearing group was to be maintained; Lind would never stand for the Baneblade being with the KoB, and she was too wary of the direction the DDA was going to want to risk leaving it in their hands, either.

Outside of the DDA, at least, the idea seemed to be acceptable. There were one or two disgruntled faces among her own KoB, but the Legend Braves looked all in favor, as did most of the solos. Kizmel was actually smiling at her, while Kirito looked… resigned, she thought, As if he’d expected the outcome.

It was again Agil who played the role of third-party advocate. “Sounds like a plan, Vice-Commander.” Suddenly, he snorted. “Sounds like a lot of fuss for one sword, now that we’ve all said this heavy stuff. Might as well not have brought it up at all. So… how about we actually get to that boss-planning, huh? That okay with you, Lind?”

From the look on his face, it was not exactly “okay” with Lind, but the man forced out a grudging nod anyway. “I suppose that will do… for now,” he said, slowly returning to his seat. “Though we may need to discuss this again in the future.”

“We might,” Asuna acknowledged. “In the meantime… Shivata-san, I believe we were about to go over your report?”

Looking deeply relieved that it was all over, the DDA scout nodded. “Ah, yes, Vice-Commander. First of all—”

At least the boss planning itself had ended up being straightforward, Kirito reflected. Shivata’s scouting party had done a thorough job; barring a surprise state change when the last life bar went into the red, it looked like the battle was going to be fairly routine.

Unlike the rest of that meeting, he thought ruefully, as he and Kizmel headed into the Thirty-Seventh Floor’s labyrinth with the rest of the raid group. I didn’t count on Lind knowing the same info broker PoH’s using. Still… it could’ve been worse.

Agil’s level-headedness had as been as welcome as ever, and Kirito had to admit he felt better after the merchant’s comments about it just being one sword. Especially after the way Asuna had put forward her solution to the whole mess.

Not a suggestion she’d have made back when they were partners, he was sure. As a guild leader, though, he knew she had to look at the bigger picture now; and as Agil had said, it really was just a sword. However much Lind talked it up, as things stood it didn’t really matter.

One nice thing about traveling in such a large group: even the mobs inhabiting the labyrinth leading to the next floor didn’t pose anything resembling a real threat. The raid group made enough noise to
attract every monster within earshot, but they were dealt with as easily as swatting flies—something which couldn't quite be said of navigating the labyrinth itself.

“I hate it when floors trick us like this,” Agil grumbled as they walked through a corridor that had been turned sideways. “The main map isn't the maze the last one was, so I thought this was gonna be a breather level. Then we get to the dungeons, and we find this.”

The big merchant and his friends Lowbacca, Wolfgang, and Naijan had joined the two “outcasts” for the raid. Kirito was grateful for their support, being among the few players left in the clearing group who knew what had really gone on in incidents like the aftermath of Diavel's death.

“I wish I were more surprised,” Kizmel remarked, shaking her head. “Unfortunately, Kirito and I faced similarly confusing labyrinths in the quest we were pursuing… Truthfully, I find this place less arduous. There are no squids, and whatever their other faults might be the Dragon Knights' discipline is proving helpful here.”

Kirito couldn't argue with that, much as he'd have liked to. Maybe because of the way Lind had been challenged in the meeting, his DDA was going out of its way to quickly and efficiently open the way forward. This particular labyrinth had reset its puzzles between visits, leaving twisted corridors blocking the way and doors positioned in awkward places; the DDA members had apparently memorized Argo's maps, however, and were splitting off to flip switches and then regrouping with impressive speed.

“Never said they weren't good at what they did,” Agil said with a shrug. “I could wish Lind would get off his high horse, though.” He shot a grin at Kizmel at that. “Nice one, by the way. I don't think I've seen the guy pushed back like that since Heathcliff poached the Flash for the KoB.”

“It was nothing but the truth,” she said simply. “I might be willing to consider Asuna's offer, but Guildmaster Lind's? No. Not after how Kirito has been treated by him.” The elf girl grimaced; probably because of her train of thought, though Kirito thought the rotting hand that suddenly dropped from the ceiling—only to be slashed to pieces by her saber and Agil's axe before it got very far—might also have contributed. “Nor when it's plain Lind does not regard me as 'real'.”

“Gotta admit, Kizmel, he's not exactly alone in that,” Wolfgang pointed out, pausing to bat a Skeleton Knight aside with his greatsword. The walking bones careened toward the Legend Braves, a guild once ostracized but rehabilitated by the KoB after the Twenty-Fifth Floor debacle; they promptly tore the Skeleton to pieces. “Honestly, I pretty much thought that myself,” he continued. “After that little speech of yours? Not so sure.”

“Told ya,” Agil said. “Beats me what's going on either, but if she's a regular NPC I'll eat my axe.”

Once, Kirito would've expected his partner to react with mild bemusement. Now, she simply smiled and remarked, “I'll do my best to see that you have no reason to do that, Agil. As Argo might say, it's probably bad for your digestion.”

The merchants let out a collective laugh at that—then conversation lapsed as they reached the next floor of the labyrinth, where it looked like every mob in it was waiting for them.

Including several Ignition Squids, to Kizmel's obvious irritation.

When they reached the boss room at last, Asuna stepped to the forefront of the group, alongside a typically-stoic Heathcliff. “Here we are,” she said simply. “Follow the plan, and we'll be fine. There shouldn't be any surprises in this battle.”
“And if there are, Vice-Commander?”

She fixed Lind with a flat stare, obviously annoyed by his continued pushing. “As mentioned in the briefing, we do have one or two surprises of our own if we need them, Guildmaster. If we do, you'll see.”

If it had been her own people involved, Kizmel would've been surprised by the fact that Lind didn't try to pry further. Among the Swordmasters, though, she'd gotten depressingly used to the secrets they habitually kept from one another. That distrust is one of the greatest problems facing the conquest of this castle, she thought sadly. Yet after what I've seen, they really have no choice.

At least I have someone from whom I need not hide.

Truthfully, she was glad when the massive doors to the Pillar Guardian's dark chamber groaned open, allowing the raid group to enter. As evil—and dangerous—as the monsters that infested Aincrad were, they were an honest threat.

When the forty-eight Swordmasters had all entered the chamber, there was a deep silence for several moments. Then, in a sequence that always gave Kizmel a twinge of remembered grief, torches along the walls lit up one by one, eventually revealing what waited for them at the far end.

Four groups of three Black Knights, as heavily-armored as those she and Kirito had originally encountered. And in the center of their formation, a figure in similar armor but with an open-faced helmet, riding a similarly-armored black horse. The mounted knight's left arm carried a shield not unlike Kizmel's; the right, a black sword, lighter than the Black Knights' heavy blades yet heavier than those they used when their armor was destroyed.

For the first time, Kizmel was able to see them all as her partner did. She saw, and understood, the dark red cursors above the Black Knights, and above the mounted knight's bearded head she saw his name: Amon: The Phantom Tyrant.

“Teams C through F, focus on the Black Knights!” Asuna called out, drawing her shining rapier with a shing of metal-on-metal. “A and B, we're going for Amon!”

A and B were her own team of elite Knights of Blood and Lind's own party of Dragon Knights. Not how Kizmel might've chosen, but then she wasn't really a strategist herself, and she recognized the need to placate the leader of the second most prominent clearing guild. She and Kirito were part of F, which meant—

“We always seem to get mob cleanup,” Kirito grumbled, drawing the Baneblade. “Why is it always us?”

“So that you can suddenly switch to the main boss at just the right moment and save the day, of course,” Agil told him with a grin, twirling his axe. “Not to mention get the LA. C’mon, let’s do this!”

Kizmel thought her partner muttered something else under his breath, but even her ears couldn't quite catch it. Then, with a sigh, he took off after Agil, heading for the nearest trio of Black Knights.

As had been discussed before the battle, they split into pairs when they reached the Knights. Kirito and Kizmel went for one of them from the sides, the human cutting into the right flank with a basic Slant, the elf doing the same on the left with a Horizontal. When the Knight tried to swing its heavy blade after Kirito in return, Agil and Wolfgang slipped into the opening and dropped a Helm-Cleaver and an Avalanche on its head and chest.
**A simple enough strategy to overwhelm them,** Kizmel thought, spinning to rip into the Knight's back with a Reaver while it was recoiling. *Two of us to distract, two to deal heavier wounds, and the remaining pair fending off the other two Knights. ...This should be much easier than the previous times we've fought these foes.*

She'd meant every word she'd said to Lind about guilds. At the same time, she couldn't deny the advantages of a full party at times like these; trying to battle three Black Knights at once would've difficult, to say the least, were it just herself and Kirito. Either of them alone, she was sure, it would've been suicide.

Right now, Kizmel felt her greatest worry came from the pieces of armor that were already starting to fly off the first Knight; she actually had an attempted Linear thrown off when one of its pauldrons came free and ricocheted off the side of her head. She felt no pain, but it still staggered her, forcing Kirito to dance a step sideways before launching his own next attack.

Glancing up at the “display” hovering in the corners of her vision, she tried to see just how badly she'd been injured. It took her a moment to focus on the right “HP bar”, those of her comrades providing a distraction she hadn't counted on before the battle began. *Just a scratch—but I really must find a way to train in a full group before the next Pillar Guardian. Such a delay could easily be fatal.*

She was still very much in the blue for now, though, and the first Black Knight's outer armor was falling away. Knowing what was coming, she and Kirito split to either side, dodging the thrown sword; Kizmel promptly had to jump back to where she'd started when the Knight Naijan was keeping busy spared a moment from him to try and cut her in two. That suited her just fine, though, since it let her turn the evasion into the beginning of a Treble Scythe that ground most of her own foe's health down while it was trying to skewer Kirito.

Naijan replied to the errant blow by smashing his enormous hammer into his enemy's head. “Your mother was a hamster!” he told it as it staggered.

Catching the first Black Knight's next skill on her shield, Kizmel risked a glance at Kirito. “A hamster?” she said, confused by the odd insult.

“You're callin' us strange?” Agil said indignantly, axe spinning in a Whirlwind that finally sent the Black Knight's head sailing away, trailing red light. “Like you've got room to talk… Naijan, Lowbacca, who's next?”

“Oh, I've got this guy under control,” Naijan said, casually smashing aside his opponent's sword with his hammer. “I can wait—and you have the manners of a goat!” he added to the Knight.

Still confused, Kizmel turned her attention to Lowbacca's foe, who actually was giving the party's other axeman a rough time. *Every time I think I'm beginning to understand the Swordmasters, one of them says something completely beyond my comprehension. ...Perhaps Argo will have some idea.*

Although after the last “explanation” she'd gotten from the Rat, she wasn't sure that was safe. Her ears *still* burned at the thought of what Argo had suggested the Ethics Code option was good for…

If someone had told Asuna a year before that life-and-death battles involving dozens of other people and as many—sometimes more—monsters would eventually become routine for her, she would've thought they were crazy. Yet “routine” was really the only way to describe what was happening.
Thirty-seven floor bosses, she thought in a detached corner of her mind, trying to keep an eye on the battle as a whole in between striking at Amon herself. Almost as many field bosses. And since the Twenty-Fifth Floor, I've been leading these battles as often as not.

...Did Kirito-kun's Attract Implausible Events skill rub off on me?

Ahead of her, her own guildmaster was holding up his enormous shield to fend off Amon's heavy blade, while the other four members of their party, along with Lind's personal group, hacked away at the Tyrant and his horse. As usual, Heathcliff seemed more comfortable in a defensive role, acting as the most efficient tank Asuna had ever seen to allow the DPS players to do their part.

Routine so far, at least, she mused, stepping back for a moment to take stock of the situation. The horse was already down to the second of its three lifebars, which meant Amon would soon be undergoing a rather abrupt state change; in the meantime, the DPSers hacking at its flanks had to dodge around its stomping hooves, which even Heathcliff's shield could do little to restrain.

Off to the sides, mob control was going exactly as planned. Teams C and E had taken out one Black Knight each, while D had actually started in on their last; with six people attacking just one, it wouldn't last long, either. At the same time, Asuna was completely unsurprised to see that Team F had finished their three already, and had retreated to the edge of the boss room to heal.

First three, Asuna reminded herself. Each time Amon loses a lifebar, more will spawn. Sorry, Kirito-kun, Kizmel-chan... Hang in there. At least until it's time for the Last Attack.

“Vice-Commander, Switch!”

Reflex honed by hundreds of battles had Asuna dashing toward Amon's horse, leading with her rapier, before the words had finished penetrating her strategizing reverie. She passed by Havok, the KoB player who'd called for her, and charged the boss with a wordless yell. Just as she reached the horse's side, it reared up and tried to turn on its rear hooves, obviously trying to trample her; she ducked to the side ahead of it, and drew her blade back for a skill.

Enveloped in bright azure light, Asuna's rapier sped out to pierce the beast's hide, then came back out just as quickly. Then back in, out, and in twice more, the powerful Quadruple Pain finishing off the horse's second lifebar entirely.

In the stun inflicted by Quadruple Pain, Asuna herself caught for a moment in the post-motion of her attack, Lind suddenly rushed in, leading off with the three back-and-forth slashes and spin of the Horizontal Square. The horse neighed in pain, almost toppling itself and its rider to the floor; the impact of Lind's comrades adding several light Sword Skills of their own nearly finished the job.

At the same time, their actions pushed horse and rider alike away from Heathcliff's shield, freeing Amon's sword from its interference.

Grinning beneath his beard, Amon took the chance to draw his blade back to charge a skill of his own—and nudged his horse right beside Asuna herself. She'd recovered from Quadruple Pain's delay, but there was no time to move back; only time to either guard, or emulate one of her old partner's tricks.

Amon leaned down to launch a Sharp Nail, despite the awkward angle. Asuna met it with the opening move of a Triangular, setting off a loud boom as two skills collided, the shock of it driving them both back—at the same time giving Teams A and B plenty of openings to try and finish off the horse.
Asuna didn’t join them this time. She’d blunted the skill, but it hadn’t been without cost, so she skipped back and to the side, until she was standing behind Heathcliff’s reassuringly heavy armor and shield.

“Well done,” he commented quietly, as she drew out and opened a potion.

She hid her flush of pride at the compliment behind the bottle, making sure to down the whole thing as quickly as she could. When it was finished—and her expression was back under her control—she started to reply, only to be saved the necessity of by a glimpse of the horse’s HP bar. “We’re about to hit a state change!” she called out over the din of multiple Sword Skills going off at once. “A and B, watch for any tricks; mob control, watch for respawns!”

A few moments later, with a final Savage Fulcrum from Lind, the horse made one last cry of agony. It reared up, sending Amon flying, froze in place for a split second—and shattered into a million azure fragments.

As predicted, Asuna could hear the sound of fresh mobs spawning at the edges of the room. Those, though, she knew she could leave to the other teams; her eyes were on The Phantom Tyrant, who’d managed to land in a controlled crouch. Coming to his feet, Amon looked at the Swordmasters who’d killed his mount… and smiled.

Still following the pattern the scouts reported, she told herself. This is just regular programming. He's not like Kizmel-chan…

“A and B, with me!” she called out, loud but calm. “He's only down by half, don't let your guard down yet!”

The heavy blade hit her left flank hard enough to make her stumble a couple of steps to one side as it passed, but Kizmel only paused to recover her footing before lunging at the Black Knight who'd thrown it. This was the seventh she'd engaged since the battle began; by now, she was beginning to get used to the lack of pain even from heavy impacts.

No pain, no fatigue, she thought, carving an Uppercut through the Knight's chest armor. Off-balance, it clattered back a pace, giving Lowbacca the chance to smash his axe into its spine. So this is how the Swordmasters have accomplished to much, despite having come to this world unprepared…

Kirito blurred past her, ripping the Baneblade down through the Black Knight's left shoulder with a Sonic Leap. His new blade conferred no special strength against mere mobs, but it was nonetheless a quality weapon in its own right; despite its decrepit appearance, its blow took the Knight's “HP” down to the red. “Kizmel, Switch!”

The elf didn't need the call, already in motion again. Darting in on her partner's right, her Eldhi Arc glowed a deep crimson as it mirrored the line of Kirito's cut, then came back around and traced the path that Sonic Leap had taken.

With a guttural cry, the Black Knight shattered, and Kizmel whirled to confront her next foe.

Vitality expressed as numbers. At first it was so confusing, but now… In a world like the tales say our people lived in before the Great Separation, it would've made no sense, yet when one can keep fighting until the last of one's life is extinguished, it has a terrible simplicity.

It was disturbing, thinking of life itself in terms of mere numbers, but in combat Kizmel could see the cold logic. No wonder even those who'd been untrained civilians a year before could direct battles like hardened veterans.
Although, she thought, risking a glance at Team A as she ducked under the next Black Knight's sword, there are some here who I have no doubt simply have natural talent. Here or in any other world, some of them would thrive.

Directing the flow of battle while dancing among the blades herself, to Kizmel's eyes Asuna was not a student thrown unexpectedly into a life and death struggle, but a born leader and swordswoman who had only needed to find the world in which her talents could be expressed.

There were others she saw like that, as she moved among the blades of the remaining Black Knights to disarm and destroy them. Her own partner, as she knew well; also a blonde solo with a strange, ridge-backed short sword she could see with another of the parties, who'd managed to trap a Black Knight's lighter sword in one of those ridges. An older man she didn't recognize took the opening in an instant, hacking the Knight's head clean off with a heavy greatsword.

Sachi, too, Kizmel mused, driving her saber into the throat of her own foe. Her own fear held her back, nothing more—ah! Spinning away as soon as her latest skill had released her, she almost avoided the blow the last of the current trio of Knights had aimed at her leg. “Almost” wasn't quite good enough, though, and the impact stole her balance entirely.

“Kizmel!!” Even as she spun to the floor, she caught a glimpse of Kirito driving the Baneblade into the offender's shoulder, leaving the other to be finished by three irate merchants. Driving it back, he continued, “Are you alright?!”

“It's nothing,” she called back. “I just—need a moment to find my bearings.” Now that she had the privileges of a Swordmaster, she might no longer have felt pain, but Kizmel had just discovered being knocked to the floor was still disorienting. Despite her best efforts, it took a few moments before she could gain purchase to push herself back to her feet.

When she did, it was just in time to notice that Amon's final HP bar was nearing critical—and see a wild grin appear on his face. An icy chill ran down Kizmel's spine at the sight, and without thinking she yelled out, “Asuna! Something's about to happen!”

“Everyone, guard!” Asuna snapped at once, leaping back a step to shelter behind Heathcliff. “I think there's about to be a state—”

Amon flung his shield to one side, letting out a deep, booming laugh at the same time. Gripping his sword in both hands, he brought it to his shoulder, where it began to glow with the telltale light of a Sword Skill; then, despite no players being within the weapon's reach, he swung it in a wide arc—sending out a broad wave of brilliant spheres along the blade's arc.

Tanks like Liten, Hafner, and Heathcliff withstood the unexpected attack well enough, as did those who'd managed to get behind them. Kizmel, with a lighter shield, stumbled back a couple of steps, but held her footing; next to her, Kirito started the Baneblade whirling in his hand, defending himself with the Spinning Shield skill.

Some of the lighter Swordmasters, such as Lind, were thrown completely off their feet. Which, Kizmel knew, would've been hazardous enough with the surprising change in Amon's tactics. Making it worse in this case was that, as soon as the attack was past, the edges of the chamber flared with the arrival of a dozen fresh Black Knights, many of them close to the fallen Swordmasters.

At the same time, Amon himself leapt back to the far end of the room, where he watched the scene and laughed.

Kizmel could see in Kirito's eyes what he was thinking. Only the tanks and a few lucky ones like
themselves were still on their feet at all; over half the raid group was prone, as disoriented as she'd been earlier and worse-injured, and at least ten of them were under imminent threat from the newly-arrived Black Knights.

Two of them, at most, the pair of them could reach in time. The rest…

“Everyone still on their feet, help the fallen!” Asuna shouted over the din. “Then pull back and heal! Leader—”

As unflappable as ever, the red-garbed knight Heathcliff simply nodded. “Of course, Vice-Commander.” Leaving his shield planted firmly between him and Amon, he held out his blade in a position Kizmel didn't recognize, but which did start the weapon gleaming with a golden light.

Then, just as the blonde girl Kizmel had noticed earlier was about to take a Black Knight's sword to the neck, Heathcliff swung his directly over his head with a shout, pointing it to the ceiling. The brilliant flash that filled the room suddenly gave Kizmel a clue about the “unique skill” Argo had hinted at a week and many battles ago.

The light was brilliant to her eyes, at least. To the Black Knights, it was apparently blinding; as one, the new arrivals stumbled back, shielding their eyes. “Now!” Asuna ordered. “Pull everyone back!”

Some of the downed players managed to haul themselves up in the opening Heathcliff's strange skill had given them, and they helped the tanks drag those who were still stunned away from the frontline. Kizmel almost moved to help herself, but Kirito gave a minute shake of his head, a frown on his face.

When he burst into sudden motion a moment later, she followed. He skidded to a halt beside Heathcliff, already starting another Spinning Shield; taking the cue, she set herself and raised her shield to widen the defense.

As Kirito had obviously realized, Amon took that moment—when the retreating fighters' backs were turned—to unleash another wave of energy spheres. Between the two with physical shields and Kirito's Weapon Defense skill, though, the attacks that might've finished off some of the wounded were deflected before they ever reached their targets.

“Ranged attacks at critical health,” Asuna muttered behind them, voice taut with the iron control of someone determined not to panic. “A full twelve new adds. We need to go on the attack if we're going to give the others time to heal, but I don't know if we can defend against Amon's attacks on the move…”

“I've got an idea,” Kirito told her, staring hard at Amon. “Let me lead with Kizmel, and bring a few other DPSers behind us.”

When Kizmel glanced back, she saw Asuna frowning. “You can't keep up Spinning Shield while running, Kirito-kun.”

“I know. But I think I know what's up with this boss.” He finally turned back to look at her. “Trust me?”

That seemed to snap the KoB vice-commander's hesitation. “Right.” Raising her voice, she called out, “Leader, please guard those on POT rotation. The rest of Team A, with me! Everyone else, keep the adds off us!”

Lind's head whipped around. “Vice-Commander,” he began indignantly, “we should still—”
"You're half-dead," Asuna cut him off. "Heal, then—Kirito-kun, incoming!"

Amon had taken advantage of the brief conference to launch another attack—this one aimed very specifically at the three who'd thwarted him before. Kizmel and Heathcliff both readied their shields, but Kirito took a single step forward, shouted, and swung the Baneblade across the path of the attack.

With a sound not unlike that of two Sword Skills colliding, the blast of energy struck the blade, rebounded, and sailed back across the room to crash into the wall just a few paces to Amon's right.

Kirito's only response to the looks Kizmel and Asuna favored him with was a sheepish grin. "Gotta thank Argo for jogging my memory later… C'mon, let's go!"

They didn't need further encouragement. While most of the rest of the raid continued to recover their health or charged to head off the Black Knights, Kizmel, Asuna, and four other Knights of Blood followed Kirito in a dead run toward the far end of the room, where Amon still stood laughing. The Phantom Tyrant wasn't idle either, though, swinging his dark sword again and again to hurl balls of energy in their path.

Each time, Kirito swung the Baneblade, knocking them back again and again—one of them even catching Amon himself in the chin, staggering him for a few crucial seconds.

Kizmel quickly realized it wasn't quite the stunning display of precise reflexes it appeared—each time the Baneblade approached one of Amon's attacks, the blade took on a glow that reached somewhat beyond its own width—but it was still impressive. More importantly, it kept them from having to stop and guard along the way.

Kirito did miss one of them, when they were almost to the Phantom Tyrant; but while the solid impact to her chest made Kizmel stumble, she kept her footing and continued on. Just a little more, she thought, gaze focused on the gleaming red bar above Amon's head. Defeat him, and the Black Knights no longer matter!

Asuna was the first of them to reach Amon. Kirito had slowed to swat an energy burst heading for the healing players behind them, and in that opening she slipped past to drive a blinding-quick Linear into Amon's chest. Kizmel followed in her wake, putting all the energy of her charge into a Shooting Star thrust directly beneath Asuna's blow.

The other members of Asuna's team came in just behind them, tearing into the Phantom Tyrant with a flurry of Sword Skills too fast and varied for Kizmel to keep track. Amon staggered under the onslaught, his health dwindling rapidly; then, in the moment his attackers were recovering from their own skills, he let out a bark of laughter, drew back his sword, and unleashed a solid wave of golden light.

Unprepared for the wide attack, Kizmel was flung back in a tumble with the others, landing in a tangled heap with Asuna. Dazed by the impact, she heard a faint chiming noise in her head; before she could figure out what it was, though, it was drowned out by Kirito's loud battle cry.

Her partner had evidently cut himself a gap in Amon's last attack with the Baneblade, and now he came to a halt right in front of it with a stomp. At the same time the Baneblade lit up with a bright blue gleam, cleaving straight up Amon's chest armor, to the left across his collarbone, down the other side, and finally ripping to the right out through his stomach.

Amon staggered once more, and tried to retaliate with another energy attack. The blast came out just a little too slow, though; Kirito cut through most of it, only flinching slightly at the fragment that bit
into his shoulder. He followed up with a Vertical Arc, the V-shaped slash crossing the red lines his Vertical Square had left behind.

Then Kizmel was back on her feet, and together with Asuna drove a matched set of Linears into Amon's gut. The Phantom Tyrant finally howled in pain with that blow, drawing the elf's attention back to his health bar—now almost empty, with a small amount of flickering red at the very end.

She exchanged a glance with Asuna, who rolled her eyes, grinned ruefully, and joined her in leaping back. “All yours, Kirito-kun!”

“It's not like I always do this on purpose, y'know!” Kirito called back. Despite the protest, though, he didn't hesitate to draw the Baneblade back to begin one last skill. Snapping it forward then, cutting through a final blast of energy from the Phantom Tyrant, he etched the inverted triangle of a Sharp Nail in deep red lines through Amon's neck and chest.

The dark knight let out a final, weak laugh. His sword dropped from his hand, and his head dropped to rest his chin on his chest.

The [Congratulations!] that appeared in the center of the chamber with Amon's shattering, along with the strange fanfare that Kizmel heard in her ears, almost didn't register. She was too busy realizing Kirito had been entirely correct at how tiring a battle could still be, even without physical exhaustion. If someone had offered her a bed then and there, she'd have taken it in a heartbeat.

“Well,” Kirito managed at length, flourishing the Baneblade much more slowly than usual, “that was kind of interesting. I thought there wasn't supposed to be that kind of magic left in Aincrad?”

“Clearly the evil that has infested the castle knows things we do not,” Kizmel said wearily, sheathing Eldhi Arc. She managed a smile then. “Fortunately, we had exactly what was needed to counter it, yes?”

“I am so buying the details from Argo later,” Asuna said, fixing them both with a mock-glare. “I know you two have been holding out on me, if Kizmel-chan is really a Swordmaster now, too. I was hoping, but—” She broke off, eyes widening. “Kizmel-chan, your HP!”

“Eh?” Kizmel blinked. Glancing up to her left, she finally got a good look at her own health again, and her eyes widened at the sight: her own HP was in the red, the bar flashing in time with the chiming in her ear.

Hurriedly, she drew a potion from her belt and downed it. “Why didn't you pull back and heal earlier?” Kirito demanded, his face having turned distinctly pale. “If you'd taken that much damage—”

“Ah…” She blushed, embarrassment chasing back the chill of her unknowing brush with death. “Apparently, I need more practice? Truthfully I found it difficult to remember to check my 'HP bar' in the fighting, and without pain to remind me…” She coughed. “At any rate. You did strike the final blow, Kirito. Did you receive anything of note?” She still found it odd, the way killing enemies caused materials to appear directly in Swordmasters' “inventories”—and it was a much safer topic just then regardless.

From Asuna's flat stare, she suspected she wasn't off the hook yet, but it did seem to distract Kirito, whom promptly brought up his menu. “Oh, yeah. Let's see… Well, that could be handy.”

With a few strokes in the air, he made a sword materialize in his hand. A weapon of the same class he always used, and more ornate than the Baneblade currently was, if probably less than what the
ancient weapon would be when fully restored.

Kirito lifted it for the raid as a whole to see. “The LA Bonus this time is just an ordinary sword,” he called out. “About as good as the Baneblade's regular stats, but nothing special. So unless somebody has a good objection, I'm keeping this; I could use something a little less conspicuous.”

From the look of things, Lind for one would have liked to object, though Kizmel wasn't sure if that was because of the quality of the weapon or just the general situation. Either way, the DDA guildmaster stayed his tongue. It was left to Heathcliff to actually comment. “You struck the final blow, and you were one who received the drop,” he said with a shrug. “Among the KoB, our policy is that those who receive drops keep them.”

“Anyway, it's just a sword,” Agil put in, resting his hands on the head of his axe. “What's there to fuss about, huh?”

“Glad everybody's in agreement.” With a few more deft motions, the Baneblade disappeared from Kirito's back, leaving room for the new sword. Tension immediately flowed out of his shoulders, and he turned back to his companions. “Anything else we need to do here, or can we head up and activate the teleporter on the next floor?”

Then he yelped, as Asuna grabbed him by the arm. Kizmel let out a startled sound of her own just after, finding herself dragged with her partner toward the door behind the place where Amon had made his final stand. “We can talk on the way,” the chestnut-haired girl said, in her best Vice-Commander voice. “But you're going to tell me everything you two have been up to on this floor—and then I'm going to buy everything you leave out from Argo!”

Kizmel's gaze met Kirito's, for once matching his look of alarm. “Ah, that's not really necessary, Asuna,” she began. “There really isn't much that didn't come up at the meeting earlier—”

“I'll be the judge of that!”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Amon is a rather blatant shout-out to a particular Zelda boss. I don't really think I did the concept justice, either; fortunately the nature of that fight gives me an excuse to revisit the mechanics later, with a tougher opponent.

Lowbacca may or may not be a shout-out to the Star Wars character of the same name; he's from Progressive canon, so I have no idea. Considering the Star Wars references in the Phantom Bullet arc, I wouldn't be too surprised.

The "Elven Blade" unique skill was my Author's Saving Throw after discovering when Progressive 4 came out that I'd gotten the classification of Kizmel's weapon all wrong. I'd been assuming sabers fell into the One-Handed Curved Sword category, and had tossed in a few Rapier skills to fill in for the dearth of canon curved sword skills, but Progressive 4 mentions they're actually considered One-Handed Swords, like Kirito's. Giving Kizmel an NPC-only skillset seemed the simplest way to cover that.

Next chapter brings the story to the end of what I had originally planned for Chapter III. ...By this time, I have mostly given up estimating when I'll reach a given event.
Chapter X: Christmas Blues

December 14th, 2023

“Ha!” Kirito’s sword, the Valiant Edge, swept out to catch the Goblin Guard across the breastplate, knocking it back a pace. Before it could recover, his left arm continued the combo, cutting a deep crimson line across its throat; the goblin’s HP promptly drained deep into the red, close to death.

Close, but not quite. Rallying in the precious fragments of time Kirito’s skill left him immobile, the Goblin Guard regained its footing, lifted its evil-looking scimitar to its shoulder to start the bright glow of a Sword Skill of its own, and charged.

“Kirito, Switch!”

Without thinking, he ducked to the side the instant he could, allowing the figure in violet armor to speed past him, driving a Reaver straight into the goblin’s throat. The monster gurgled, almost managing some kind of final curse—and slumped, shattering into pieces.

The Swordmaster Kizmel took a quick look around, alert for other enemies; finding none, she relaxed, letting her saber fall to her side. “That would seem to be all the Goblin Guards for the moment, Kirito,” she said, sheathing her blade. “Shall we break for lunch?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kirito agreed, putting away his own weapons. “The safe zone should be… this way.”

The tunnels that led to the Goblin Cavern Town on the Fortieth Floor weren’t the best place for clearers of their levels to grind, he reflected as they headed for the nearest safe zone, just outside what was considered the “dungeon” section of the tunnels. With the frontline a good seven floors above, it actually did almost nothing for their EXP. Which was exactly what made it useful to them; that, and the fact that few players seemed to know about it.

Out of the way, with a convenient safe area and enemies with low EXP but high defense: ideal for what they’d been working on since just after the conquest of the Thirty-Seventh Floor.

The safe area within the tunnels seemed to be the remains of a dwarf camp, abandoned who knew how long ago. All that remained were carved-stone seats and a table, at the edge of an underground spring. Lit by ancient torches reflecting off deposits of precious gems, it was actually a pretty nice place—for a tunnel system infested by goblins, anyway.

The two of them quickly found seats on either side of the table, stowed their weapons, and turned at once to lunch. Kirito contented himself with a simple sandwich as usual; Kizmel conjured a couple slices of pizza from her storage, still looking fascinated by the process as her latest foray into human cuisine materialized from thin air.

Two months, and it's still hard to believe she's got player privileges, Kirito mused, taking a bite from his sandwich. Well, it is a big change… This has been that kind of year.
Kizmel took an experimental bite of her own lunch, took on a thoughtful look as she chewed, and finally swallowed with apparent satisfaction. “Even after all this time, the variety of human food still amazes me,” she commented. “I feel as if I could spend years and still not find more than a tithe.”

He nodded. “There is quite a bit,” he agreed, once he'd swallowed his own latest morsel. “Even I hadn't heard of a bunch of the things I've tried in Aincrad.” One of several things that impressed him even now about SAO, really. The attention to detail Kayaba had put in was nothing short of incredible.

_of course, it was to make a better death world, _he reminded himself. _All this was for was making a better “story”, that's all. He needed enough variety to keep things fresh for at least a couple of years…_

Conversation lapsed for a time, as they finished their respective lunches. Once they had, though, Kizmel simply leaned back in her stone chair, making no move to get up. “A year,” she mused. “It seems to have gone by so quickly—yet so much has happened, it's hard to believe sometimes that it has been _only_ a year.”

“Yeah,” Kirito agreed. Resting his head on his hands, he slouched casually in his own seat, and glanced idly at the time display on his HUD. “Heh… it _has_ been that long, hasn't it? A few hours, and it'll be one year to the minute since we first met in the Forest of Wavering Mists.”

“Indeed.” A small smile lit Kizmel's face, bittersweet but genuine. “I had only recently lost my sister, and had resigned myself to die fighting a Forest Elf… and you and Asuna appeared from nowhere to save my life.” The elf girl chuckled. “I confess, at first I was irritated by your interference. I thought humans had no place involving themselves in a conflict between elves.”

Remembering that she'd been just as hostile to them as the Forest Elf, before they'd chosen a side in the battle, he nodded in rueful agreement. Of course, that had seemed to be perfectly natural NPC behavior—the very last time he could remember Kizmel acting like a normal NPC. “You didn't seem to think that very long, though.”

“Your courage, and Asuna's, left its mark,” she agreed. Gaze wandering to one of the gem deposits refracting light around the cavern, she continued quietly, “Truthfully, at first I wasn't certain what to think. I had been fully expecting to die; I had not thought of what to do if I lived. Let alone how to react to being saved by two humans. Of course, by the end of that week I certainly had a much more favorable view of Swordmasters. Well, you and Asuna, at least.”

A little _too_ favorable, Kirito had had cause to think a couple of times, that first week. She'd swiftly proven herself a strong ally, provided him with very valuable advice more than once, and bailed him out of a _very_ tricky spot with the ALS and DKB. On the other hand, she'd also about given him a heart attack with her lack of concern for modesty—and from how she'd teased him over the months since, she knew it perfectly well.

Trying to force the memories out of his mind before _SAO_’s emotional expression code could start the steam coming from his ears, Kirito hurriedly pressed on. “I learned a lot about elves during that week, too,” he said, turning to look at the spring in what he knew was likely a futile attempt to hide his blush. “It was nice to hang out for a while in a place where nobody knew me as the 'Beater'.”

“Not something any of my people are likely to call you, no.” She turned to look at him again, head tilted curiously. “Was that why you came to Yofel Castle so soon after you reached the Fourth Floor? I know you had not at first realized the danger you reported, but I never thought to ask why you were there in the first place.”
Oh. That.” Kirito coughed, keeping his gaze away from hers. “Actually… we went there to see you.”

Kizmel blinked. “Me?”

Sure he was glowing in the dark by now, he could only nod. “Thing is, I remembered a human holiday too late to get Asuna anything else, so… going to Yofel Castle to see you was kind of my Christmas present for her. Not that I didn't want to see you again myself, of course!” he added hurriedly.

When she didn't reply at first, Kirito chanced a glance in her direction. To his surprise, it was her turn to blush; and if it wasn't as bright as when Argo had explained the Ethics Code to her—whatever that was—it still clearly stood out against her dusky skin.

Realizing he was looking, she quickly glanced away. “…I see. Well, I certainly can't complain. Indeed, your visit was the best present I could have asked for at the time, myself. During the war, Yofel Castle was… Well. You saw how it was.”

He had. The place had certainly been peaceful, but if anything that had chafed more for his friend. Barred by the Castle's priests even from wearing armor, for a warrior such as Kizmel it had obviously been uncomfortable.

It was her turn to cough, meeting his eyes again as her blush slowly faded. “So, what might this 'Christmas' be? I don't believe I've heard the word before.”

“Eh? Oh…” Kirito frowned, dredging up his memories of the holiday. Given the focus it usually had in Japan, it wasn't something he'd ever had much reason to pay attention to. “It's a religious celebration, from another land. In my homeland, it's… well, usually considered a day for couples.” Hurrying past that, he added, “Not always, though; there's gift-giving between friends, too. It's usually got lots of lights hung on trees, and, um… songs are traditional too, at least in some places. And fried chicken, for some reason.” He was sure there was a reason for that last one, but he couldn't for the life of him remember it.

I'm pretty sure there's another really common thing they do in the West around Christmas, but what was it? And… why do I get a sense of impending doom ala Argo, just trying to remember?

Kizmel nodded slowly, a distant look in her eyes. “I see… Actually, that sounds somewhat like my people's Yule Festival, which is also celebrated this time of year. Our traditional food is roast goat, and rather than lights on living trees we find the largest fallen trunk we can and use it at the center of a bonfire; but we, too, enjoy singing in the festival, although often accompanied by wine and ale.”

“Really?” Kirito leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “I hadn't heard about that before. When Asuna and I were at Yofel Castle last year, things didn't seem that, well, festive.”

“During the war with the Forest Elves, much was set aside,” she said softly. “I don't believe I've seen a true Yule Festival since I was a child…” The elf girl trailed off, then suddenly smiled. “With the war over, however, there will probably be one this year. Perhaps we might take some time off to visit Yofel Castle then? We might even bring Asuna with us.”

The hardcore gamer in him immediately dismissed the idea as a waste of time. After all, time spent having fun in a festival could be spent grinding his newest skill, and keeping up with clearing Aincrad so they could all go home. What was the use of anything that didn't contribute to escaping the game, after all?
But Kirito remembered the question Diavel's ghost had once asked him, and the answer he'd had to it. The way a gamer looked at Aincrad, after all—even a gamer who'd been forced into risking his real life—wasn't the way someone like Kizmel did.

“I think I'd like that,” he said, finding himself smiling back at his partner. “We might have a little trouble convincing Asuna—you know how she's been getting lately—but we all need a break here and there, and that sounds great. When is the Festival?”

“It starts on the Twenty-First, but the main event begins on the night of the Twenty-Fourth, and continues through the following day.” There was a bright, eager look in Kizmel's eyes that he found himself wishing she'd have more often. “The Yule Dance is that night, ending just at midnight.”

Kirito nodded, only absently noting the last statement. *Christmas, huh... It's obviously supposed to be a stand-in for it, then. Well, works for me.* Aloud, he began, “The Twenty-Fourth, huh? Well, by then we should have at least this floor cleared, and maybe the next one—”

“'Bout that, Kii-bou. Might have a bit of a problem.”

He jumped off his seat in pure reflex, hand darting up to the sword he wasn't currently wearing, before he realized who it was. “Argo?” he blurted. “What're you—?”

“Business, Kii-bou,” the hooded girl standing at the safe area's entrance replied. “Got a message for ya. He tried reachin' ya direct, but didn't know where you'd gone.”

That Argo did know was unnerving, but not too surprising. What did bother Kirito was that she'd come after them, instead of just waiting for them to reach somewhere private messages could reach. He had the unsettling feeling she had some idea of why he and Kizmel had dropped out of sight for awhile, but up to then she'd seemed willing to respect their privacy.

*Which, with her, is even scarier...*

Kizmel cleared her throat. “'He', Argo?”

“Klein. He'd like to meet all three of us, soon.” Argo grimaced. “Sorry to disturb you're super-secret training, guys, but I got a bad feeling about this one. ...Think it's got something to do with Sachi.”

*Just once, I'd like to get together with him when things aren't completely crazy,* Klein thought glumly, making his way through the streets of Gasraad. Built in a style his latest guild member had described as being straight out of Renaissance Italy—as seen in a game she and her old guild had played, anyway—it was the central town of the Forty-Fifth Floor. Just far enough down from the front for a nice, inconspicuous meeting. *I guess our lives aren't that simple though, huh?*

After weaving through the crowds of NPCs and mid-level players, the self-proclaimed samurai found his way to the small, out of the way cafe Kirito had recommended, and pushed open the doors. Inside, amid a small gathering of NPCs with odd hooded outfits, he spotted two figures that stood out—three, when he realized one of the hoods didn't belong to an NPC.

Kirito waved from the table he shared with his partner and the other girl Klein had hoped to see today. “Over here,” the Black Swordsman called, voice low but pitched to carry through the sound of the other patrons.

Klein was grateful his friend wasn't any louder, especially when he noticed there was at least one more player in the room. Hurrying past a Swordmaster in the white and red of the Knights of Blood, only barely taking notice of the singing, guitar-playing girl the Knight was listening to, he dropped
carelessly into the remaining free chair at the table. “You're a sight for sore eyes, buddy,” he said honestly. “And good to see you, too, Kizmel-san,” he added, bestowing a more formal nod on the elf girl. “I heard about your quest reward from a couple months back. Congrats.”

Kizmel smiled, inclining her head in turn. “Thank you, Guildmaster Klein.”

“What, nothin' for me, 'Guildmaster'? Aren't ya happy to see me, too?” Argo the Rat tossed back her hood, took a deep gulp from the tankard in front of her, and fixed him with a mock-glare. “A girl might start to feel unappreciated, ya know.”

“That depends on how much Cor you're gonna get out of me, and for what,” Klein shot back. The fire quickly drained him, though, and his shoulders slumped. “I'll tell you this, though: you've got the right idea to have a drink handy. Excuse me!”

By the time he'd gotten the closest Aincrad had to a good, stiff drink in his hands, Kirito was looking at him with a concerned frown. “Okay, Klein,” he said, leaning forward over the table. “What's wrong? You don't usually call us up for a meeting like this.” He bit his lip, a worried look in his eyes. “Has something happened to…?”

Klein quickly shook his head. “Nah, Sachi's fine, Kirito. Don't worry about that. …Well, mostly.” He sighed, taking a long pull from his drink to buy himself a few moments. “Actually, I did call you because of Sachi-chan. Thing is… Look, you guys always know everything first, so you've probably already heard about this. The special event the NPCs have been talking about lately.”

As he'd expected, the two clearers and info broker nodded, none of them looking very happy. Not that Klein could blame them. He'd thought of several different complications, and if he'd figured out that many, he was sure they'd come up with more. Obviously no solo—or duo—would want anything to do with it, especially if the rumors about a certain sword Kirito had gotten his hands on were true; the last thing he was likely to want was more attention.

Of course, that was why he'd wanted to talk to them. He just wasn't sure which answer he'd really prefer to hear, given the potential consequences either way.

“You're talking about the event boss,” Kirito said after a moment, voice even lower than before. “Nicholas the Renegade. Defeat him, and you get everything in his sack—and with it being a once-a-year boss, it's sure to be really good drops. The kind any guild would want.”

“But that's not what you're asking about, of course.” Klein didn't know Kizmel very well, but it wasn't hard for him to see that she was at least as troubled as her partner. “I take it you have heard the rumors about what else this Nicholas is supposed to have with him.”

Her reaction could've just been because going after some poor fat guy with Christmas presents didn't make any sense to her; he still didn't know how the AI handled the idea of mobs like that. Klein had bought a fair bit of info about her from Argo, though, and had a pretty good idea of why else she might be bothered—and he couldn't blame her a bit.

“Yeah,” he confirmed unhappily. “The revival item. I know it's crazy,” he went on, when Kirito opened his mouth again. “After what Kayaba did, setting up the rules here, the idea of an item that brings back the dead has gotta be just a crazy rumor. Normally, I wouldn't even bother trying for it—taking Fuurinkazan up against an event boss might work out, but I dunno if it'd be worth it. But…”

Kirito closed his eyes, slumping back in his chair. “Sachi heard about it, didn't she.”

“…Yeah. And man, she's pretty determined to go for it.” Klein winced, remembering the look on
Sachi's face when she first heard the rumors. He hoped he'd never see an expression like that again. "She told me point-blank she'd go after Nicholas solo, if she had to."

He didn't know what it was like for someone to watch their guild be destroyed around them. If he had anything to say about it, he never would, and Sachi would never see it again. Having seen it once, though, had obviously left its mark on her, and she'd gone from being quietly determined—as she'd been since Kirito had first brought her to Fuurinkazan's guildhouse—to frighteningly single-minded.

"I know it's a long shot," Klein continued. "I know it's crazy. But—dammit, Kirito, even if she wasn't talking about trying to fight a boss all by herself, she's one of mine! I owe her the chance, however small! So please—if you know anything at all, any weird rumor from the beta test, even…!" He bowed his head, clasping his hands together in supplication. "And Argo—any price, I'll pay it! Even for a scrap!"

For a long moment, the others were silent. Startled by his vehemence, maybe. Or maybe just laughing at me. I know the whole thing is crazy, and Kirito's got his own problems—

"Honestly, Klein, I might even give ya a discount, under the circumstances," Argo said, sounding unusually serious. "But I don't charge for rumors, and that's all I got." When Klein raised his head to look at her, she grimaced, raising one hand palm-up. "Nick's s'posed ta spawn under a fir tree at midnight, on the twenty-fourth day of the Month of Holly—Christmas Eve. That much everybody knows for sure. But nobody seems ta know which tree, what forest, which floor. And as for the revival item…" She shook her head. "I dunno if even any NPCs are talkin' 'bout that. I can't even figure out who started the rumor."

When she'd finished, Kizmel quietly cleared her throat. "I've not heard anything else about this Nicholas myself," she said softly, eyes downcast. "But the stories of the artifact he may be carrying… those may have come from other Swordmasters who have dealt with my people. We have legends of the 'Divine Stone of Returning Soul', which indeed is said to be able to restore life. I have never heard of it being seen in recent ages, though…"

Klein perked up, just a little. If there was one thing he had learned about things elf-related, it was that their legends tended to be pretty close to the mark where quests were concerned. If she was saying it might've existed…

"…Even if there is such a thing," Kirito said, gaze distant, "I can't imagine that it would really work. If there was any chance players could be revived, then Kayaba lied to us—and if he did, then we'd already be out of here. Well," he corrected himself, "I can think of maybe one way, if the—spell—just kept 'dead' players in comas, without letting them wake up… but that's not likely."

"I know," Klein admitted, deflating. Draining half his ale in one gulp, he continued, "I know it's a crazy idea, Kirito, but 'unlikely' isn't 'impossible'. And for something like this, that's a chance worth taking, don't ya think?"

There were shadows in Kirito's eyes, leaving the samurai wondering just how many people the so-called Beater had seen die in the year since SAO turned deadly. All he knew about was the Black Cat guild, but with how secretive Kirito could be, who really knew?

"A few months ago," Kirito said at length, "Kizmel and I found a place that looked like it might be the start of an event. There wasn't anything about it at the time, but… it was a giant fir tree, in a forest that seems to match what the NPCs have said about Nicholas' arrival."

"Ya sure, Kii-bou?" Argo asked sharply. "I've checked a buncha places m'self, and I just keeping
finding pine trees, not fir. They're a lot alike—"

“I know the difference,” he interrupted. “We had both back—I know what each of them is like. Trust me, it's a fir tree.”

_Oof._ Klein hadn't heard that kind of self-correction in awhile; everybody he knew tried their best not to even think about the real world anymore. Deliberately pushing that part aside, he leaned his elbows on the table, giving the younger swordsman his most earnest expression. “If you've got a place, lay it on me. I'll even pay you for it, Kirito, you've earned that much—”

“No charge, Guildmaster Klein,” Kizmel interrupted. “We’ll be glad to help.” She turned to her partner. “You're talking about the Lost Forest on the Thirty-Fifth Floor, right? With the confusing warp points, which made it more difficult to navigate than Lethe Forest?”

“Yeah, that's the place.” Kirito grimaced, but didn't dispute her instant agreement. “It's tricky, but we can show you the way, Klein. I made a map of it when we were first clearing the place. But if we are going to do this, we should take the time before Christmas Eve to do some grinding. Taking on an event boss with just us and Fuurinkazan is going to be risky, even for something twelve floors below the frontline.”

Klein breathed a sigh of deep relief, slumping in his chair. “Thanks, buddy. I mean it. If we just have this much, I can convince Sachi-chan to at least prepare with the guild, and…” He trailed off, realizing he'd missed something. “Wait a sec. You guys'll come with us?”

“We have our own stake in this,” Kizmel reminded him, looking down at the table again. “Remember… we were the ones who led the Black Cats into that dungeon.”

All of a sudden, he wasn't sure if he wanted more to give the unlikely duo a big hug, or track down Joe and roast him over an open fire. With how cheerful the two of them usually were, Klein had managed to forget just how bad off they'd been the night they showed up on his doorstep with Sachi.

_Hug_, he decided, seeing the look on Argo's face. _The Rat has revenge handled, I think. Too bad Kirito would probably go all hedgehog on me... Wait a second! I've got an idea..._

While the young swordsman and the elf were lost in their own thoughts, Klein surreptitiously brought up his menu below the table, typed up a quick message, and sent it—and was almost immediately rewarded with a smirk and a tiny nod from Argo.

With that handled, Klein shoved himself to his feet, deliberately noisy. “Okay, then,” he announced, clapping his hands to break Kirito and Kizmel out of whatever past vision they were seeing. “If we're gonna need to grind, let's go get Fuurinkazan and get to it. I've never lost a guildmate, and I'm not gonna let Nicholas break my record!”

Kizmel had only been to Fuurinkazan's guildhall once, over three months before. At the time, they'd been based on the Seventeenth Floor, in the town of Taira; now, while the guild hadn't gotten to the frontline yet, they had moved up their operations by quite a few floors, and currently made their home on the Thirty-Third.

Even so, it felt much the same as she accompanied Kirito and Klein to the guild's new home. The central town on the Thirty-Third Floor, Masashi, followed much the same aesthetic as Taira, and Fuurinkazan's guildhouse was another pagoda-style building.

_A little larger than the old_, Kizmel judged, following Klein inside. _Though not much... And I'm distracting myself from the real issue, of course._
It wasn't just Fuurinkazan's guildhouse she hadn't seen in over three months, she reflected on entering the building's meeting room. She hadn't seen the guild members since then, either—and not entirely by chance. She lacked her partner's history with Klein, but she had her own reasons to feel guilty.

Fuurinkazan as a whole didn't seem to agree, though. Seated around a low table in the center of the room, the eclectic group of samurai greeted their leader's guests cheerfully enough. Heavy-set Dale waved, and the mustachioed Dynamm—whom she remembered Kirito comparing to a pirate, for reasons she wasn't quite clear on—actually grinned. “Kirito, Kizmel,” he called. “Bout time Leader dragged you guys back here again.”

“Nice to see you, too, Dynamm,” Kirito replied, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. “Ah… I guess we’ll be in your care for a little while.”

“More like we'll be in yours,” Issin—a man Kizmel had always thought looked oddly gaunt—told him, shaking his head. “Honestly, any info you can give us, we'll be glad for. This one has us stumped…”

It wasn't the original six of Fuurinkazan that had Kizmel's attention, though. Her attention was quickly drawn to the one girl in the guild, seated between Issin and Kunimitsu, whom the other members seemed subtly protective of. The last time the elf had seen her, she'd worn mostly blue, her armor a style much like that favored by the DDA and KoB. At that time, she'd also been very obviously in shock, and for good reason.

Now Sachi, last survivor of the Moonlit Black Cats, wore the red lacquered armor Fuurinkazan preferred, topped by a cape not so different from Kizmel's Mistmoon Cloak. She no longer looked nearly so lost as she had three months, but she didn't look very happy, either. There was an intense, focused look in her dark eyes, one which made Kizmel a little uneasy.

“Hello, Sachi,” she said after a moment, offering a tentative smile. “It's been some time.”

“I guess it has. I'm glad to see you again, Kizmel.” To the elf's relief, Sachi's expression eased up just a bit. Not as much as she'd have liked, but a bit. “I'm sorry I haven't been in touch, but…”

“I understand.” Kizmel remembered very well her own feelings after the destruction of the Black Cat guild; more, she remembered how she herself had been in the wake of her sister's death. And Tilnel, at least, did not die by treachery.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Sachi shook herself. “I heard about you getting player status, by the way. Congratulations. And, Kirito…” She turned to the young Swordmaster, who was having difficulty even looking in her direction. “It's good to see you, too.”

“…Likewise,” Kirito managed, voice barely more than a whisper. “I'm glad you're doing okay, Sachi.”

“Course she is!” Klein clapped him on the shoulder, boisterous voice dispelling the gloom that had begun to gather. “You asked us to take care of her, and that's what we've done. Don't worry about a thing, buddy. Now c'mon, everybody sit down, and let's talk!”

Klein really was more perceptive than he looked, Kizmel thought as they all settled around the table. He might indeed by a somewhat comical sort by nature, but he obviously knew how to use that to keep up morale. An underrated skill, in her opinion, and one that more of her own people could stand to learn.
It didn't seem to lift Sachi's spirits any, but Kizmel suspected nothing was going to change that girl's mood until the matter of Nicholas the Renegade had been settled, one way or another.

From his position at the head of the table, somehow managing to look almost like a true, serious leader of warriors, Klein cleared his throat. “Alright, guys, here's the deal. If you can believe it, the Rat didn't have anything to sell me about Nicholas, but our ol' buddy Kirito and his partner did. Kirito?”

Attention turned to Kizmel's partner, and as usual he obviously wished it hadn't. He coughed, giving himself a moment to gather his thoughts. “Well, this isn't exactly solid,” he began. “Otherwise I'd have sold it Argo as soon as the NPCs started talking about Nicholas. But… if I'm right, Kizmel and I found where the boss is supposed to appear. We don't know anything about what the fight is supposed to be like,” he added quickly, “but if it's where I think it will be, it should be possible for us to beat by ourselves, if we're careful.”

“It's not on the frontlines, then?” Harry One asked, looking intent.

“Two floors above where we are right now,” Kirito said, nodding. “I don't know what kind of levels Klein's gotten you all to, but if you're doing any hunting above that… I won't say it won't be risky, but it's doable.”

“It'll be fine, Kirito,” Klein assured him, doing his obvious best to look calm and serene as he folded his arms above crossed legs. Personally, Kizmel thought he was trying too hard, but that lent its own effect to his efforts. “I agree that we oughtta do some more grinding while we've got the time, but as it is, we're about a month or so away from joining the clearing group ourselves.”

The declaration surprised Kizmel. Partly because he'd made such a direct statement about his and his guildmates' levels, amid the Swordmaster culture of secrecy, and partly at the idea that they really had gotten that strong. The last group she knew of that had attempted to climb from mid-level to clearing…

As if following her train of thought, Sachi spoke up next, her earlier warmth vanished again. “What about the revival item?” she asked, leaning over the table, eyes dark. “Do you know anything about it?”

It was Kizmel's turn to clear her throat. “There are very old tales among my people, yes,” she said. “I fear I can't tell you much, however…”

When she'd gone over what she did know, Sachi leaned back again, visibly disappointed. “…That's still a lead, though,” she murmured, apparently to herself. “Thank you, Kizmel. Um… are you two…?”

“Well we'll be going with you,” Kirito said, not quite looking her in the eye. “It's a long shot, but it's one worth trying. And I… wouldn't be able to forgive myself if something went wrong. After what already happened once, when I tried to help out…”

“That's not gonna happen again, Kirito,” Klein said firmly. “We're all gonna be careful, and we're all stronger than your friends were back then. And we're gonna get stronger still.” He swept his gaze over the assembled Swordmasters, this time looking every bit the warrior he styled himself as. “We've got ten days until Nicholas the Renegade is supposed to show up. We're going to use every one of them. No days off 'til Christmas, got it?”

“Slave driver,” Dynamm grumbled. He was grinning, though. “So. Where to, Leader? The usual place on the Forty-Fifth?”
“Not this time. That's one thing I did buy from Argo: info on a good training spot on the Forty-Sixth.” Klein pushed himself to his feet. “Time to hunt some acid-spitting Giant Ants!”

There were mock-groans all around, except from the once again silent Sachi. From Kirito and Kizmel, though, the sound was much more sincere—and Kizmel suspected there was an additional reason for Sachi's silence, as well. Acid-spitting giant insects were nothing new to them; they'd fought similar preying mantises during the attempt to bring the Black Cats to clearing level.

*It's not the same as back then,* she reminded herself, discreetly putting a reassuring hand on Kirito’s arm. *Klein is even more careful than Keita ever was, and his guild has been together longer. This won't be like those days.*

*And a few bad memories coming back will be worth it for the closure this may bring, whether the Divine Stone really exists or not.*

It was getting late by the time they began battling oversized insects, just one floor below the frontlines, but Kirito hardly noticed. From the earliest days in *SAO,* he'd been accustomed to fighting long into the night, or starting before dawn; sleep was something he gave into when he had to, more than according to any normal schedule. That was how it was for anyone, really, who was trying to stay ahead of the level curve and stay alive in this game of death.

That timing turned out to be just as well, anyway. The snowfield on the western edge of the Forty-Sixth Floor, bordered by a cliff honeycombed with ant tunnels, was known to plenty of other high-level players, to the extent that a schedule had actually been arranged around the respawning of the Giant Ants. Fuurinkazan arrived just a few minutes before another group finished, leaving the next batch free for them.

With the irregular number of players they had on hand, they'd set up a party rotation before setting out. It left Kirito sitting out the first round, hanging back with Klein; to his concern, while Sachi was also out of the party itself, she was still participating. It didn't take him long to understand why, though, and it certainly impressed him.

Honestly, watching as Issin and Kunimitsu used their polearm weapons to keep two of the Giant Ants at bay while their sword-wielding comrades took them from the flanks, Kirito felt a little embarrassed. The Reaver Dynamm unleashed against one of them, catching it just under one scythe-like arm, was textbook, reminding him of when Klein had performed that exact attack as his first Sword Skill. Harry One's followup, smashing the ant's arm off with his mace, was perfectly coordinated.

*Klein really did use what I taught him that day,* Kirito thought, taking note as Kizmel timed a Diagonal Sting on the other to give Dale an opening for a leaping Avalanche. *It's weird, seeing them fight just like that. Maybe... maybe I didn't screw up everything, after all. Not quite.*

There was a brief moment where it seemed like they'd miscalculated, a third Giant Ant having snuck up to spit acid at Issin's back while he was recovering from a Straight Thrust he'd just used to force back the first. Just as it opened its mouth, though, the ant abruptly stumbled to the side, a crimson line etching itself deeply into its flank. There was a flutter of cloth, accompanied by three more slashes to complete the Horizontal Square, and with a screech the oversized bug tumbled to the snowy ground.

The post-motion from the Sword Skill finished before the ant could right itself, and Sachi renewed her attack at once. Targeting a fallen enemy could be tricky, given the nature of Sword Skills, but she managed the angle for a modified Vertical Square smoothly enough, tracing the four slashes across the ant's torso with vicious speed and power.
It did manage to throw itself back to its feet after that, in a convulsing movement Kirito couldn't quite describe. The Giant Ant's health was down pretty far, though, and by the time it had turned to try and spit acid in retaliation, Sachi had vanished completely. It was left standing motionless in confusion, its AI as befuddled as if by an ordinary Switch.

Kirito shivered. He remembered when Sachi had gotten the Nightcloak, but back in the days of the Moonlit Black Cats, he didn't remember seeing her use it much. Aside from the time she'd hidden away from the rest of the guild, for reasons he'd never quite learned, as far as he knew she'd kept the invisibility-granting cape in storage.

Now, she'd developed an entire fighting style around it. He wasn't sure how well it would work in a boss fight, but obviously it had its uses against basic mobs.

"Kinda spooky, I know," Klein said quietly. The red samurai stood next to him, arms folded, watching his guild train. "I've never seen anything like it. Course, I don't know of anybody else even having a cloak like that, but still. Any player with a brain knows better than to go in for a fair fight, but Sachi-chan's in a class by herself: always looking for a little bit more of an edge, like the biggest min-maxer you ever saw. When she figured out how to use that in a fight…"

Kirito nodded. Kizmel's cloak couldn't be used that way, especially given it only provided true invisibility at night, but he could certainly see the advantages of one that could. It made him nervous, though, and for more reasons than one. Since as far as he remembered the quest Sachi had gotten the Nightcloak from hadn't been unique, just hard to find, it was entirely possible other, nastier people had them. Besides which…

"How many people know about that?" he asked, under the cover of the first Giant Ant shattering noisily. "What Sachi can do with it?"

From the grimace on Klein's face, the guildmaster got the point. "We've tried to keep it under wraps," he admitted. "But… there've been a couple of close calls." He sighed, breath steaming in the winter air. "This one time, we got followed back to town, and some mid-levels got nasty. Called Sachi-chan a 'Beater' to her face."

Kirito flinched, remembering vividly the last time he'd been called that.

"Yeah, I know, you'd take that like a champ, then go disappear for a couple months." Klein glared balefully ahead, as if his anger could push back the glob of acid that singed Dynamm's hair. "Sachi-chan, though… she doesn't take that kind of thing lying down. Dunno how she was with the Black Cats, but with us she's always been real quiet, even before this came up—but if somebody starts throwing 'Beater' around, she gets mad."

Conversation paused for a moment as Sachi herself suddenly appeared again, batting aside a glob of acid with her shield. Her timing was off just enough for the other Giant Ant to nick her right side; despite that, she drove her blade firmly into her target's thorax. It reared back, giving Dale a chance to lop its head off with his heavy blade, while Kizmel punished the one that had hurt Sachi.

Klein took a moment to look over the attack, a clinical look on his face. After an approving nod, though, the concern was back in full force. "She handled it—with a couple of bumps and bruises all around. Some people still don't like it, but… we're usually left alone. …Maybe a little too much."

Something about that struck Kirito as more than a little ominous. Giving Klein a sidelong look, wondering if he really wanted to know, he asked anyway: "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That Keita guy… He still won't talk to her. At all."
Off to the side, another party had arrived—a small group from the DDA, Kirito noticed absently, to judge from the armor—but the only thing he could focus on was the ball of ice that was starting to form in his gut. “He won't even talk to Sachi? I knew he… didn't take things well… but I never thought…”

“Don't think she did either. Sure as hell isn't how I'd have done things, if something like that had happened to Fuurinkazan.” Klein was glaring again; Kirito was pretty sure it had nothing to do with the extra set of Giant Ants that had just charged out of the tunnel mouth. “It was about a week before we started hearing about Nicholas when I finally got out of her that her buddy wasn't answering messages. He's still on her friends list, so she knew he wasn't dead, but he wasn't saying a word.”

Keita. The last time Kirito had seen the Black Cats' young guildmaster, Keita had used a teleport crystal to retreat to the very first floor—after knocking Kirito flat on his back and leaving him with an indictment that still haunted him. It wasn't surprising that he hadn't come up again, but for him to have even stopped messaging the only other survivor of the guild…

“I took that kind of personally,” Klein went on after a moment. “Sachi-chan's one of mine, now, and I take care of my own. So I got the guys to keep her busy, and I went down to the City of Beginnings myself to go see what the hell was wrong with him.”

Kirito swallowed hard. “I… can't imagine that went well.”

“Not really.” The samurai's jaw clenched, one hand moving as if on its own to the hilt of his katana. “I found him, all right, wandering the streets like a damn zombie. Now, I've seen my share of bad stuff in Aincrad, and I know about trauma, but—dammit, it's not right!” Klein shook his head angrily. “I told him I was Sachi-chan's new guildmaster, and that she was worried about him. And you know what he said?”

I don't think I want to. “What?”

“He got this look on his face—like I was some kinda Astral monster—and asked me if you'd introduced me to her.” Klein let out a breath in a hiss through his teeth. “Then he told me to go to hell, and stormed off. Didn't even ask how Sachi-chan was doing.”

Keita… Kirito closed his eyes, suddenly no longer surprised. Angry for Sachi's sake, but no more than resigned at how Keita had reacted to Klein. “…What did you tell Sachi?”

“Not a damn thing, of course. I didn't even tell her I'd gone to see the guy. But… I think she figured it out anyway.” On the battlefield in front of them, Harry One and Kunimitz trapped the last ant between their weapons, holding it in place; it got out a glob of acidic goo in return, landing on Kunimitz's shoulder with a loud sizzle, but was unable to do much else but struggle.

Before it could free itself, Sachi tossed back her cloak again, and together with Kizmel tore into it with her blade. She carved the figure-four of a Savage Fulcrum into its thorax, while the elf spun into a Treble Scythe that ended with a brutal slash across its compound eyes.

“She was even worse after that,” Klein said as the Giant Ant shattered, his voice barely audible even to Kirito's ears now. “‘Til we heard about Nicholas. Since then… well, you can see for yourself. I think she's doing this for Keita, as much as herself.” He snorted bitterly. “After what he did to her, I say he doesn't deserve it. But if she's gonna do it, we're right with her.”

“Hey, you guys, let somebody else in there, will ya? Other people need some EXP too, y'know!” Klein spared the DDA party leader a rude gesture, but motioned for Fuurinkazan to pull back
anyway. “I really appreciate this, Kirito,” he said as the others came back toward them. “If you hadn't told us where to look for the boss, well…”

“This is still probably going to come to nothing, Klein,” Kirito reminded him, looking away. “I can't believe there's really a revival item. Even so… Kizmel and I owe Sachi a lot. And Keita... and the others. This is something we have to do, after what we did to them—”

He was cut off by a cuff to the back of his head. “You start getting suicidal on me, I'm locking you in a room with Kizmel-san and Argo,” Klein warned him. “I dunno what would happen, but I bet it'd distract you real fast.” Still several meters off, Kizmel twitched and blushed; Klein seemed to notice, and after a quick grin lowered his voice further. “Whatever you think is your fault, you're the only reason some of us have lived this long, moron. Don't forget that.”

December 24th, 2023

The ten days spent training with Fuurinkazan reminded Kizmel painfully of the months she and Kirito had worked with the Black Cats. It was, after all, the only time other than when they'd helped the doomed the guild that they had spent any notable time with other clearers. It was inevitable that the memories would be brought to the surface.

Especially with Sachi herself as a member of both groups.

Yet as they all prepared in Fuurinkazan's guildhall, the evening the battle they'd been training for finally arrived, Kizmel realized it was different. Much like the Black Cats, Klein's guild was cheerful and optimistic; unlike Keita's group, though, every action they took was tempered with caution, an understanding of just how easily any of them could fall if they made the slightest misstep.

Even Keita was willing to take risks we would not have, she reflected, bringing up her menu to equip her armor and weapons. Most of her gear had changed much since her days as a Pagoda Knight, replaced with better items located on higher floors; now, regretfully, she replaced even her beloved Mistmoon Cloak with a heavier, fur-lined cape more suited for the colder weather. Klein listens to Kirito—and his people to him.

They are not the children the Black Cats were.

Granted, Kizmel had heard Kirito refer to himself as such, but as she watched her partner switch out his usual longcoat for a fur-collared version, she couldn't think of him that way. He might have had difficulty in social situations, but the grim expression on his face now, the certitude with which he checked his Valiant Edge, showed his maturity.

A maturity she often thought was greater than Klein's—though at this moment, the red samurai was actually looking appropriately solemn himself. Standing at the front of the gathering in the guildhall's meeting room, he looked them all over—from guests Kizmel and Kirito to his own red-armored warriors, including the quiet, focused Sachi—with a critical air, before nodding in satisfaction.

“Okay,” Klein said quietly. “We've had ten days to get ready for this. We're twenty-five levels above the floor level the boss is supposed to be—thirty-five for some of us, and someday I'm gonna figure out how you two did it—and we've got all the info there is on the boss—”

“Which isn't much,” Dynamm put in laconically.

The guildmaster glared at him, but without heat; the comment fractured the dark mood that was starting to gather. “Maybe it isn't, but we've got a massive level advantage, nine people, and a map right to where Nicholas should be showing up. We can do this. But,” he added, raising a cautioning
finger, “that doesn’t mean we’re going to let down our guard, got it? We’re gonna do this smart, and careful, and whatever loot we get from this, we're all coming back in one piece. All of us.”

From the way he spoke of Kirito sometimes, Kizmel might’ve thought that last directed at her partner specifically. Instead, all eyes turned to Sachi. The former Black Cat had said nothing since beginning the evening’s preparations, and precious little over the ten days of training; now, she met the scrutiny calmly. Almost apathetically, Kizmel thought.

But not weakly. “I won't die, Klein,” she said, quiet but firm. “No matter what, I won't die here.”

He watched her for a long moment—as did Kirito, Kizmel noticed without surprise—before nodding again, more slowly this time. “You better not. I don't want any martyrs here, Sachi-chan.” Abruptly, he clapped his hands. “Okay, then. Let's move out, kill that boss, and get home. Kirito and Kizmel-san promised me there’s a Christmas party coming, and I don't want to miss it!”

Kizmel leaned over to whisper in Kirito's ear. “Were you able to discuss things with Guildmaster Heathcliff?”

He nodded fractionally. “It’s fine. Asuna will be waiting for us in Rovia tomorrow morning.”

“…Does she know that?”

Despite the situation, Kirito grinned. “Not yet.”

After assembling into two parties—most of Fuurinkazan in one, Sachi and Harry One joining the clearing duo to round out a slightly smaller group—they set off into Masashi, heading for the Teleport Plaza. The banter that had gone on in the guildhall lapsed once they were out in the cold winter air, leaving Kizmel alone with her thoughts.

Their group was quite a contrast to the residents of Masashi and the other visiting Swordmasters, she noticed. Where they had a purpose that evening, a solemn and serious one at that, those around them were as cheerful as any Swordmasters Kizmel had ever seen. Instead of the usual habits of those pressing forward to clear Aincrad, tonight these people were enjoying the “Christmas” holiday Kirito had told her of, eating and talking amongst themselves; even some of the KoB, a group she normally associated with dedication to duty, were taking the night off.

By contrast, oddly, she saw no sign at all of the Divine Dragons Alliance. Of course, knowing Lind it was entirely likely they were taking the time to try and upstage the KoB again. They had grown ever harsher since the days Kizmel had first encountered them; back then, from what Kirito had told her, they’d been as eager as anyone to celebrate a holiday.

As they passed one such gathering in a small park, centered around a girl in a cape and large hat plucking at a guitar, Kizmel felt a pang of homesickness. Among the listeners were a pair of Swordmasters, one of them a girl with tanned skin, resting her head on the shoulder of a young man with a tamed Dagger Wolf by his side; though neither of them really resembled her sister or brother-in-law that closely, the pose still reminded her painfully of times long gone.

Those who are mourned will never return, she reminded herself, deliberately turning away from the tableau. The hands of time cannot be turned back… no matter how much we might wish it.

Glancing briefly at Kirito, then Sachi—both of whom were silent, faces darkly shadowed—she was startled to feel a hand land on her shoulder. “Oi. You okay there, Kizmel-san?”

Looking up quickly, Kizmel found Klein gazing back at her, a look of faint concern on his face.
“Ah, it's nothing,” she said after a moment. “Just... old memories.”

“About your sister, right?” he said knowingly. “I heard a little bit about that.” The guildmaster glanced briefly at Sachi, then spoke again, voice barely audible even to her elven ears. “That item we're after... that's what you're really thinking about, isn't it?”

He really was more perceptive than his “mountain bandit” look tended to suggest. “It crossed my mind,” she mumbled unwillingly. “If there were any way at all to bring her back... But even were it possible, I don't see how I could bring myself to use it. After all...”

Klein nodded, a flicker of darkness in his eyes. “You can only use it once—and we've all got people we'd like to bring back, don't we?” He cracked a tiny smile at her look of surprise. “Hey, Fuurinkazan hasn't lost anybody, but I've had friends outside the guild. Not all of 'em have made it.” He looked toward Sachi again. “Three dead from that guild, right? ...Even if this works, I'm afraid of what it's going to do to her. Having to choose which one to bring back.”

Yes. That was exactly what Kizmel had been thinking about, in the end. She longed to bring Tilnel back, yet how could she choose her sister over anyone else? Her sister's husband had followed her into death not long after, as had many others over the course of the war with the Forest and Dark Elves. Such a choice was impossible for her to make and live with.

“Yet you're still willing to help Sachi do this?” She felt she knew the answer, but asked anyway.

“Whether we help or not, she's doing this. She's made her choice, and I can either respect that and stand back, or respect it and help her through the fallout. What do you think I'm gonna do? Besides...” Klein's eyes drifted to the other loner of the group. “I've got debts of my own to pay back. Thanks for helping with that, by the way.”

The Teleport Plaza only about a street away now, Kizmel looked at him in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“C'mon, you know how Kirito is. He really needs a keeper, y'know? Somebody to watch his back, make sure he doesn't do something totally insane and get himself killed.” He shook his head, still watching Kirito's back. “Make sure he doesn't go completely crazy. When I heard his partner left him, I was worried. Bad as things were when the Black Cats broke up, I was glad when he showed up with you.”

Now she looked away, feeling a flush growing. “The timing was pure coincidence. Surely you could've filled the gap well enough...”

“He wouldn't have let me, and I think you know it. And he—” Klein broke off, noticing they were just at the Plaza. ‘I'll tell ya later. But thanks, really.” He raised his voice. “Okay, guys, this is it. Let's go to the Thirty-Fifth Floor and get this done.”

A brief cheer from most of Fuurinkazan and a shared glance between Kirito and Kizmel later, and the nine disappeared in a flash of blue light.

It had been months since the Thirty-Fifth Floor had been the frontline—in fact, it had been cleared not long after the Black Cats' encounter with The Commandant—but Kirito remembered its layout pretty well. What he didn't remember, his map mostly supplemented; and what that didn't quite cover, the notes he'd taken back then did.

Taking the lead in the Lost Forest, thus, wasn't a problem in terms of finding his way around. Knowing where to go was easy. It was what lay at the end of it that had him worried. Not the boss
fight, really—for all his words of caution, nine players at their levels would likely be more than enough—but what came after.

One thing at a time, Kirito told himself, running without hesitation from one invisible teleporter to another, his partner and Fuurinkazan following close behind. Beat the boss first. It's not likely to even have that item anyway…

He wasn't sure if he hoped it did or not. Either way, the guilt he'd tried so hard to push aside for months was heavy on his shoulders again.

After an hour of tireless sprinting through the maze of fir trees, their deadline of midnight fast approaching, Kirito finally skidded to a halt in the snow in one last unremarkable clearing. After taking a moment to steel himself, he turned to face the rest of the group: Kizmel and Klein looking supportive, most of the rest of Fuurinkazan cheerful but cautious, Sachi unnervingly calm.

“This is it,” he announced, projecting a cool confidence he didn't really feel. “Just ahead is a teleport to the giant fir tree. If I'm right, Nicholas the Renegade will be spawning in…” He paused to check his time display. “Ten minutes. If we want to turn back, now is the time.”

“No.” Somewhat to his surprise, it was Sachi who spoke first, a hard look in her eyes. “I'm not turning back, Kirito. Not now.”

A moment of silence followed, before Klein cleared his throat. Resting a hand on the hilt of his katana, he stepped forward, an easy grin on his face. “You heard the lady, Kirito. We're gonna do this thing. So let's just—”

The hissing sound of a teleport cut him off, and after a brief instant of startled paralysis the group turned almost as one to look back the way they'd come. Who would even think of coming here?! I thought I was the only one who'd figured out the clues, and Argo wouldn't have sold—

Over a dozen players materialized in quick succession, wearing very familiar armor. Familiar enough to make Kirito grind his teeth, especially when he saw the long blue hair on the group's leader, and the distinctive scimitar he wore at his side, shield slung over his back.

“The DDA?” Klein hissed, right hand going to the hilt of his sword. “What the hell are they doing here?!”

“Good question,” Kirito replied grimly, as their own group formed around them. “Lind!” he called. “I was wondering why I hadn't seen any Dragon Knights around lately. What are you doing here?”

“If you're here, then I think you already know the answer to that, Kirito,” Lind replied coolly. He hadn't gone for his weapon, but some of his subordinates were clearly thinking about it. His own expression was as hard as Kirito had ever seen it. “The revival item is something anyone would value—and I'm sure the boss that carries it wouldn't be an easy one.”

Klein scoffed. “You're not suggesting we work together for it, are you?”

“Why not? You run a guild of your own, Klein, surely you understand this better than Kirito. How cautious we have to be in this world—and how precious resources are.” Lind shook his head. “This is something too big to be left to any individual—or small group—to deal with as they wish. We all have friends, loved ones we've lost to this twisted game.”

And who would you choose, Lind? Kirito wondered. Naga? Or maybe even Diavel… None of the members he'd once worked with to kill a Floor Boss in the smallest-ever boss raid were here, he noticed; he wondered, too, if that had any significance.
Even if he'd been inclined to ask, though, someone else beat him to it. “If we do it that way, there's no point!” Sachi declared, yanking her sword out. “I need that stone!”

“You're being unreasonable, Sachi-san,” Lind retorted, expression hard. “I have been patient with your friend Kirito in the past, but this is something there can be no negotiation on. If the Divine Stone of Returning Soul is real, then the only fair way to handle it is by group discussion. If there's any chance at all of bringing back anyone who fell here—”

No negotiation. Kirito could tell that he meant it, and the way the DDA members were looking—as if they were not just willing, but eager to draw their weapons—suddenly made him very nervous about just how far they were willing to push it.

Given the look on Sachi's face when he glanced her way, he was at least as nervous about how far she was willing to go.

“No,” Sachi said, glaring at the DDA leader. “I won't let you do this. I won't let you take this chance from me!”

Lind's hands tightened into fists. “Sachi-san, with all due respect, you're not in any position to make such a statement. As good as some of you may be, the DDA has the advantage here. And as we're running short on time, I'd really suggest you be reasonable.”

Kirito swallowed, exchanging a quick look with Klein. This is bad. If he's really willing to go orange over an item that probably doesn't even exist... and he's right, there isn't time for this—

“No negotiation. Be reasonable.” Abruptly, Kizmel stepped out in front of the group, hand on the hilt of her saber. “It's interesting, Lind, that 'reasonable' with you always seems to mean doing things your way.” She looked back over her shoulder. “Everyone else, get moving. I'll hold them off.”

“By yourself?” For the first time, Lind focused on her directly, eyes widening incredulously. Yet Kirito thought there was also just a trace of anxiety there; remembering, maybe, just how strong Kizmel had been when first they met. “Lady Kizmel, that is an unreasonable—”

Once again, he was cut off, this time by Klein moving to Kizmel's side. “Not quite alone, big guy. Some of us still know what Bushido is, y'know?” He turned back to the others. “Go! There's no time!”

Kirito wanted to protest. Probably would have, actually, except the next thing he saw was a blue flash in the corner of his eye, accompanied by the hiss of a teleport. Sachi had already gone through, and she was quickly followed by the rest of Fuurinkazan.

Paralyzed for one endless moment, he locked gazes with Kizmel—who gave a slow nod, and a warm smile. Wordlessly, she mouthed, “I'll see you soon.”

Ice forming in his gut, Kirito whirled and followed Sachi through the warp point.

Unlike Kirito, Sachi had no personal experience with fir trees, but she had enough knowledge of Western Christmas traditions to recognize one on sight anyway. When she and her companions emerged from the final warp point, she knew at once that the giant tree that awaited them was exactly what she'd been looking for.

There was nothing there yet besides the tree, but Sachi knew it was the right place anyway. It was only a matter of time.
Just a little longer, guys. Just a little longer, and… I'll have it. Pulling her Nightcloak over herself, she settled in to wait.

Some of the others weren't so patient. They all drew weapons, and Dale looked around uncertainly.
“…There's nothing here, guys. You sure this is the right place?”

“It's still five minutes to midnight,” Kirito said, voice low and tight. When Sachi glanced over at him, she saw him half-crouched, sword held in a ready stance. His expression was as tense as she suspected her own to be. “Nicholas is supposed to show on the hour, remember. Be ready.”

Sachi was. Ever since she'd heard the rumors about the Divine Stone of Returning Soul, she'd been getting ready, fully prepared to go it alone if she had to. Though she was grateful she didn't; nothing would be gained if she died here.

_I've been the one left behind before_, she thought. _I won't do that to my family._ She glanced again at Kirito, who was obviously growing more tense by the second. _I won't do that to anyone. I have to live to the end of this world._ Her hand clenched on the hilt of her sword. _And if I have anything to say about it, I'm bringing at least one more person back with me!_

The five minutes remaining until midnight seemed both endless, giving her own tension time to build ever higher, and brief as an instant. Five minutes of no sound but the wind, no motion but tree branches swaying in that wind and snow softly falling from above. Five minutes of hoping her guildmaster and her friend were all right, holding off so many DDA players…

Then Sachi heard it. A jingling of bells somewhere above, quiet at first but quickly growing louder. Snapping her head up to look, she spotted the first contrails she'd seen in the year she'd been trapped in _Sword Art Online_, behind the faint shape of a sleigh flying just below the disc of the floor above.

“Here it comes,” Kirito breathed. “Get ready…”

From the back of the sleigh, a figure suddenly dropped, plummeting down to slam hard into the ground right in front of the giant fir tree. Snow was blown into the air by the impact, very briefly obscuring it; when it had dispersed again, Sachi finally got a good look at the thing she was determined to kill for the sake of her friends.


[Nicholas the Renegade] really did look like an evil Santa, Sachi thought distantly. Clad in a red suit with matching hat, a long gray beard, carrying a heavy sack on his back—but everything else screamed “monster”, from his towering six-meter height and over-long arms to his wild eyes, capped off by an axe held high in his right hand.

“It's time,” Kirito said, beginning to step forward. “Let's do this like we planned, and—”

Nicholas' madly-rolling eyes suddenly fixed on Sachi, completely ignoring the Hiding effect of her Nightcloak. Turning his head toward her, he opened his mouth, uttering a sound like warping metal—and something in Sachi finally snapped.

Throwing the cape off, she gripped sword and shield in hand and charged, screaming a wordless battlecry as she rushed through the snow to her enemy. In that moment, nothing mattered to her, nothing but killing this twisted parody of a human and gaining the spoils to bring back someone real.

“Sachi—! Dammit, after her! Make sure she doesn't hold all the aggro!”

Sachi barely noticed Kirito's protest. All she saw was Nicholas' mad gaze, all she heard was the
glitched sound clips he roared at her. Sumika, Tetsuo, Sasamaru, Ducker… this is for you!

“Die!”

Seldom had Lind ever bothered to give Kizmel his full attention, in her experience. Of all the Swordmasters with the clearing group when she rejoined Kirito, he was the one who seemed to cling most stubbornly to the idea that she was merely a figment of a deadly dream; he only ever seemed to address her in the context of his condescension toward her partner.

Now, though, he really was looking at her, and obviously wasn't happy about it. He was even ignoring Klein for now, something she found darkly amusing under the circumstances. “Lady Kizmel,” the DDA guildmaster began, “you have to realize there's no point in this. The two of you haven't the strength to keep back my men, especially with yours gone on.”

“That's true,” she replied evenly, holding her saber at guard between them. “But we can make sure you cannot pass without force—and are you truly willing to risk that? Klein and I are still green. Whoever strikes first will face consequences.”

“Oh, yeah, like we're going to worry about hitting an NPC.” One of the other DDA members, one she only vaguely recognized from Pillar Guardian raids, scoffed. “We can just go right through, Guildmaster, why waste our time—”

“She has player privileges, Quet,” Lind interrupted, expression tightening further. “She's right about that. But, Lady Kizmel,” he went on, “the same holds true for you, doesn't it? In trying to pass you, we risk going orange, but if you want to stop us, you'll face the same problem.”

Kizmel only smiled at that. “True enough, Lind, but you forget—Kirito and I are independents. A few days waiting to return to green will be little trouble for us.”

She let him digest that for a moment, and her smile widened at the grimace that followed. After all the times he'd badgered her partner about joining a guild, he had to know that truth as well as she did. Although, she thought with grim amusement, it's even less an issue than he might think. We might be barred from human towns for that time, but my people will care little for disputes among mankind.

“This is nuts, Guildmaster,” Quet said irritably, breaking the brief silence. “So one or two of us have to find a safe zone to camp out for a couple days. Isn't the revival item worth the risk? Let's just bust through and do it!”

Kizmel actually had to give Lind some credit: he didn't seem very happy by that idea, either. Even so, he slowly nodded. “Quetzalcoatl is right, I'm afraid. I would really prefer not to do this, but this is simply too important for us to walk away—”

“Hey, can somebody make a suggestion that doesn't involve risking a PK incident?” Klein demanded. “Important, yeah, I got that, but let's not be getting crazy here!” He glared at Quetzalcoatl for several moments, then switched to Lind. “You can't just let this go. Y'know what, I get that. We've got our own reasons for this. But none of us really wanna risk getting anybody killed, do we?”

Several of the Dragon Knights shifted uncomfortably. Lind himself only stared at Klein, before slowly nodding, some of the tension easing out of his shoulders. “That's true enough,” he acknowledged. “That would run counter to our very purpose here, after all. You have a suggestion, Klein?”
“An honorable duel,” Klein answered, drawing himself up to look every bit the samurai, rather than the mountain bandit. “You and one of your guys, against me and Kizmel-san. Half-Loss—basic skills only, we don't want to risk a Duel PK, do we?”

A duel… Kizmel found herself nodding, while Lind frowned pensively. That would keep them busy long enough, and save face for all sides. Of course, that presupposes our victory—but that is hardly a worthwhile question, is it?

“Oh, come on,” Quetzalcoatl complained, kicking at the snow in obvious annoyance. “Like we should waste our time like that when we've got numbers on our side—”

“Speaking of wasting time,” Klein interrupted, smiling tightly. “We do this the hard way, you'll be wasting time while Kirito and my guys finish the boss. You win a duel fast enough, we get out of your way without any more fuss. So which is it gonna be? Quick and honorable, or slow and dirty?”

After another long pause, while most of the Dragon Knights—especially the belligerent Quetzalcoatl—glared, Lind finally nodded. “Very well. If that's how it has to be… I accept the challenge. I will face Lady Kizmel, then, and Orochi will be your opponent, Klein. If there's no objection?”

“None,” Kizmel replied, before Klein could say anything. Smiling coolly at the Dragon Knight commander, she said, “I would not have it any other way.”

The axe came down hard, almost cutting her in half from the top of her head down, but Sachi had seen it coming. She was two steps to the right before it impacted, avoiding the blade itself—only to find herself thrown from her feet by the shockwave anyway, tumbling farther to the side amid the spray of snow.

She heard Kirito yell in anger, followed by the sound of his sword clashing against Nicholas' axe. A collective bellow from her guildmates came after, accompanied by the sound of half a dozen Sword Skills tearing into Nicholas' flank; their attack had come too late to preempt the boss', but bought her the time she needed to recover and come back to her feet.

Sachi managed the roll with practiced ease. Months on end she'd trained herself to fight this way, even before the tragedy that claimed her friends. Now she put that practice to the test, turning the roll into a run right back at Nicholas, her sword held back to charge another skill, her mouth open for another yell of wordless fury.

Nicholas the Renegade was some levels below them, but he was still an event boss. His attacks were powerful, and as she'd suspected her cloak was useless to hide her from his sight. She was so focused on cutting him down anyway that she'd paid no heed to defense; her shield was more or less forgotten, useless as it was against a weapon of such size as Nicholas'.

Sachi didn't care. She'd pull back to heal if she absolutely had to, but in the meantime she was going to cut down as much of Nicholas' HP as she could.

She'd just gotten into range when Kirito finished carving a Horizontal Arc into Nicholas' side. “Sachi, Switch!”

There was no need to even say it. Dashing right past her retreating friend, she thrust her sword forward before she was even within reach. She connected anyway with the blaze of red light that shot forward from her blade; the high-level skill Vorpal Strike gave her that power, and its impact against Nicholas' chest staggered the evil gift-giver back half a step.

The others of Fuurinkazan were waiting, unleashed a flurry of One- and Two-Handed Sword Skills,
spear thrusts, and mace blows on Nicholas' back and flanks. He roared again, the same glitched, metallic screech that had come before; he followed with a simple but fast Double-Cleave as he spun around, bowling over Dynamm and Dale despite the former's shield. The others managed to duck or leap back, but were still forced to hold off for a few precious moments.

It was still working. Nicholas was a boss, but they were at higher levels, with better gear, than Kayaba had apparently expected for the battle. Two of his four lifebars were already gone, and as Sachi readied herself for another attack she could see the third beginning to drain away, little by little.

*Soon,* she thought fiercely. *Soon, I'll have it! Just a little more—!*

Before she could start the Sonic Leap she planned to launch herself back into the fight, though, Kirito suddenly stepped into her path. “Pull back!” he said sharply, whipping his Valiant Edge up in an Uppercut to counter Nicholas' Overhand. “You're edging into the red; get back and heal!”

Sachi started to snap back a protest, only forcing her mouth closed by sheer will. She'd promised: she wouldn't die here. Instead, she nodded chopply, leapt back, and took a potion from her belt pouch.

*Not much longer,* she thought, wrenching open the drink and downing it with quick, angry motions. *Just a little longer...!*

Kayaba may have been a genius at programming, but as Klein took Orochi's Zekkuu skill on the edge of his katana, he reflected that the madman didn't know much about swords. In *SAO* your weapon took extra damage guarding with the flat; any self-respecting samurai knew darn well the opposite was true with a real katana.

*And ain't that a stupid thing to think at a time like this,* he groused, forcing Orochi back with the wavering half-circle of a Gengetsu. *Damn, I thought Argo was exaggerating when she said how stupid Lind was getting. All this over a rumor? He's nuts!*

Klein would've liked to have put that to Lind directly, but Kizmel hadn't exactly given him the chance. In hindsight it made some sense, since Orochi also favored the katana—though in his own humble opinion, Klein was just a tad better with it—yet he was pretty sure tactics hadn't been the elf girl's priority.

“How did you even find us, Lind?” he heard her ask, over the clash of saber-on-scimitar. “This place was hardly well-known at all, let alone its purpose.”

“The Rat knew nothing, and I knew that if anyone did, it would be you and your partner,” Lind replied; where her tone was almost conversational, his was tight, controlled. “From there—well, the DDA has a very good tracker.”

“So you spied on us.” A bit of anger in Kizmel's voice now; it almost made Klein miss Orochi's next strike completely, and he hissed when the blow still carved a shallow cut across his right shoulder. “Don't bother denying it; you shouldn't have even known Sachi's name otherwise—”

He lost track of the conversation for a bit after that, refocusing his attention on the arrogant DDA pretender to the art of Bushido who was currently trying to take off his arm. This was supposed to be a Half-Loss duel, but this Orochi guy seemed not to have gotten the memo.

*Then I'll just show him what a real samurai is,* Klein told himself. Sidestepping Orochi's next strike, he retaliated with an Engetsu, slashing once to the left then back to the right with a twist of his wrists. Orochi caught the first slice on his own katana; carried to the side by the impact, Klein's second strike came through cleanly, biting deep into the Dragon Knight's breastplate.
“I’m starting to think I may have misjudged you, Lady Kizmel,” Lind was saying when Klein could turn an ear that way again. The DDA guildmaster spoke through gritted teeth; when Klein glanced that way, Lind was raising his shield to cover, a crimson line marking his left pauldron. “Allowing then, for the sake of argument, that you are more than just an NPC—surely you understand our position. That we, too, have a legitimate concern here, with an item like this.”

“I do,” Kizmel conceded evenly. Holding her sword to her side, she let it charge with glowing power, then released it in a simple Horizontal, battering at Lind’s shield. “I, too, have those whom I would wish to see brought back. I’m sure that any Swordmaster would. Your cause has as much merit as ours.”

Brushing aside Orochi’s sword to thrust his own into the man’s gut, Klein had to grin at the look on Lind’s face. “If you realize that, then why—?”

“You’ve missed the flaw in your own argument, Lind,” Kizmel told him, taking advantage of his surprise to land a Reaver on his chest.

Lind hadn’t lasted as long as he had as frontline leader through luck, though. He grunted, then lashed out in return, forcing the elf off-balance by bashing his shield into hers. “What are you talking about?” he demanded, following up with a Vertical Arc; the downstroke missed, but the return drew a deep line through her right bicep. “If you see the logic—”

“You have as much right to the Stone as we do,” she said, pulling back her saber to prepare another skill. “But only as much. And when two causes are of equal merit, I cannot choose by logic.” Her saber took on a bright azure glow. “Nor, now, by duty.” Letting the system assist take hold of her blade, Kizmel began to turn on the spot, sword whirling into a spin. “My choice must lie with those whom I love!”

If this had been the real world, Sachi’s voice would’ve been sore from shouting. Letting out yet another battlecry, she slammed another Vorpal Strike through Nicholas’ gut, tearing a deep gash of crimson wire-frame through his mockery of a Santa costume. He jerked back with a twisted cry of pain; above his head, his final lifebar dropped to a quarter.

Nicholas fell back on the waiting blades of Fuurinkazan, who ripped into him with everything they had. In front of him, Kirito rushed into the opening Sachi had created with his dark sword in hand, whirling once he was close enough to carve Sharp Nail’s inverted triangle into Nicholas’ chest.

The red-suited boss rallied in the moment Kirito was held by his own attack's post-motion, lunging forward to sweep his axe into Kirito’s chest. With a grunt, the swordsman flew back, HP dropping a few precious percent; before he hit the ground, he contorted in a flip, turning his landing into an upright slide.

He didn’t quite manage to cancel his momentum before his back hit one of the small fir trees ringing the clearing, but his only reaction was a gasp as the virtual wind was knocked out of him. “This is the final stretch!” he called, dropping back into a ready stance. He paused to check everyone’s positions, then continued sharply, “Dynamm, everyone, get back—he’s about to try an AoE!”

Sachi leapt back instantly, recognizing herself the glow beginning to surround Nicholas’ axe. The other Fuurinkazan players scattered as well—not quite fast enough to get all the way clear, but far enough that it was only the shock of the axe’s whirling passage that reached them, not the blade itself.

“Back on your feet, and we’ll make the final push!” Kirito waited for the bowled-over, snow-covered samurai to right themselves, then nodded firmly to Sachi. “Let’s hit it with everything!”
Dynamm led in with a leaping Fell Crescent, dragging his curved blade down Nicholas' back; Issin and Kunimitsu followed him with synchronized Straight Thrusts that bit deeply enough to emerge from his chest. Harry One was next, making a Bone Crusher live up to its name by smashing his mace into the back of Nicholas' calf.

The boss staggered under the onslaught—and Dale's two-handed Avalanche to the spine drove Nicholas to his knees.

Kirito and Sachi were waiting.

With a loud yell of his own, Kirito launched into the longest Sword Skill Sachi had ever seen, his blade turning into a dark blur. One slash, two; a third, and he spun in a complete circle for the fourth. Where another skill might've finished there, this continued with a pair of full backflips, and finished with a spinning diagonal.

The seven-hit skill almost knocked Nicholas over, but his HP wasn't quite gone; a tiny sliver of red remained in his final lifebar—which left him alive to see Sachi rising in a Sonic Leap, stare him right in his separately-moving eyes, and slash her blade straight down through the top of his head.

Breathing hard, she hit the ground again in a crouch. Looking up at the boss from there, she watched his eyes roll wildly, a scream of tortured metal coming from his throat as he began to topple for the last time. Falling forward, he almost landed right on top of Sachi—only for Nicholas the Renegade to shatter into fragments just above her head, scattering to vanish in the snow.

A huge [Congratulations!] appeared in the air a moment later. Like the last time she'd seen that notice, though, it was greeted only by silence. For a long moment, no one said a word; not her, not her new friends in Fuurinkazan, not even Kirito.

Guys... I did it. I really did it... didn't I? With a shuddering breath, Sachi straightened up, put away her sword and shield, and with a shaking hand checked the rewards from defeating Nicholas. Surely, as the one who'd gotten the Last Attack...

A variety of jewels. A pair of boots that would probably have excellent stats. No sign whatsoever of any special item.

Sachi felt ice beginning to form in her stomach. Had it just been a rumor after all? Did Nicholas the Renegade really have nothing special at all. This... it can't have all been for nothing...!

The other members of Fuurinkazan were beginning to look at each uneasily, having checked their own loot drops. One head shook after another—then, just as she began to despair, she felt a hand on her shoulder. “Here, Sachi,” Kirito said softly when she turned to look at him. In his other hand was a rainbow-colored jewel, unlike anything she'd ever seen in Aincrad. “Take it.”

Trembling, she took the egg-sized stone in both hands. The Divine Stone of Returning Soul... it really exists...! I can... do this...

But who...? Tetsuo, Ducker, Sasamaru... Sumika. How do I decide...? No. First, let's make sure...

Swallowing hard, heart hammering in her chest, Sachi tapped the Stone, bringing up its menu.

“I'm afraid I really have misjudged you, Lady Kizmel. I'm sorry about that—for your sake. It would've been kinder if I'd been right...”

Even after the Dragon Knights grudgingly followed their leader back through the warp point, Kizmel...
found herself staring at the broken shards of Lind's sword. His reaction when she countered his argument, and destroyed his scimitar, wasn't at all what she'd been expecting.

It wasn't a sentiment she was completely unfamiliar with, of course. Kirito had given her a similar warning just before she gained the status of a Swordmaster. But for someone like Lind to say it, as well...

There was no time now to dwell on it, though. As a similarly-weary Klein slipped his katana back in its scabbard and sank to the snow-covered ground, the shimmering sound of a teleport came from behind them. Turning quickly, she found the rest of Fuurinkazan returning, alive and well, yet somber—and behind them, a stone-faced Kirito guided Sachi through.

Kizmel sent a questioning look to her partner. His response was a pained grimace, and a slow shake of the head.

She swallowed hard. Not that she was surprised, she had always thought it a faint hope, but even so... “Sachi?” she said gently.

Sachi plodded toward her, eyes dark. The girl came to a stop before the elf, lowered her head, and lifted a hand to reveal a brilliant jewel. “…Ten seconds,” she whispered. “The Stone only works... within ten seconds. My... my friends... it's been too long…”

She couldn't go on. Tears streaming down her face, Sachi let the Stone fall to the snow, and choked back a sob. Then another, only barely contained.

Throwing any trace of elven dignity to the wind, Kizmel pulled Sachi into a tight embrace. “Oh, my friend... I am so sorry...”

Control snapped completely, and Sachi buried her head against Kizmel's shoulder with a cry, howling the grief she'd suppressed for so long to the winter sky.

Chapter End Notes

Not really much to say about this one. I think the pacing was a bit off; it was originally written in fits and starts, as I was having health problems at the time. I like to think it wasn't too bad, though.

And yes, Kizmel quoted the Epitaph of Twilight in there. I think the .hack franchise is overrated, but darn if it doesn't have some good lines sometimes.

This two-chapter arc has a bit of mood whiplash, of course. This chapter was grim; the next is Grade-A fluff, pretty much setting the tone of fluff for the rest of the story. ...I'll try not to take quite so long to get that one posted here. (Sorry, had a tiring week.)
Chapter XI: Christmas Waltz

December 25th, 2023

After over a year trapped in the Steel Castle Aincrad, there were times he could hardly remember he’d ever had another name. That once, he’d fled as far and as fast as he could from the art of the blade. That he’d ever been anyone besides Kirito, the Black Swordsman.

Sometimes, though, he was still painfully reminded of the socially-inept otaku sleeping beneath the Swordmaster's shell. The aftermath of defeating Nicholas the Renegade was one of those times.

Sachi had calmed, at least, by the time Kirito and Kizmel arrived with her at the room Klein had more or less ordered them to stay in at Fuurinkazan’s guildhall. No longer sobbing incoherently, even the signs that she had done so at all had been wiped from her face by the physics of the virtual world. Even still, Kirito didn’t think he’d seen such a look on someone's face since the day the Black Cats had fallen.

All he could do was remain silent as the two girls sat on one of the room's futons. He wanted to say something, anything, to help, but this wasn’t a battle he knew how to fight.

"All I've ever done in this kind of situation is run away," he thought morosely, dropping wearily onto his own futon. "Monsters I can fight. This... dammit, I hate feeling this helpless..."

They all needed sleep, but none of them made any other move to turn in, instead sitting up in a long, deep silence. Finally, though, it was Sachi whose voice first broke that quiet. “It was a stupid idea, wasn’t it,” she whispered. “Bringing back the dead... it was crazy of me even to hope.”

“Not crazy, I think,” Kizmel demurred, putting an arm across the girl's shoulders. “Unlikely, certainly—but if you humans are anything like my people, it's only natural to reach for such a hope, however slim. I know if I had heard of such a thing after my sister fell, I would have fought for it just as fiercely. As it was...”

Kirito winced internally. He remembered, not long after they met, her admission she might have been hoping to die in the battle in which he and Asuna had intervened. Whether that had been part of the initial scripting their actions had apparently broken that day, it wasn’t a thought he liked very much. Less now than ever.

“...I've thought about that, too, once or twice,” Sachi admitted, looking down at the floor. “But I can't do that. I've lost so many myself in this world; I can't bear the idea of my family having to live with that... or my friends.” She smiled; a twisted, bittersweet expression. “Maybe it's just as well that I know for sure, now, that we can't bring anyone back. I took too many risks, chasing that dream.”

“There is something to be said for closure,” Kizmel agreed. “I would dearly love to have Tilnel back—but I would rather move on, with my friends, than be chained to an empty hope. As much as I've lost, I still have much to live for.”

Sachi stared at the floor for a long minute more, before taking a deep, sighing breath. “You're right,”
she said softly. “I didn't get what I was looking for... but maybe it was worth it to try, anyway. If Keita ever talks to me again, I can tell him that much. And we did at least get something out of it.” She raised her head, looking at Kirito. “Are you sure you're okay with leaving the Stone with us? It was only because of your help that we could even find it...”

He raised his hands, shaking his head. “Fuurinkazan is more likely to need it than we are,” he told her. “We're just a pair, and we're careful—and anything that does get one of us is likely to get both of us, anyway.”

*And, Kirito didn't, couldn't, say aloud, *I don't even know if it would work on Kizmel. If I needed to try, and it didn't...* He couldn't even finish the thought.

Before he could dwell on that too long, anyway, Kizmel cleared her throat. “Kirito is right, Sachi. Besides,” she added with a small smile, “I believe we have enough trouble with Guildmaster Lind as it is. No need to take possession of yet another rare artifact and attract yet more attention.”

To Kirito's surprise, Sachi actually laughed at that. Briefly, but she did, and afterward she even had a weak smile of her own. “Fair enough,” she admitted. “You two do seem to have some kind of history with the DDA. Is there some reason that Lind guy doesn't like you?”

“Long story,” Kirito said, waving a hand. “It goes back to Illfang, actually—I don't think he still blames me for that one, but who knows—but it boils down to him still wanting to be in charge of the clearing group, and, well...”

“Kirito doesn't play well with others,” Kizmel said dryly. “Present company excepted, thankfully.” Her face sobered. “I'll tell you the full story later, Sachi; perhaps at the festival. In the meantime, we had all best get some rest. ...Are you going to be all right?”

There was another long silence. “I think so,” Sachi said at length, looking down at the floor again. “Maybe not yet, but... I do feel better than I did earlier. At least I won't be wondering anymore. Or taking crazy chances looking.”

Kirito found himself nodding at that, as the girls turned to getting ready for bed. *It's a good thing we were involved. Taking on something like Nicholas solo... that's too crazy even for me. Some risks are just too dangerous, even for a “Beater” like me—*

“Wait, Kizmel, Kirito's still here—”

He looked up at Sachi's protest, just in time to see Kizmel bringing up her menu. A very brief moment of confusion followed—then he whipped his head around to face the wall, barely an instant before very familiar chimes and swishing sounds filled the room.

Face aflame, Kirito busied himself for a few moments unequipping his boots, coat, and sword; just enough to make sleep comfortable, without leaving himself dangerously exposed. Only when he heard blankets shift did he dare even glance back toward his roommates.

Tucked into her futon, her face bright red, Sachi refused to look in his direction at all. Next to her, wearing a teasing smile and her usual thin nightgown, Kizmel chuckled. “I trust him, Sachi. I know he'll not do anything I would object to.”

Dragging blankets over her head, Sachi mumbled, “There's more than one way to take that, you know!”

*I'll say! And if Argo were here, she'd really let us have it! Worse, knowing his partner's sense of humor, it was all too likely she knew exactly how it could be taken. I know you keep saying you've*
got nothing to hide from me, but this is a bit much!

Realizing from the look on Kizmel's face that his eyes were starting to stray dangerously low, Kirito hurriedly rolled to face the wall again. She was probably just trying to break the tension, he thought, pulling up his own blankets. It's hard to be gloomy after that! But still... you're lucky it's just me, Kizmel. What would you have done if I did take it the wrong way?

Thank goodness for the anti-harassment code. Knowing he didn't need to worry about some possibilities was probably the only thing that let him get to sleep.

“Rovia: prettiest town in the first ten floors, and the biggest pain to get around. If there were more bridges, I'd be really tempted to move the guildhall down here.”

“Don't even think it, Leader. We're not cut out to be boatmen.”

“Says the pirate!”

“Hey, I said if, guys, take it easy…”

Sachi chuckled at the byplay, and Kizmel hid a sigh of relief at the sound. As the combined group of Fuurinkazan and solos made their way from the Teleport Plaza of Rovia toward a dock at the far end of town, the former Black Cat was still obviously subdued, but still far better off than she'd been before.

Better, really, than when we began preparing for last night's battle, Kizmel thought, keeping a surreptitious eye on the other girl. Last night was painful... but necessary, I think. We all needed the chance to put that fool's hope to rest.

With that behind them, the elf could properly appreciate the celebration to come, as well as their current surroundings. She hadn't seen much of the canal city Rovia when first she'd fought alongside Kirito on the Fourth Floor; the conflict with the Forest Elves, as well as the battle with the Pillar Guardian, had taken all her time with her human friends then.

Klein was right: it truly was a beautiful place, in its own way. The canals were unlike anything she'd seen in other human settlements, and if there were few Swordmasters these days plying the gondolas along them, there were still many humans born of Aincrad going about their business.

Of course, there were still a fair number of Swordmaster gondolas around, waiting for the return of their owners. With the size of their group, in fact, Fuurinkazan had arranged to rent a large one from an enterprising Swordmaster who'd started a unique business of it. Kizmel would honestly have preferred to take the boat her human friends owned, named as it was for her own sister, but practical concerns prevailed.

A small price to pay, in any case. At the least, the company will be—

“There you are! I hope one of you, at least, has a good explanation for this? I do have duties in the guild, you know!”

Waiting for them at the pier was the final member of the group heading for Yofel Castle, whether she knew it yet or not. Probably not, Kizmel thought with some amusement, seeing the look of exasperation Asuna wore along with her white and red KoB uniform. I suppose Guildmaster Heathcliff left it to us to explain.

From the look on his face, Kirito had realized the same thing, and was not as amused as the elf was.
“Ah, Asuna,” he began, rubbing the back of his head nervously, “actually…”

“Actually, what?” Asuna prompted, hands on her hips. “Guildmaster Heathcliff told me to take the day off and come here, but he wouldn't tell me why! Some of us are busy even on holidays, Kirito-kun, so there'd better be a good reason—”

“Aw, take it easy, Aa-chan!” Pushing past a bemused Klein, Argo came to the fore of the group, a mischievous grin on her face. “It's Christmas, an' we're having a party. And Kii-bou told me about last year, so don't worry: this year, the cake's not a lie!”

Taken aback, Asuna blinked in obvious confusion. Feeling much the same, Kizmel shot a quick glance at Kirito, but her partner only shrugged, clearly just as baffled—the collective groan quickly brought her attention to Fuurinkazan, though, most of whom were demonstrating remarkable coordination in covering their faces.

Unfazed, Argo waved a dismissive hand. “Yeah, yeah, I know, that meme was old when we were kids, you don't gotta say it, Klein… Forget it, Aa-chan. Look, we're going to a festival at Yofel Castle, this time there's gonna be a Christmas cake, and Kii-bou and Kii-chan didn't wanna do this without you.”

“I did kinda screw it up last year,” Kirito said sheepishly, glancing away. “So… I wanted to do it right, this time.”

Asuna looked at him for a long moment, glanced quickly at Kizmel, then finally sighed, shaking her head. “Oh, fine. I guess I can take one day off… and it's as good a time as any to get you and Kizmel-chan up to speed about a couple things, anyway.” Before Kizmel could question that ominous remark, the other girl looked past them at Fuurinkazan. “Would someone introduce me, please? I recognize Sachi-chan, of course…”

“Ah, right.” Kirito coughed into his hand, then swept it out to gesture at the guild. “This is Fuurinkazan, led by Klein. I've known them off and on since the start, and they're the ones who took in Sachi after… Well, you know that story. Klein, everyone, this is Asuna, Vice-Commander of the Knights of Blood.”

Some of the irritation finally faded from Asuna's demeanor, and she bowed formally. “A pleasure to meet you all. Kirito-kun's mentioned you a couple of times, Klein-san… Er, Klein-san?”

For a moment, Kizmel was as puzzled as Asuna by Klein's immobility; he hadn't so much as twitched since the Knight had come into view. Then, catching Kirito's resigned expression, she remembered where she'd seen that reaction before, and had to cover her mouth to stifle a laugh.

Just as Asuna was starting to look concerned, Klein snapped to attention, bowed stiffly, and said, “Hello, Asuna-sama! Klein, twenty-three, single, looking for—”

Kirito and Argo struck him lightly on either side of his head, turning his formal introduction into a flailing stumble, only barely caught by Dynamm. “Don't mind him,” the Rat advised, rolling her eyes. “That's how Klein greets every girl he thinks might be old enough. Gonna get him ganked one of these days, ya ask me…”

“He's a good guy, though,” Kirito said hastily. “Even if he's a little—well, strange—ack!”

Yanking him back by his collar, Klein glared at him. “Do you always have to hit me?! Give a guy a break once in a while, you—”

Asuna stared at the byplay, glanced at Argo's obvious mirth, and finally turned her gaze on Kizmel
“Kirito is right, Klein is a good man,” Kizmel assured her, unable to restrain a smile of her own. “And his guild is as reliable as they come. Truly, Asuna, do you believe we'd take them to Yofel Castle if they were any less?”

“No… no, I suppose not.” Finally, even Asuna began to smile, just a little. “All right, I admit I could probably use the laugh. Things have been a little tense lately…” Turning back to the still-squabbling group, she raised her voice. “If you people are quite done, let's go. And I'm holding you to that cake, Kirito-kun.”

Asuna's in one of her moods, it sounds like she's got news I'm not gonna like, and I'm stuck playing gondolier. I hope the festival goes better than this.

Not that Kirito was exactly unfamiliar with guiding a gondola around the Fourth Floor's canals and rivers, but it had been almost a year. Worse, the gondola he was steering now was of the largest size available, and filled to capacity at that; Tilnel, his and Asuna's old boat, had only carried two plus the gondolier. This one just wasn't as nimble as he was used to.

He really hoped nobody noticed how he almost rammed them into an NPC gondola on the way out of town.

“So what is the news you have for us, Asuna?” Kizmel asked from near the front of the gondola, as they slipped from Rovia’s canals into the river leading to the southern end of the floor. “Has something happened since we were last on the frontline?”

Asuna had been leaning against one side of the gondola, idly watching the fish—and not-fish—pass by them. Now she glanced up, started to speak; paused when she remembered the other players aboard. After a moment of obvious thought, she sighed. “I suppose everyone here should know, under the circumstances. Though maybe we should discuss this privately, Klein-san…?”

Klein shook his head. “Now that's not ominous at all… Give it to us straight, Asuna-san, anything you can say to me, I want my guild to know.”

Heh. That's Klein for you, Kirito thought, allowing himself a small, bitter smile. A real leader… we sure could use him on the frontlines. Heck, he probably should have the Baneblade... but he's too much a samurai, he'd never take it. Unfortunately.

The KoB vice-commander gave Klein a thoughtful look, then turned it on the other members of Fuurinkazan. Whatever she saw apparently satisfied her; probably, Kirito suspected, spotting Sachi was the clincher. If anyone outside the clearers knew how to handle bad news, it was the former Black Cat.

“All right, then,” Asuna said finally. Shifting in her seat to get a better look at the group as a whole, she continued, “The first thing you should probably know is that the DDA is… a bit out of sorts, right now. I don't know what happened last night, but it's got all of them snapping at anybody they see. I actually think Lind is trying to keep a lid on it, but you know what his people are like.”

“Yes,” Kizmel agreed, shaking her head with a sigh. “They're not as fractious as Kibaou's group, but Guildmaster Lind does seem to have… difficulties with his leadership.”

“This time, it's our fault, too.” Klein rubbed the back of his head, looking down at the deck. “They were after the same item we were, last night. We got there first, and he lost the duel.”

Asuna turned so sharply the gondola rocked. “A duel?! What duel?!” she demanded. “You fought a
“Hey, easy there!” Kirito protested, fighting with the oar to get the gondola back on course. With an effort, thanking whatever higher power might be listening that he'd put so many points into his strength stat, he managed to avoid a collision with a canyon wall.

Barely. Swearing under his breath, he promised himself that if anyone did rock the boat enough to cause an accident, he'd make sure they were the ones who paid the repair fee.

When it had settled, Kizmel cleared her throat. “Technically, I was the one who fought Guildmaster Lind,” she said. “Klein dueled with another Dragon Knight, Orochi. Trial by combat was the means agreed upon to determine whether or not the Dragon Knights would be allowed to interfere in the battle Kirito and Fuurinkazan were engaged in.”

“A battle… you mean a boss battle?” Asuna looked from one to another through narrowed eyes. “All right, you'd better give it to me from the top. What exactly happened last night?”

The explanation took up about half the trip down the river, interrupted as it was by Klein needing to fend off a Crocoshark that tried to take a bite out of the boat in the middle. He and Kizmel took turns explaining the details of the duel—still omitting, Kirito noticed, the exact details of Kizmel's discussion with Lind—while the other members of Fuurinkazan handled the battle with Nicholas the Renegade.

Much of that was from Kirito himself, in between trying not to capsize them. Sachi may have been recovering from her depression, but she still seemed to be in no fit state to talk about the incident to others, or what had led up to it.

At the end of it, Asuna slumped back in her seat. “Well, that explains that,” she said warily. “The DDA doesn't like losing at the best of times, and with a revival item in the mix… I won't ask what you're going to do with it now—the last thing the clearing group needs is another debate about what to do with a rare item—but I'll tell you it explains a lot about why the DDA is acting like that this morning.”

“I heard he'd lost a guy,” Klein murmured, rubbing his goatee. “I know I'd take that personally. Maybe it'll die down once word gets out that the Stone doesn't work if you're not right there? Well, once we figure out a way to get the word out without people coming after us for it…”

“I'm workin' on that, big guy,” Argo put in. Up to then, she'd been to all appearances asleep against the side of the gondola; knowing her, though, Kirito wasn't very surprised to see her fully alert now. “It's gonna be in my next guide, from one of my 'anonymous sources'; everybody knows mine are good.” For once there was no humor on her whiskered face, despite the boast. “But I dunno how much good that's gonna do. Right, Aa-chan?”

“She's right,” Asuna confirmed unhappily. “I'm not at all sure the DDA will believe it, except maybe Lind. And whether they do or not, there's going to be a lot of interest in finding more of those Stones. Even if they do only work within ten seconds, right now people will take what they can get.” She huffed, looking torn between irritation and worry. “And it's stupid! It wouldn't help with what's going on right now, anyway!”

Kirito felt a chill, and from the collective looks of most of the passengers, he wasn't the only one. Worse, he had a pretty good idea of why. Fuurinkazan, he suspected, didn't—but they were about to, if he was right. “What is going on, Asuna?” he asked, afraid he knew the answer.

“Naga isn't the only victim of a direct PK anymore,” Asuna said bluntly. “Well, you and Kizmel-
chan probably already knew that, after what happened to you two on the Thirty-Seventh Floor, but… it's getting worse. Ten mid-level players have been murdered in the last month—and that's just the ones we know were PKed. There are a few more we suspect, but without witnesses, we can't be sure.”

Klein said something Kirito personally thought any sane MMO would've censored, but he couldn't disagree. He'd known it was bad—Argo had kept him and Kizmel updated, and hadn't even charged for that information—yet he hadn't realized it was quite that bad. Ten murders in a month, at least, in a game everyone knew killed players for real…

No. It's even worse than that. “Witnesses?” he began, only to cut himself off and focus on steering when he realized he was about to run them into a sizable log.

“Pretty sure it means just what you think it does, Kirito-kun,” Asuna said grimly. From the look on her face, she wanted to take out her rapier right then and there and go hunting. “The PKers wanted them to live. Otherwise they would never have gotten away.”

“PoH,” Kizmel said flatly. From her, the name sounded like a curse as vile as Klein's.

“It sounds like it, from what you two told us about him.” Asuna's hand clenched on the hilt of her sword, before she visibly forced it to relax. “Which is what I meant that trying for more of those Stones is stupid. These people wouldn't give anyone a chance to use one anyway. Anybody who tried to stick around to use it would just be killed, too.”

There was a long silence as the group as a whole digested the grim news. Sachi in particular, Kirito noticed, looked ill. It was Klein, though, that broke the gathering tension. “…Damn,” he whispered, with the tone of someone who couldn't find an adequate obscenity. “That's just… Who does somethin' like that, knowing what's at stake here?”

“I don't think we want to know, Leader,” Dynamm said, a distant look in his eyes. “That kind of mindset we're better off not understanding, you ask me.” After a long moment of staring at something only he could see, he shook himself. “Well, suddenly I'm glad we're making this trip. Thanks for the warning, Asuna-san. We'll be careful.”

Asuna inclined her head. “For what it's worth, I don't expect Fuurinkazan to be targeted,” she said. “I won't ask, but it looks like you're all close to clearer level? So far, they’ve only gone after weaker players. Well, except for Kirito-kun and Kizmel-chan, but that was different… As Vice-Commander of the KoB, however, I would ask you to pass it on to any lower-level players you do know.”

“Done,” Klein said at once. “Sounds like we'll be fine, yeah, but I know a few… But that's for later.” He gestured out at the river; Kirito had just guided them around a bend, and now fog was starting to envelop them. “Looks like we're almost at our destination, and I, for one, don't wanna spoil a perfectly good party!”

The Knight might've had something to say about that, but they burst out of the fog before she could. All eyes immediately went to the island in the center of the lake they'd just entered—and the castle built atop it, flying the crossed horn and scimitar flag of the Dark Elves of Lyusula.

Slowly, taking care not to rock the gondola too much, Kizmel stood up, a small smile on her face. “There it is, my friends: Yofel Castle, demesne of Viscount Leyshren Zed Yofilis.” She caught Kirito's eye, then glanced to Asuna and Sachi, and her smile grew. “Allow us to show you a proper Yule Festival!”

After the gloomy conversation on the river trip, Klein had to admit Yofel Castle made for a really
good distraction. He'd never even known the place was there; the quests Fuurinkazan had taken on when they'd come to the Fourth Floor the first time hadn't brought them within sight of the lake at the southern edge. So he hadn't really known what to expect, when Kirito invited them along.

Damn, but those elves have got style, he thought, whistling long and low at the sight. Isolated on an island, built of gleaming white stone, it was both large and elegant—bigger than he'd thought, he realized as Kirito brought the gondola in close to Yofel Castle's long pier. They sure put a lot of effort into this place… just what was that questline like, anyway?

“Here's our stop,” Kirito announced, bringing the boat to a careful halt. “Whatever you do, don't tie that line, we'll have to swim back if you do… Everybody off, and follow our lead.”

Torn between awe at the snow-covered fortress and amusement at his buddy's attitude, Klein motioned for Fuurinkazan to follow him off the boat and onto the pier—as ordered, letting the cocky solo, his partner, and the celebrity fencer go first. They were the ones who were flagged to have access, after all. Besides, it gave the rest of them time to gawk.

“You ever been here before, Sachi-chan?” he asked quietly, eyeing the two halberd-wielding elves guarding the heavy metal gates. “Hell of a place they've got…” Klein trailed off, remembering belatedly the only time the girl had traveled with Kirito and Kizmel was not the best thing to remind her of just then.

To his relief, while she did look a little sad, Sachi only shook her head calmly. “They never took us anywhere that wasn't going to help with our leveling. I don't really know that much about the Elf War questline. Just a few stories Kizmel told me, really.”

“Huh.” Well, he couldn't claim to be surprised by that. Getting Kirito to talk about anything could be harder than kiting Giant Trapdoor Spiders. “Well, I guess we're gonna see it for ourselves in a second…”

At the approach of the players, the elven guards braced to attention, but didn't quite brandish their halberds. “Swordmasters,” one of them said, inclining his head. “Welcome back to Yofel Castle—and welcome to your guests, as well. Please, proceed.”

Yep, they know him here. Must've been a heck of a quest—whoa, that's cool!

With a rumble, the dark gates swung open, revealing the fortress behind the outer wall: a huge building like a European castle, made of the same bright stone as that first wall. Klein couldn't see all of it from there, but he did notice two grand towers to either side; more immediate, and spectacular, was the front courtyard.

Trees, planters, cast iron fences… All of it lit by pale blue lanterns, lending the place an otherworldly feeling, enhanced by the groups of Dark Elves gathered in it. Talking, drinking, some of them even singing; it made Klein feel like he'd wandered into a completely different game.

The three who'd been there before just kept right on going, heading for the main building as if this was all old hat to them. Argo, well-informed Rat that she was, didn't seem any less at home. He was more than a little relieved that his own guild was gawking just as much as he was; even Sachi, who had only a trace of gloom on her face now.

“I feel like we've walked into Rivendell,” she whispered. “I had no idea there was anything like this in Aincrad…”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” Klein caught a bit of singing he was sure wasn't in Japanese, and felt his
world tilt just a little more. “Sometime I gotta get the whole story out of Kirito. This is way more elaborate than anything from any quest I've been through.”

“If you think this is impressive,” Kizmel called over her shoulder, “just wait. The Yule Festival is being held in the inner courtyard.”

“I dunno,” Kunimitsu muttered. “Can we take the shock?” Despite the sarcasm, though, he looked as much out of his element as any of them.

It actually made Klein vaguely uneasy. In a game where the story seemed to be mostly created by the actions of the players, he was getting the sense that the Dark Elves—maybe the Elf War quest elements in general—were weirdly well-developed. Considering that as far as he knew, his buddy Kirito and his old partner were the only players who’d ever gone all the way through it…

Later, he told himself, following the clearers’ lead into the main structure of the castle. You can wonder what the hell Kayaba's up to later. Tonight, you party, and forget about all the bad things for a few hours.

Putting that back out of his mind wasn’t too hard. After just a few turns down halls just as elaborate as the exterior, they came out into a large room, filled with tables and more chatting elves. Klein had just a moment of deepened unreality at the sight of a few long-eared children playing in a corner, before his attention was grabbed by a deep voice.

“Swordmaster Kirito, Lady Asuna—and Lady Kizmel, as well. Welcome back to Yofel Castle, my friends.”

Starting, Klein turned to see a tall, oddly-pale Dark Elf greeting the clearers. Decked out in a uniform as fancy as the castle, there was a scar running down his face, right through where his left eye… didn’t seem to be anymore. Which was just plain weird, as far as the samurai was concerned, but it didn't seem to faze his younger friends.

“A pleasure to be here again, My Lord,” Asuna replied, bowing formally. There wasn’t a trace of the bite she’d had when talking to Kirito earlier, Klein noticed. “I hope we’re not imposing?”

“By no means,” the elf told her with a smile. “Those who saved my Castle, and my people, are more than welcome—as are their friends, of course.” He turned to Fuurinkazan. “Welcome, Swordmasters. I am Viscount Leyshren Zed Yofilis. Please be at ease, as long as you are here.”

Finally, something normal. Yofilis came across as a bit smarter than most NPCs, but unlike Kizmel some of that did sound to Klein like scripted dialogue. For a little bit there, I was wondering if we were still in a game at all.

A jab to his ribs from Sachi’s elbow reminded him he should still say something in return; even normal NPCs expected some kind of response. “Thank you, uh, My Lord. We’ll try not to make too much of a fuss.”

Kizmel cleared her throat then. “Ah, forgive me, My Lord, I should have remembered: will our armor be an issue?”

“Fear not, Lady Kizmel. The war may be over, but I have no intention of being complacent. I have given strict orders on the matter. The priests, I am afraid, will simply
have to live with the clatter.” He coughed. “That being said... Armor is not, perhaps, the best fit for the final night of the Yule Festival. If you would care to visit the residential wing of the Castle later, I believe the staff can fit all of you with more suitable clothing for the occasion.”

Klein looked down at his armor again, and had to concede the point. *Yeah, I guess we're not really fit for partying... but what the heck do elves wear to a party? ...Oh, right. Look around, idiot, there're partying elves all over the place. Um. This is gonna feel kinda strange...*

“We'll take ya up on that, M'lord!” Argo piped up, grinning. “Don't wanna be under-dressed for this! And besides—” She suddenly grabbed Kizmel's arm, startling the elf. “Gotta have a little girl talk before tonight, anyway.”

Klein's look of sheer dread didn't strike Klein as a good sign. Neither did the way Asuna and Kizmel both blushed—and Sachi's audible “Eep!” was just about the final straw for his nerves.

On the other hand, he thought, catching a fangy grin the Rat sent Kirito's way, it doesn't look like it has anything to do with most of us... Oh, right! Remembering his own message to Argo, over a week before, he found himself grinning too. Right on, Argo, let's get those two loosened up a little.

The Black Swordsman obviously saw Klein's expression, judging from the glare he sent. Somehow, though, Klein couldn't bring himself to worry about it too much. Kirito was going to have other things on his mind soon enough—probably enough to make him forget all about petty thoughts of revenge.

Kizmel had never really seen much interaction between her people and human Swordmasters before. Not a thought that had really occurred to her before, but it was one that came right to the forefront now. Before, the only Swordmasters who had ever spent much time with the Dark Elves were Kirito and Asuna; today, Fuurinkazan was with them as well—not to forget Argo.

The resulting contrast, she was finding, was stark.

She wasn't sure she would have even noticed, just a few months ago. After an odd experience in Fort Renya, though, as well as a few strange moments on the Forty-Third Floor, she'd been looking more closely lately. Especially after Lind's ominous comment the previous night.

Perhaps I've merely been away from Lyusula's domains too long, Kizmel thought. She, along with her partner and the other human visitors, sat at a large table in a dining chamber off Yofel Castle's Great Hall. Like her fellow Swordmasters, she'd just ordered light refreshments from the Castle's staff, and found the experience taking more of her attention than she expected.

After all, she mused as the waiters bowed and left, I do spend most of my time around the least organized of the Swordmasters. It's just as likely that I've grown accustomed to their informality. Argo's, in particular. And this is Yofel Castle; hardly the most relaxed outpost of the Kingdom, even in time of peace.

Still. The stilted manner of the servants struck Kizmel as strange—and she was sure most Dark Elves knew more of the human tongue than these seemed to understand. Didn't they?

“Oi, Kizmel-san. You okay over there?”

She twitched, surprised by the sudden interjection. “Ah. My apologies, Guildmaster Klein. I was just... lost in thought for a few moments.”

The samurai waved it off. “C'mon, Kizmel-san, drop the 'Guildmaster'. You're Kirito's buddy, and
any friend of his is a friend of mine.” He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms behind his head.
“Anyway. Pretty deep thoughts, looked to me. You okay?”

Kizmel started to reply; hesitated, when she caught Argo's expression from the corner of her eye.
“Nothing worth Cor, Klein,” she said carefully. “And please, the ‘san’ isn't needed… I was merely
reflecting on how much my life has changed over the past year. Since I first met the Swordmasters.”

“I think that's true for just about all of us,” Asuna agreed. Resting her elbows on the table, she had a
thoughtful look on her face. “I can't think of anyone I know in Aincrad who hasn't changed a lot
since we first came here.” She smiled; an expression that seemed an odd mix of sad and sheepish. “I
know I never thought a year ago I'd be where I am now.”

There were nods all around at that. Most notably, Kizmel noticed, from Sachi and Kirito; the one,
she was sure, because of what had happened to her friends. And Kirito, if I know him, because he
still has no idea how he won so many friends.

She smiled to herself. One wish she had, however petty, was to see the look on her partner's face
when it finally occurred to him why some people refused to take his villain act at face value.

“ Heck of a year, yeah,” Klein agreed. “Scary thing is, though, so much of this is starting to feel
normal. Like being here. This castle is really nice, not the kinda place I'd ever have thought I'd end
up in before Aincrad. Now? Sure, it's still really cool, but…”

“Normal,” Sachi agreed softly. She looked down at the table; from her position, Kizmel couldn't
quite see the girl's expression. “Almost more normal than…”

It was unclear if the former Black Cat would've ever finished the sentence; she hadn't been silent
long before the waiters returned, interrupting the conversation with the welcome delivery of food.
Talk in general was put off for a time by eating—prefaced by the Swordmasters' traditional
“Ikadakimasu,” a word whose meaning she still wasn't clear on—which was, all things considered,
probably just as well.

Especially with the distraction provided by Klein's comical reaction to realizing he was eating roast
goat. Apparently not a dish with which he was familiar, though he seemed to find it acceptable once
he'd recovered from his surprise.

Of course, pleasant as it is, the food here lacks the variety of the Swordmasters… Heh. I really have
been with them too long, if I'm even thinking this way about food!

Somehow, Kizmel couldn't say that actually bothered her.

The group as a whole had managed to put about half the meal away before anything was said again.
Eventually, though, Klein glanced up from his plate, a thoughtful look on his face. “Speaking of this
castle,” he said, “I've been kinda wondering… This is a heck of a fortress, Kizmel. Just how bad
was that war, anyway?”

Sachi paused, another bite of goat halfway to her mouth. “I've been wondering about that, too,” she
said shyly. “Come to think of it, I don't think I ever heard how you and Kirito got together—as
partners, I mean!” she added hastily.

Kizmel didn't miss the look that crossed Asuna's face, though it was the one on Argo's that worried
her more, knowing the Rat. Amusement in general passed quickly regardless, and she exchanged
significant looks with both Asuna and Kirito—the only others who knew the full tale, and just how
dark some of it had been.
At Asuna's small shrug, and Kirito's tiny nod, Kizmel drew in a slow breath. "That's... something of a long story," she said slowly, considering exactly how much to say. Some of it was public knowledge, some of it very private—and some of it traumatic enough she hardly cared to remember it herself. "Hm... Well, some of it Argo would doubtless prefer I left to her to sell, but I suppose a brief account wouldn't intrude on her profits too much."

"Why, thankee, Kii-chan! Very thoughtful of ya to remember, today of all days."

The elf allowed herself the human gesture of rolling her eyes, but let it pass. Indulging in the human practice of "payback" would have to wait for another time. For now, she crossed her arms and closed her eyes, leaning back in her chair as she turned her thoughts to those days.

"The war itself was, as you may have guessed, a long, bitter affair," she began. "My people's grievances with the Forest Elves went back many centuries. Indeed, the roots of the conflict went back to before the Great Separation, as we learned from the involvement of the Fallen Elves."

"Fallen Elves," Sachi murmured, a shadow in her eyes. "Like..."

"The Commandant, yeah. For what it's worth, though, he was probably the last of their generals." Kirito's gaze went to a window overlooking the lake as he made his first, quiet contribution to the tale. "We made sure of that."

Klein cleared his throat. "Lemme guess: Dark Elves don't like Forest Elves, but Fallen are even worse?"

"They had indulged in great crimes against both us and the Forest Elves long ago, Klein," Kizmel told him, "to say nothing of their pursuit of forbidden arts. They were also responsible for manipulating Dark and Forest into battle with one another." She remembered when Kirito and Asuna had first brought news that Fallen and Forest were in league—and how little they truly knew, then, of what was actually going on.

"They tricked you into fighting each other?" Sachi's gaze went to the lake, that shadow in her eyes growing darker still. "That reminds me of..."

"PoH and his band of freaks." Klein growled low in his throat, looking like he wanted to reach for the katana he wasn't wearing. "No wonder. You guys smashed 'em good when you figured it out, huh?"

"Not exactly. Indeed, we never would have puzzled out the truth at all, were it not for Kirito and Asuna." Kizmel's gaze met Kirito's briefly, then Asuna's, a bittersweet smile playing on her lips. "I still find it remarkable even now. There was no real meaning in our meeting, yet by the end..."

They were only seeking the power to survive, she thought, remembering that year-ago day when she'd first truly interacted with Swordmasters. Kirito did not expect me to live through those first minutes... yet that meeting saved my life, and my people.

I've gained much from that, despite the pain. Friends. Experiences I would never have had, otherwise...

Kizmel shook off the memory. "Argo will doubtless be willing to sell you many of the details later. To make a long story short, I met Kirito and Asuna almost by chance, but our adventures together brought to light the true conflict—and when the Fallen Elves made a last attack on our capital on the Ninth Floor with all their strength, the three of us assaulted their headquarters in turn."

She didn't like to think too much about that. The Fallen Elves' last stronghold had been steeped in the
dark magic they had used in eons past to seek immortality, and their strongest warriors had defended it. Along with her human friends, they'd gone in with a dozen Pagoda Knights—yet by the time they faced the King of the Fallen Elves, only the three of them had survived.

“…We destroyed their leadership,” Kizmel said softly. “At great cost.” Nearly including my own life. If Asuna had not been so fast—had Kirito not known of athelas—that would have been the end. “There may yet be some Fallen Elves in dark corners of Aincrad, but they will never be a great threat to anyone again.”

They'd been threat enough to small groups, of course. The darkness in Sachi's eyes was proof of that. But the danger they'd once been to Aincrad itself—no. That, they would never be again.

“Well,” Klein said after a long, uncomfortable moment. “That was heavier than I counted on. Sorry if I brought up bad memories, guys. Guess now I understand why you and Kirito get along so well, though, Kizmel. Been through a lot together, haven't you?”

“You could say that,” Asuna put in. “I was with them for a lot of that, remember.” She rolled her eyes. “Of course, since I joined the KoB they've been up to things even I can't keep up with. Sometimes I think they're deliberately holding out on me!”

We are, Kizmel thought dryly, grateful for the change in subject. Seeing as I strongly suspect half of Kirito's discomfort with living with me comes from an ingrained fear of your retribution.

“O' course, that's what I'm here for.” Argo flashed a fanged grin. “Fer the right price, I got lots of dirt on these guys.”

Kirito covered his face with his hand. “Argo… do you have to sound like a professional blackmailer, instead of an info broker…?”

From there, to Kizmel's relief, the conversation stayed away from more serious subjects. This was supposed to be a day of celebration, after all; and if it had begun with closing the door on a particularly grim chapter of their time together, it was all the more important to enjoy the Yule Festival to the fullest.

Perhaps I have been around them too much to feel at home among my own people any longer. But if this vibrant life is what I receive in return, that is a sacrifice I can accept.

That, at least, was what she thought at first. Then, when they'd all finished the meal, the waiters returned to collect their plates—accompanied by a more senior member of Yofel Castle's staff. “Your pardon, Swordmasters,” he said, bowing diffidently. “Viscount Yofilis sends his regards, and suggests that you all prepare for the evening's events.”

“Oh, right.” Asuna nodded. “He did say something about, um, providing clothing for the evening…?”

“Yes, My Lady. If you will come with me, other members of the staff are waiting in the residential wing to help you prepare.”

Argo quickly jumped to her feet. “Lead on, then!” She flashed another of those unnerving grins. “C'mon, Kii-chan, Aa-chan. We gotta get ready for the main event!”

Kizmel shivered, despite Yofel Castle's warmth. She had the uncomfortable feeling the girl was not speaking of the official events of the Yule Festival…
Being at Yofel Castle again felt almost painfully nostalgic, Asuna reflected that evening. Looking around the Great Hall, seeing Dark Elves everywhere and hardly a trace of other players—just a handful of Fuurinkazan, gawking and chatting—took her back a year; it felt more like a lifetime. It felt like she’d been a different person from the one now sitting at a Dark Elf table, that first Christmas in Aincrad.

*I was a different person,* she told herself, taking a thoughtful bite of the one dish that Kirito had brought, rather than the Castle’s staff. *I wasn't the honor student anymore—but I wasn’t quite who I am now, either. I was… weak. Weak, and needing to prove myself… and naïve about what this world was really like.*

Deliberately, Asuna pushed that thought aside. She had found her place, and if her commander was going to insist she take a day off, she was going to enjoy it. As it was, it was wearing on toward nightfall, when the gathering was supposed to move out into the inner courtyard. Before that, she wanted to get the most out of the treat Kirito had brought her.

“At least you really did remember the cake this time,” she remarked at length, halfway through a third piece. “I guess I'll forgive you for blackmailing the Commander into setting this up.”

Kirito, seated on the other side of the table with his own plate of crumbly dessert in front of him, raised his fork defensively. “Hey, I wouldn't lie about something like this. And who said anything about blackmail, anyway?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, are you really going to tell me all you did was ask him nicely? You do know we're really busy with the clearing these days, Kirito-kun. I can't be gone too long.”

He sighed, shook his head, and took a bite. “Actually, that was all I did,” he replied, the first couple words garbled as he talked around his food. “I guess Heathcliff just remembers what I told you back when we first met: you gotta take some time off once in a while, or you'll burn out.”

“Yeah, sure. Like you ever do that?” Asuna allowed herself an unladylike snort. “I do check in with Argo regularly, Kirito-kun. I know you and Kizmel-chan are always up to something—even if I think your priorities could use some work.”

The look on his face was well worth the admission of what could be construed as stalking. There were times she questioned whether her old partner had any sense of self-preservation at all, but she knew he did fear two things in Aincrad: losing party members, and Argo's wealth of blackmail material.

*I bet she's adding to it tonight, too,* she thought, eyeing Kirito's outfit. Usually, she knew, he still preferred to look the part of the morally-dubious rogue, the better to be a scapegoat. Tonight Aincrad’s most infamous player was decked out in a fancy suit, and if it was dark and the tailcoat was long enough to pass for his usual tastes, that was where the resemblance to his normal self ended. *It's almost enough to make me wish I had more time to think about that kind of thing.*

Almost.

They’d gone through another piece of cake each before Kirito managed any kind of retort. Leaning back in his chair with a lackadaisical air that belied his formal attire, he shot Asuna and aggrieved look. “Okay, fine, so maybe we're usually busy, too. But what do you mean, 'skewed priorities’?”

Asuna hesitated. She’d only meant it as a comeback, and it was touching on more serious things than she really wanted to think about tonight. Still… “You and Kizmel-chan have been disappearing to follow sidequests pretty often the last few months,” she pointed out carefully. “Like the Reliquary
quest back on the Thirty-Seventh Floor. And just what were you up to during the clearing of the Forty-Third? I can't even get Argo to say anything about that.”

She'd tried hard, too. No matter what price she offered, though, the Rat claimed Kirito had upped what he was paying for her silence, and eventually that Kizmel had added double herself. Which in Asuna's experience meant either Argo was trying to cover for one of the rare occasions she didn't actually know something, or it really was juicy enough for the pair to be desperate to keep it quiet.

“That's nothing you need to worry about,” Kirito said now, looking away; toward Viscount Yofilis and his children, who were having a quiet but obviously happy dinner at another table. Her old partner watched them for a long moment, though what he was thinking about Asuna couldn't guess. “It was just… something Kizmel and I had to deal with, that's all.”

Asuna thought pressing him on it, but only briefly. Argo could be bribed; if Kirito really didn't want to talk about something, it was like getting water from a stone. “Fine,” she huffed. “But that just proves my point, you know: you're letting yourself get distracted from clearing. Just like a year ago.”

That got his attention, and he brought his gaze back to hers with a frown. “A year ago…? Asuna, you can't be talking about…?”

“This, Kirito-kun. Well,” she amended, glancing at Yofilis herself now, “not this, coming here did probably save the raid that time… But in general. Kirito-kun, I'm as happy as you are to have met Kizmel-chan, and I don't regret saving her back then. I'm really glad she's a Swordmaster now. But you remember as well as I do how that quest ended.”

From the look in his dark eyes, Kirito remembered quite well. The horror of the siege on Lyusula's capital, their desperate assault on the Fallen Elves' Twilight Citadel. The running battle inside, against the twisted Fallen and their poisoned blades, as the handful of Dark Elves who'd come in with them fell one by one.

The nightmarish battle with the King, which had taken everything they had, and nearly cost them more.

“We almost died there, Kirito-kun,” she said softly, pushing back those memories. “It meant everything to Kizmel-chan, I know, but we almost died—and for something that had nothing to do with clearing the game. We almost died, and it would've been for nothing.”

For a long, long pause, Kirito was silent. He picked up a glass from the table, filled with Kizmel's favored moontear wine, and spent as much time staring into it as drinking from it; long enough that Asuna started to think she really should've just kept her mouth shut. We are still moving forward, she reminded herself. We need Kirito-kun and Kizmel-chan, but I don't need to push right now. Not tonight…

At last, Kirito set down the glass again—and at that moment a chime rang out. Yofilis had risen from his chair and tapped a spoon against a crystal glass, drawing all eyes to him. “The hour grows late, my friends,” he called out, voice pitched to be heard throughout the hall. “Let us take this to the inner courtyard, and end this Yule Festival in the greatest spirits this Castle has seen in many years!”

With that, the viscount led the way to the double-doors leading outside, his family in tow. The other Dark Elves soon followed, and after a brief hesitation so did Fuurinkazan. Then Kirito rose, turned to Asuna, and in the most courtly fashion she'd seen outside of NPCs since coming to Aincrad extended a hand to her.

Wondering if he was being flippant, Asuna hesitantly allowed him to draw her to her feet, and
though he promptly let go she readily matched his stride on the way out. “Kirito-kun…?”

“Let me ask you something,” he said softly. “Something I was asked a while back, by… Well, it
doesn’t really matter who it was. Asuna… what is this world to you?”

She looked at him in confusion. *Is this some kind of joke…?* But no, his eyes were as serious as she’d
ever seen them. “It’s a deathtrap,” she said finally. “What else would it be?”

“The answer I gave was ‘prison’, actually,” Kirito told her, a faint smile flickering across his face.
Just as they passed through the doors to the courtyard, though, it was gone again, and he went on
seriously, “But let’s put it another way: what do you think this world is to Kizmel?”

“To Kizmel-chan?” Now Asuna was definitely confused. “Kirito-kun… what are you getting at…?”

“Just… think about it, Asuna.” He smiled again, an air of mystery in the expression. “We’re trapped
here, sure. But that doesn’t mean we have to let that define how we look at this world.”

She wanted to question that. To ask him what he could possibly see in *SAO* other than death, after
everything they’d gone through. After the Twilight Citadel, the Twenty-Fifth Floor boss raid, and the
fall of the Moonlit Black Cats—to say nothing of the recent increase in PK incidents.

Asuna wanted to ask that, but the sight of what was waiting for them in the inner courtyard
completely derailed that train of thought. It had been redecorated since the last time she’d been in
Yofel Castle: the thorny hedges remained, the flowerbeds, the pale blue lanterns, the benches… The
tree under which they’d first reunited with Kizmel was still there at the center, even. Yet something
new completely distracted her from the remembered sights.

Tables had been added by the edges of the center garden, bearing what Asuna thought was roast
goat. What really caught her eye, though, was the huge tree trunk in the center of it all, burning
brightly against the deepening night.

It was obviously meant to be the center of the gathering. All around it was open space, in which
elves started to gather in pairs; it reminded Asuna belatedly of exactly what the finale of the Yule
Festival was supposed to be.

All thoughts of death and pain were chased out of her mind as music began to swell from elven
instruments. “Beautiful,” she breathed. “Kirito-kun… this is amazing…”

“Yeah,” Kirito agreed softly, obviously taken in by the sight himself. “Kizmel told me a little about
what this was supposed to be like, but—”

He cut off so abruptly it pulled Asuna out of the wonder, and she shot a concerned glance at her old
partner. He was suddenly oddly stiff, looking at something just out of her sight. “Let us begin, my
friends!” Yofilis called out, as Asuna tried to spot whatever had stunned Kirito. “After so long under
threat of war, let us put that all behind us tonight, with the first Yule Dance our home has seen in
many years!”

…Oh! Finally catching sight of the figure approaching from the other end of the garden, Asuna
covered her mouth to hide a smile and giggle. *Oh, my,* she thought, watching a certain Dark Elf
approach. *Kirito-kun… just how are you going to handle this one? Argo, please tell me you’ve got a
recording crystal!*

Kirito had thought himself well-used to his partner’s appearance by now, having seen her in as much
as full armor and as little as nothing at all. She might still have been able to fluster him well enough,
if she pushed it, but he hadn't thought she'd be able to really surprise him anymore.

Seeing her step out into Yofel Castle's inner courtyard, lit by moonlight reflecting off the floor above, the garden's blue lanterns, and the fire of the Yule Tree did it. Purple tunic and tights, much like what she normally wore beneath her armor but much more elaborate, tall boots and elbow-length gloves, decorated here and there with black roses—it was close to what he was used to seeing her in, yet different enough that he found himself suddenly speechless.

He was vaguely aware that he'd just been saying something to Asuna, but just then it seemed utterly unimportant next to the sight approaching now.

“Good evening, Kirito, Asuna,” Kizmel said, when she'd gotten close. She inclined her head to the Knight, then turned her gaze on Kirito; he felt suddenly self-conscious as she took in his own formal suit. Especially when she smiled, just a hint of a blush on her dusky skin. “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting too long. I’d hoped to join you for the meal, but the staff took longer than I expected with my clothing for the evening.”

“No at all, Kizmel-chan,” Asuna assured her. “Kirito-kun and I were just catching up, that’s all.” She giggled. “I’d say the wait was worth it anyway. Right, Kirito-kun?”

The elbow she not-so-subtly jabbed into his ribs jolted Kirito out of his immobility. “Uh, yeah!” he blurted. “You, er, look very nice, Kizmel.”

Smooth, a corner of his mind snarked at the rest. Really smooth… Huh?

“Thank you, Kirito.” It might've been his imagination, but he thought Kizmel's smile widened just a hair. “You as well, my friend.” She chuckled, raising one gloved hand to cover it. “It would seem the staff here knows you well; perhaps we have been here a little too often.”

Yeah, and that's another thing that weirds me out. They shouldn't be keeping track of my equipment habits like that… but I guess that doesn't really matter right now.

Realizing he'd been struck silent again, Kirito cleared his throat, floundering for a topic; somehow he was feeling much less confident around his partner than usual. “So… do you want to go back inside and get something to eat, since you missed dinner? There should still be some left…”

Kizmel shook her head. “No, I'm fine for now. We can always return later. Now is not the time for dining, is it?” She gestured toward the cleared space around the Yule Tree.

Kirito glanced over and started, reminded now of what he'd been told earlier. Elven musicians had begun a tune he found oddly familiar, while most of the elves had split off into pairs in that open space. …Oh. Right. She told me about this the other day, didn't she?

So… what the heck do I do now, anyway?

Actually, odd feeling in his stomach aside, Kirito had a pretty good idea of what he was supposed to do now. He wasn't used to socializing; that didn't mean he didn't know anything about it. Even to him, some things were pretty obvious.

The question was, could he make the first move without bursting into flames? Noticing Fuurinkazan gathering on the benches around the garden, along with Argo—whose presence made him nervous on general principles, never mind the expression currently on her face—didn't help.

But Kizmel was only standing there patiently, waiting with a reassuring smile as he got his act together.
Asuna was less patient. Even so, Kirito could almost thank her for jabbing him in the ribs again, prodding him forward. “Er, Kizmel,” he began awkwardly, fumbling for the right words, “may I have this dance?”

“I’d be delighted, Kirito,” she answered at once, smile definitely widening now. She extended a hand. “Shall we?”

On the one hand, it was all worth it to see the expression on Asuna's face change from amused anticipation—the look of someone expecting him to trip over his own feet—to open-mouthed surprise when he took Kizmel's hand. Holding her right hand with his left, he placed his right hand on her waist while her left settled on his shoulder.

*Didn't think I knew how to dance, huh, Asuna?* Kirito thought, leading Kizmel out into the space cleared for the Yule Dance. *Not that I'm going to admit how I learned it…* That he'd been *that* determined to clear a particular quest in an early offline VRRPG was something he wasn't quite willing to admit to anyone—especially not anyone who was friends with Argo.

On the other hand… This was the first time he'd ever danced with someone who wasn't definitively a soulless NPC, uncaring of the closeness of the situation. It was one thing to dance with a true NPC, whose actions were completely scripted; it was something else entirely to do it with his partner and best friend.

*Or is it?* The thought nagged at Kirito as he led Kizmel in the ballroom dance. *One way or another, she's an AI, too… right?* He was quickly realizing he was actually the better dancer; Kizmel's steps were more hesitant at first, and her eyes were following his feet more than his face. With each step, she got a little better—obviously learning as she went, not something she was programmed to do.

That was made all the clearer when she actually stepped on his foot, an action no pre-programmed algorithm was likely to include. Yet…

*A learning program would make mistakes along the way, too. Especially with a human partner as an irregular element. So how is this any different from any high-level AI? Leaving aside whether it makes sense to devote that kind of processing power to a quest NPC.*

A step to one side, then the other. Kizmel's movements were beginning to even out, just in time for them smoothly slip past Viscount Yofilis and his wife. She spared the Castle's master a sheepish smile at the close call, and finally brought her gaze up to Kirito's.

He almost stumbled then, seeing again in her violet eyes that indefinable *something* that had always set her apart from other NPCs.

*“Just one copy made from a mold, Kirito? Are you really so sure about that?”*  
The voice of Diavel's shade, asking one of the questions that had shaken Kirito's entire worldview. The half of the Trial of the Wise that he hadn't been able to answer that day. It echoed in his mind, even as he let go of Kizmel's waist to twirl around her, ingrained reflex moving his feet to the music.

*“There is truth in how you see it, Kirito—yet maybe not as much as you think. Or maybe you're not looking at it the right way. Think back to when you met—to what she's told you. Think about it, and ask yourself: are those really signs of interchangeable copies? Or is there something more?”*  
*“…I don't understand.”*  
*“I don't have the answer either, Kirito. Perhaps not even the crimson bird knows the truth. But consider it. The truth may not be so simple as you think…”*
Kirito thought about it now, drawing Kizmel closer again. Looked into those violet eyes, and remembered the days of the beta, when she'd followed the same rote actions every time. Remembered when he'd met her again in the death game, and everything had changed.

He was startled when a voice suddenly rose to join the elves’ music, singing a wordless song alongside the melody. As one, he and his partner glanced off to the side, to see Sachi on her feet; drifting closer to the musicians, it was her voice that added the new element to the waltz. Impromptu, unasked, but none of the elves objected as she added to the harmony.

Kirito hadn’t even known Sachi could sing—but looking at the soft smile on Kizmel's face, he realized the elf girl had. *Those nights of “girl talk”,* he thought now. *Talking about little things… things no ordinary NPC would ever think of.*

*She could still be. This could all be just programming. But… it doesn't make any sense. Not even for Kayaba's dream. So…*

*I can't keep worrying about that all the time. I don't have the answers. I just know what it's been like, traveling with her through this world. It doesn't matter if she's AI or anything else. Kizmel is… my partner.*

*My friend.*

Yeah. That sounded right. In this world where death was real for them all, it didn't matter who anyone was before, or where they came from. Asuna, Klein, Sachi, himself… In this world, who was to say an elf who fought by their side through thick and thin was any less a person than they were?

A tension he hadn't quite realized was there went out of Kirito's shoulders, and his own dance steps smoothed out just a little more as well. He almost stumbled right after anyway, as a laughing Dark Elf child darted across the garden, weaving through the dancers without a care.

When he recovered, he found himself meeting Kizmel's gaze again. With a start, he realized she'd been watching him the whole time—and she'd seen the change in his stance. “Kirito,” she murmured, barely audible even to his ears. “How do you really see this world?”

“What is this world to you?” Diavel's other question echoed in his ears.

“A prison,” Kirito had answered, baffled by the question.

“What do you think Lady Kizmel, a person born of this world, regards Aincrad as?”

Those questions, he'd been able to answer that day. To Kizmel, of course, Aincrad was home. And now, Kirito had another answer of his own. If he could just take the risk of saying it…

“I can't see this world as anything other than constructed,” he whispered back, forcing himself to be honest. If she was his partner, his friend, she deserved that. No matter the consequences. “But… a lot of people would say my world was made by a higher power, too. That doesn't make it, or everyone in it, a dream. Or fake.”

It wasn't the whole truth. He wanted to believe he only left it at that because he didn't think she'd understand, not because he was afraid—but it was still the truth.

For a long moment, there was only the step to one side, then to the other, as she stared into his eyes. Then, finally, she nodded, a smile playing at her lips. “Then that's enough for now, my friend.”
Kirito wanted to ask what that was supposed to mean, and at the same time was afraid to ask. Either way, he didn't have the chance. The music was picking up, building toward a crescendo; Sachi's singing had taken on lyrics, which he couldn't quite make out. And Kizmel was suddenly pouring more enthusiasm into the dance, matching him step for step, pushing him to use every bit of his own hard-won skill.

Releasing each other, they stepped around one another, back to back, in time with the other dancers—yet with just a bit of a slip in timing, compared to programmed perfection—and then Kirito caught Kizmel's hand again, guiding her through repeated, graceful twirls.

The music reached its climax, Kizmel spun back into step with him, and he finally realized Sachi's song was in English, a language he hadn't known she knew. He suspected the words weren't meant for the elves' tune, but she somehow matched them to it anyway.

"...I'll be home for Christmas... if only in my dreams..."

Elven instruments and human voice alike fell silent. Kirito and his partner came to a stop with it, just beneath one of the trees at the edge of the garden—and Kizmel slipped from the hold of the dance into a close embrace, resting her chin on his shoulder.

Startled yet again, as he'd been so many times tonight, it felt strangely natural to match the gesture, his arms around her back, chin on her shoulder. His virtual heartbeat picked up; he could smell Kizmel's familiar pine scent, now with a strange touch of sakura blossoms.

Any thought of her being a dream was driven completely out of his head. Right then, for reasons he couldn't grasp, this was the only reality that mattered. He could hear her breathing beside his ear, felt her heart beating against his chest. As fast as his own was going, it took him a moment to realize hers had sped up as well; she shifted against him in a way that made him uncomfortably aware of her body.

Kirito didn't know if he was relieved or disappointed when Kizmel pulled back, just far enough to look him in the eye. He didn't know if it was embarrassment or something else that made him feel warm at the blush on her face. But when she spoke...

"Kirito... I believe, as Argo would say, we've been 'had'."

He blinked. "Eh?" Following her gaze, he spotted the Rat herself, grinning widely, hands tucked suspiciously behind her back; next to her was Asuna, the vice-commander blushing for the first time he could remember seeing in a long while. On Argo's other side, a grinning Klein, giving him a thumbs-up.

Kizmel was right. Argo was up to something. But what—?

With a lift of her chin, the elf girl directed his gaze upward, to the branches of the tree above them. And to the innocuous leaves hanging down from otherwise barren branches.

Then, and only then, did Kirito remember one last Western Christmas tradition that had completely slipped his mind, when he'd explained the holiday to his partner. The realization set his face on fire; he jerked his eyes down from the damning plant, inadvertently meeting Kizmel's gaze again—

She was blushing, too. But she was smiling, and her head was tilting to one side as she slowly leaned in toward him; at the same time, without conscious thought, his hand came up to rest on the back of her neck.
He didn't know what he was doing. Before Aincrad, he would never have dreamed of doing something like this. But…

Eyes drifting closed, Kizmel crossed the last of the distance—or maybe he met her halfway. He was never sure, later. “Merry Christmas, Kirito,” she whispered, and her lips met his.

...Wow...

December 31st, 2023

The Forty-Ninth Floor of Aincrad was a beautiful place, Kizmel had to admit. Containing mostly open plains, with a few low hills bearing the entrances to ancient catacombs scattered around, the towns and cities were built of smooth, polished stone. Quartezia in particular, the city closest to the Pillar of the Heavens, was notable for its graceful towers, reaching much of the way to the floor above.

Quartezia was also close to the edge, and Kizmel stood now atop one of the farthest towers, allowing her a breathtaking view of the sky. From here, she could see so many of the stars normally hidden by Aincrad's structure—the stars, and the full moon gleaming over the city.

*It's almost the New Year,* she thought, resting her arms on the railing ringing the tower's roof. *The second the Swordmasters have seen since they came to this place. Little more than a full year that they've been here, and so much has changed...*

Three floors cleared in the past month alone, and almost half the entire Steel Castle in that year. Over a millennium it had been since the Great Separation, with no hope of truly uniting the peoples of Aincrad's hundred floors, yet the Swordmasters had come so far in such a tiny fraction of time.

*Be honest,* Kizmel told herself, grimacing. *Powerful as the Swordmasters are, it is not merely strength that sets them apart, but will. Even the humans of Aincrad could have made some progress, had they been willing to try—and my people more, had we a reason. But with our own means to avoid the barriers entirely, there never has been one.*

True, the war with the Forest Elves had long been a distraction as well, and now both sides needed time to recover before even contemplating direct action. Even so, she could no longer imagine sitting back and doing nothing herself.

*I've seen too much, fighting alongside the Swordmasters. Experienced too much of their culture... made too many friends. I could hardly turn back now, even had I not invoked the ancient alliance. Unconsciously, her right hand came up, touching two gloved fingers to her lips. Especially not now.*

Kissing her partner, her best friend—especially the way she had—by rights should've made things awkward between them afterward. Certainly that evening had ended on an odd note for them both; Kirito had returned to the room they shared much later than she, and in deference to his obvious discomfort Kizmel had feigned sleep. Yet the next morning had had only a slight stiffness between them, and the week since had seen things settle down close to the old routine.

*Close... but not quite the same.* Something *had* changed between them, Kizmel was sure, but she hadn't yet come to grips with what. She only knew that Kirito had come to some kind of realization that night, one that had left him more relaxed about their circumstances than she had ever seen.

Whether it was at all like the epiphany she was slowly coming to, Kizmel couldn't say. But then, she was only gradually beginning to understand her own part in things.
“Ah, young love. Warms a girl's heart t' see, it does. Aincrad's Christmas miracle.”

Kizmel jumped, catching herself on the railing. How she'd managed to miss that person coming up on her… “I don't recall telling you my age, Argo,” she said, turning to face the new arrival—and hoping that her face wasn't as bright as it felt. “And you were the one who told me that particular tradition wasn't necessarily between lovers.”

Argo sauntered over, hopped up to sit on the railing—heedless of the long fall below—and grinned at her. “Maybe ya didn't, Kii-chan, but I call 'em as I see 'em. That's first-kiss-catatonia if I ever saw it, fer both o' ya. If you're not Kii-bou's age in years, I'm willin' ta bet you're at that stage fer an elf.”

Trying to think of some way to deflect the topic, Kizmel finally settled on, “That will cost you thirty thousand Cor, Argo.”

At that, the Rat burst out into such a fit of laughter that the elf girl feared she'd fall. “You're learning, Kii-chan!” she gasped out, clutching at the railing. “Nice one—but be careful, girl, one of these days I might just have that much ta spare.” Calming, she flashed another grin, eyes narrowed. “An' don't try to change the subject. I saw you, remember?”

Kizmel did, vaguely. Though after the discovery of the position she and Kirito had ended up in, she had been just a little… distracted.

“You did,” she acknowledged, leaning back against the railing as she folded her arms. “Of course, the whole thing was your doing, Argo. And as Asuna told me afterwards, you did trick me. As she tells it, tradition has it more… perfunctory than your tale.”

“Where's the fun in that?” Argo shrugged, mischief in her eyes. She did not, Kizmel noticed, deny the accusation. ‘Sides, it didn't look like you were bein' 'perfunctory' one bit. Looked ta me like you were enjoyin' yerself quite a lot.”

_Is this how Kirito feels when I tease him about our respective standards of modesty? For once, Kizmel felt every bit as young as Argo was insinuating. Less the knight she was than the carefree girl the war had never really let her be. Only Argo could possibly do this to me!_

Face well and truly flaming now, she fumbled for a response. She was having difficulty finding one that didn't involve outright lying, though, and before she did think of something to say, the other girl seemed to take pity on her.

“So, where is Kii-bou, anyway?” Argo glanced around the roof, as if Kirito could somehow have been hiding on the perfectly empty roof. “Don't tell me ya scared him off? Didn't think that was too forward, but maybe I underestimated the _hikikomori_ in him—”

“Kirito is merely buying drinks,” Kizmel interrupted quickly. “I believe Agil and several other merchants are planning a fireworks display at midnight, which we're intending to watch from here.”

“Well.” There was something in the Rat's expression that Kizmel didn't quite trust, but Argo said nothing more about it. Instead, a thoughtful look on her face, she said, “So, no Aa-chan tonight, huh?”

“Unfortunately not,” Kizmel said regretfully—though she had to admit to being grateful for the change in subject. “The Knights of Blood are busy planning for tomorrow's raid on the Pillar Guardian.”

More and more, she'd noticed, her friend—the sister who'd stepped in to fill some of the chill void left by Tilnel's death—had been consumed by the clearing of Aincrad's floors. Indeed, Kizmel
suspected Heathcliff had ordered Asuna to take time off for the Yule Festival because the girl otherwise would hardly have rested at all. A far cry from the young woman the elf had met in the Forest of Wavering Mists, a year before: a woman who'd taken the time to look in wonder at her surroundings, even amidst the conflict.

Not that Kizmel could entirely disagree this time. Scouting reports suggested the Pillar Guardian here was not going to be anything out of the ordinary, but she knew all the clearers, especially the veterans of the Twenty-Fifth Floor, were very concerned about what awaited them on the Fiftieth. Caution was probably wise.

“Well, that's a shame,” Argo said now, sighing. “But she's got her job, an' she really is darn good at it. Though on the bright side…” She grinned; an expression Kizmel didn't trust for a moment. “At least there won't be a third wheel for yer date with Kii-bou, eh?”

“It's not a date!” Kizmel protested at once, blush returning in full. “And what is a third—oh, never mind.” Slumping, she shook her head. “Argo. Did you come here merely to kill me from embarrassment, or was there another reason? Kirito should be back soon, if you wish to see him.”

“Nah, I'll leave ya guys be. Really, I just wanted to give ya this. Call it a late Christmas present.” Dropping her feet back on the roof, Argo slipped a hand under her cloak, pulled out what appeared to be a piece of parchment, and laid it on the railing beside Kizmel.

The elf girl took a quick look at it, and her blush grew hotter still. “Argo…!”

“What? C'mon, Kii-chan, trust me: you're gonna want ta keep that memory fresh. And it's such a good picture, dontcha think?” Argo looked down at the picture, taken at one precise moment that one evening, and her grin widened. “Really, I think I outdid myself with the timing. And you look so…” She trailed off, grin fading into a frown. “Say… shouldn't that've set off the…?”

Unable to bear the scrutiny, either of the picture or, as she was sure would soon be the case, herself, Kizmel quickly turned her back.

“Kii-chan,” Argo breathed. “…You turned it off, didn't ya?”

Looking up at the brightly-shining moon, Kizmel could only reply, voice soft even to her own ears, “…Why not? I've nothing to fear from Kirito—nor anything to hide.”

There was a long, uncharacteristic silence behind her. Then Argo whistled, low and long. “You're something else, Kii-chan. I dunno of any human player who'd turn that off fer real. …You're serious about this, aren't ya?”

Kizmel shrugged uncomfortably, feeling the Rat's gaze on her back. “Any man who wishes to wed me must have unshakeable conviction and an iron will,” she said, trying to make light of the whole matter.

“How! That the best ya got, now that ya can't just brush it off with needing your Queen's permission?” The Rat snickered. “Gotta do better than that, Kii-chan. Seein' as somebody we know has a pretty strong will and all…”

…I should've known that would not dissuade her. “…I've many reasons to follow this path, Argo,” Kizmel said finally, still quiet. “The world of the Swordmasters, that I've glimpsed these last months—your world—is a place I wish to see more of for its own sake. There are many friends I've made among you, whom I believe deserve to return home.”

She still remembered that one night in Taft, when Sachi had first begun to explain to her what had
been done to the Swordmasters—and the night she met Klein, and Kirito confessed the truth of who, and what, his people really were.

“So many reasons,” she murmured, as much to herself as to her friend. “And if I have one particular Swordmaster I wish to see it with… Well. We’ll see where things lead from here, won’t we?”

“…Guess we will, at that.” Argo chuckled to herself. “Won't lie to ya. Kii-chan: I got no idea how you might follow us home. But if there's a way, you bet we'll find it. So good luck with Kii-bou. And don't worry—yer secret's safe with me. Won't even sell that one to Aa-chan.” Kizmel heard light footsteps heading for the stairs down into the tower; then a pause, and a quick laugh. “‘Sides, she'd prolly have a stroke if I did tell her!”

Only when Argo was safely gone did Kizmel risk looking away from the night sky. Picking up the picture, she found herself smiling, despite her embarrassment. The mischievous information dealer truly had picked a good moment: not the first, brief contact that Asuna had told her later was all that was normally expected, no. Argo had waited until Kizmel had pressed a second, deeper kiss on her partner; until, in fact, Kirito had apparently concluded he was hallucinating, and gone along with it.

“…There are worse games that girl has played,” Kizmel murmured to herself. “Even if I cannot guess where this one will end…”

Well, she supposed there was one way to find out. No longer bound by the authority of the Queen of Lyusula, the choice was hers now, and hers alone.

*Just as you told me in the Trial, Tilnel. Thank you, Sister…*

Footsteps coming back up the tower's stairs broke Kizmel from her reverie, and with hurried motions she summoned her menu and consigned the picture to her inventory. Not a moment too soon, either; Kirito appeared at the top only a moment later, a glass in either hand.

“Sorry I took so long, Kizmel,” he said, crossing to join her by the railing. “The line was pretty long; the KoB and DDA may be busy tonight, but a lot of other people aren't…” He trailed off. “Are you okay?”

“It's nothing,” she assured him, taking the glass he offered to her. Ficklewine, it was; a human drink she'd taken a liking to for its unpredictable variety. “Argo was here not long ago, that's all.”

“Oh.” Kirito nodded in understanding. “Yeah, that'd do it… Um. Do I want to know what she had to say?”

“Probably not,” she said, with deliberate understatement. She took a sip of her ficklewine, nodded approvingly—a very nice red, this one, reminding her of a restaurant they'd visited on the Forty-Third Floor—and added, “She was just being her usual self.”

“That bad, huh?” He took a drink of his own wine, shaking his head. “Yeah… that's one thing I can probably do without knowing.” Leaning on the railing much as she had earlier, his eyes flicked upward; checking the time, she thought. “It should be starting soon, anyway. Guess I got here just in time.”

“More than in time, my friend,” Kizmel told him, noting herself that it was only moments until midnight. On impulse, she moved closer—close enough to lean her shoulder against his.

Kirito shot a quick glance at her, visibly surprised. In return, she only smiled enigmatically, raising her glass toward him. As the fireworks suddenly erupted from the city below, arcing out to compete with the moon and stars in bright bursts
of color, he said, “Happy New Year, Kizmel.”

She clinked her glass against his. “Happy New Year… Kirito-kun.”

Chapter End Notes

Let the shipping begin! Eleven chapters--and just over a year, real-time--in, and the romance part of the fic finally kicks in. Given that I loathe the "Status Quo Is God" trope, you may expect that this is a major turning point in the story.

Main canon, I have no idea if Kirito knows how to dance. Game canon does include one such scene, though, and since I've borrowed several things from the games as it is, it seemed appropriate to include that as well. (The specific dance, for what it's worth, is based on Final Fantasy VIII's most famous scene. It was a convenient template, and, I thought, an appropriate one.)

Next chapter, not so fluffy, sadly. Though it does have a couple of moments, I suppose.
Chapter XII: Blood Crescendo

January 7th, 2024

I knew this was a bad idea! What was I thinking, trying something like this, even with a full party—please, someone, anyone, help!

There would be no help coming, though. Lux was sure of that now. Pale green hair streaming behind her as she ran through the dungeon's dark stone hallways, she knew her only chance of survival was to run. Find someplace where she could stop moving long enough to get at her inventory, get out the Teleport Crystal she should've had ready from the start, and escape.

The rest of the party was already out, or dead; she wasn't sure which, after all the traps that had separated them one by one. Either was, she hadn't seen any of them in at least fifteen minutes—though she thought she'd heard a scream, once. Briefly.

Instinct prompted her to duck just as she rounded a corner, narrowly avoiding a whirling blade that swung out from the wall and nearly took her head off.

If I get out of this, Lux promised herself, panting from fear and imagined exhaustion, I'm never joining a PUG again! And never, ever coming to someplace like this again!

It had seemed so simple. A dungeon on the Thirty-Second Floor, nearly twenty floors below the frontline, rumored to have really rare gear for that level of Aincrad. Lux wasn't exactly clearer-level, but even with the traps the dungeon was said to have, she and the pick-up group she'd ended up with had thought it a reasonable risk.

They hadn't counted on trapdoors and false walls. Between those and some unexpected elite-level mobs, they'd been scattered within twenty minutes; now Lux was all by herself, lost, and trying desperately to get just enough breathing room to make her getaway.

Taking a sharp left down a corridor she was pretty sure led in the general direction of the dungeon's entrance, Lux skidded to a halt just before she could run headlong into a Lizard Knight. Letting out a squeak of frightened surprise, she lashed out with her sword in a reflexive Horizontal; at the same time, the reptile's scimitar came down at her in a flashing Vertical.

Their blades met each other halfway, rebounding with a ringing crash and knocking player and mob alike off-balance—and the moment Lux's left foot came down again, her vision was filled with a blue flash.

For a second, she thought the Lizard Knight had somehow hit her with another Sword Skill. When she stumbled to the floor instead of hitting a wall, though, she realized the truth: she'd just found another of the dungeon's traps, and been teleported somewhere else within its maze.

On the one hand, she thought as she took stock of her new surroundings, this was about as bad as it could get: she'd traded a hallway with a single Lizard Knight for a big, boxy room with only one door—filled with at least half a dozen Porcine Brigands, all of them armed with swords as big as she was.
On the other—

They’re all at the far end, Lux realized, virtual heart hammering in her chest. If I’m quick—! With trembling fingers, she brought up her menu, went to her inventory with only two false-starts, and materialized her precious Teleport Crystal. Gripping it tightly, painfully aware that the armed pigs had noticed her and were heading her way, she lifted the crystal high.

“Teleport: Zeronia!”

It took Lux a few moments to realize absolutely nothing was happening. When she did, her blood turned ice-cold, and the crystal slipped from nerveless fingers. An Anti-Crystal Area, she thought numbly. This is… another trap…

She’d heard about Anti-Crystal traps. There’d been a rumor floating around months before about an entire guild being wiped out by one. She’d hoped it was only a story. Now she was in one, and the only other way out was past monsters even the full party she’d come with might not have been able to defeat.

And the Porcine Brigands were coming closer.

Numbened by fear, Lux pushed herself to her feet, one-handed sword clutched in one trembling hand. Her only chance now was to make a break for it, try and get past without fighting them. Gathering herself, she pushed off in a dead run, yelling incoherently.

There was a gap, just a small one, between two of the pigs. If she could just slip through—

She almost made it. Then, just as she made it to the gap, she felt a terrific blow to her gut, and suddenly she was flying backward, sword tumbling away.

Lux landed hard, gasping from the impact. An icon blinking on her HUD told her she was in a Tumble status, but she hardly noticed; her head was spinning from the blow, flight, and landing. And her sword was gone.

Shaking, she managed to roll onto her back—and immediately wished she hadn’t. Her sword was nowhere in sight, but the Brigands were. Right on top of her, now; at least three of them were already close enough to attack, and the light from their blades as they prepared to strike almost blinded her.

No! Lux tore her gaze away, eyes squeezing closed in terror. “No… no…! Somebody, anybody… help me!”

Running footsteps. The sound of blades zipping through the air in Sword Skills. Squeals of porcine anguish. Flashes bright enough to be seen through her eyelids, and the shattered-glass sound of virtual bodies breaking into polygons.

Silence.

For a minute, Lux didn’t even realize none of those sounds had heralded her own death. Then, slowly, she realized her own HP was still well in the blue, and her vision was only the black of closed eyelids, not death. I’m… alive? Someone… someone saved me…?

Hesitantly, she opened her eyes—and realized she was anything but saved.

An eclectic group of players stood where the Porcine Brigands had been. A tall young man with a thin blade, most of his face covered by a skull-like mask; another with a knife dripping with poison,
entire head hidden by a brown bag with eyeholes. Toward the rear, a wild-haired youth with a katana and an expression of twisted glee. Almost hidden in his shadow, a young girl in blue, bearing a rapier and a blank look.

All of them—save the girl, whose sign made no sense at all—bearing orange cursors.

Orange players, Lux realized, relief chased away by cold terror once again. Criminals... no, please, no!

“Well, what do, we have, here?” The boy in the skull mask tilted his head, examining her with bright red eyes. “Another one, from those idiots, we saw, before?”

“Who cares?” Cackling, the one with the bag mask and the poisoned knife stepped closer; frantically, Lux scrabbled back, only to find herself trapped by bare stone. “All I see here… is a bonus. One more chance for fun, right?”

Watching that knife come closer, Lux shook her head rapidly, whimpering. “No,” she whispered. “No, please, you can’t…!”

“Sure I can. Ain't that right, girlie?” he called over his shoulder. “Like we told ya—this is what the game is really all about!”

If the impossible girl made any reply, Lux didn't hear it. She was too focused on the knife, and the realization that she wasn't going to die to monsters. No, she was going to be murdered by people—people who killed and laughed like it was all just a game.

Cackling louder, the masked man swung the knife down.

“No…!”

“Wait, Johnny.”

A centimeter from Lux's throat, the knife stopped. “What for, Boss?” he said plaintively. “C'mon, this is the best part! And you know we don't get a chance to kill girls much; in Aincrad, she's practically rare loot by herself!”

Lux shuddered.

“Oh, sure, I get that.” The faintly-accented voice sounded amused; and when the owner of it stepped into view, the grin visible beneath the hood of his poncho bore it out. “But y'know, Johnny, I had another idea. One that'll make for a lot more fun than just killing her.”

“What's, that, Boss?” the skull-masked one asked, red eyes flicking toward the group's apparent leader.

“Wait and see, XaXa. Wait and see.” Idly flipping a knife in one hand, the man in the poncho crouched beside Lux. “Name's PoH, girl. And I've got a choice for you. Aw, don't worry, I'm not gonna hurt you,” he added, seeing her flinch. “No, that wouldn't be any fun at all. And shut up, Johnny, just listen for a second.”

“Ch-choice…?” Lux got out, shaking even more than before PoH's “reassurance”.

“Yep. See, I'm starting up a little guild here. You can see from our cursors what we're up to, of course—which leaves us with a little problem.” PoH raised his free hand, palm-up. “There's only so much we can do without being able to go into town, and people run from us on sight in the field.
So… here's the deal. Option one, we leave you here, stuck in the middle of this dungeon, and you take your chances tryin' to get out on your own.”

She swallowed. Only sheer luck had kept her alive this long, and that had been before she'd been teleported to a completely different area. There'd been no chance to check her map, but she'd have bet she was nowhere near anything she'd explored before.

Being left here, now, was as much a death sentence as letting “Johnny” kill her himself.

PoH could clearly see her reaction. “Yep, that's what I thought,” he said, like it was one big joke. “Option two: you join up with us. Don't look at me like that, we won't ask you to hurt anybody—we need your cursor to stay green, after all. You won't have to hurt a fly. Just give us info, help us with supplies… that kind of thing. And… send some messages for us.”

*Oh, no.*

Lux knew what that meant. Maybe these player-killers wouldn't ask her to actually attack anyone, but there was no question what the actions she did take for them would do. If they wanted help, it was for one thing.

“Hey, hey, hey, nice one, Boss!” Johnny cackled again, tossing his knife from hand to hand. “Bait, huh? Oh, yeah, I like it! That's way better than what I had in mind!”

“The game lasts longer that way, doesn't it?” PoH agreed. Turning his attention back to Lux, he smiled; she found herself wishing he'd glared, instead. “So, whaddya say, girl? Stay here and die, help us and live? Which is it gonna be?”

Lux shuddered violently. She knew what “bait” meant. She knew what they meant for her to do—but she was so scared. She'd always been scared, since Kayaba Akihiko betrayed them all, but this was worse than anything she'd ever felt, in all the months she'd been trapped in Aincrad.

Sooner or later, someone would find out, and she'd die for it then. But that would be then, and this was now. As horrible as what they were asking of her was…

“…Okay,” Lux got out, hating herself with every fear-driven word. “Okay, I'll… I'll do it…”

PoH's smile turned to a broad grin. “I knew you'd see it our way.” Tucking away his knife, he grabbed her hand, hauling her roughly to her feet. “Welcome to Laughing Coffin, girl. Listen up, everybody—it's *showtime!*”

*January 10th, 2024*

The mood in the meeting hall co-opted for the pre-boss meeting was grim. Situated in the town of Algade, it was a nice enough place—but that made it an exception on the Fiftieth Floor. The town looked to be a good place for a player hub; it had become clear quickly, though, that that would only be the case for the over-leveled.

Ten days the clearers had worked to conquer the Fiftieth Floor, and it had so far proven to be just as hard as had been feared. Even the basic mobs in the field were more difficult those of the previous by a greater margin than a single floor would normally imply. The field boss had been a major headache, and the labyrinth more so.

Sitting at the large table taken for the meeting, Kirito wasn't surprised to see some of the usual boss raid crowd missing. Everyone had suspected, after the nightmare of the Twenty-Fifth Floor, that the
Floor Boss this time was going to be bad; clearly, some of them didn't have the courage to see it first-hand.

*If anything, I'm surprised Asuna managed to scrape up enough people to replace them,* he thought, catching sight of some unfamiliar faces. *I wonder—who's worse here? The people too afraid to challenge the boss, or the ones crazy enough to do it knowing what it's likely to be?*

He felt a hand squeeze his under the table. “Don't despair yet, my friend,” Kizmel murmured in his ear. “This is not the same as The Adamantine Arachnid.”

True. *We don't have Kibaou going off half-cocked this time.* Taking a deep breath, Kirito returned his partner's gesture. It was one that might've still felt awkward to him just a couple of weeks before, but things had been different ever since Christmas. He still wasn't sure how, or where it would lead, but right now he was just grateful for the support.

For once, the two of them had been among the first to arrive. With clearing on this floor so difficult, they'd been right in the thick of it, working more closely with the other clearers than usual; this time, they were left waiting for the leaders of the Knights of Blood and Divine Dragons Alliance to round out the meeting.

*And... where are they, anyway? I'd have expected to at least see Lind already; he's usually here early to try and upstage Asuna.*

They didn't have much longer to wait. The hall's doors opened one more time, letting in three more players: Lind, Asuna, and Heathcliff, all of them quiet and sober. Not exactly an unusual attitude from the KoB's official commander, but coming from the other two it was enough to make Kirito more than a little uneasy.

The three took their places with their respective guilds; unlike the others, though, Asuna remained standing in her place at Heathcliff's side. “I'm sorry for the delay,” she said, taking the lead in the meeting as had become common. “Unfortunately, the scouts took longer than we expected to return.”

“Something tells me that ain't a good sign, Vice-Commander,” Agil commented from the "unaffiliated" section of the table. Folding his arms, he fixed the Knight with a grim look. “Give it to us straight. How bad is it?”

“Not good,” she said frankly. “Worse, we're not actually sure how bad it is. Guildmaster Lind?”

Seeing Asuna willingly cede the floor to her own would-be rival, Kirito's unease deepened. *She and Lind hate each other's guts. Just what is going on here?*

Clearing his throat, Lind pushed himself to his feet. “As Vice-Commander Asuna says, the situation doesn't look good,” the blue-haired swordsman said frankly. “The scouting team was led by my own guild—Shivata, more specifically—and they only barely escaped with their lives.”

Kirito exchanged a look with Kizmel. Boss scouting was never exactly safe, but since their only job was to try and work out attack patterns, it wasn't usually the riskiest job in Aincrad, either. When things did get hairy, they were generally smart enough to run and let a full raid worry about the rest.

“Here's what they brought back,” Lind continued. "The boss is called 'Vemacitrin: The Six-Armed Automaton', and it resembles a mechanical Asura: three faces, six arms. The first pair of arms has no weapons; the second, a pair of axes. The third... well, Shivata's team saw scabbards, but never actually saw them drawn. The scouting mission didn't last that long.”

“What happened?” Kizmel asked, leaning forward; under the table, her grip on Kirito's hand
tightened.

The DDA leader grimaced, but unlike prior encounters it didn't seem to be anything to do with having to “put up with” an NPC participating in the meeting. “Well, the fight went smoothly enough at first. Vemacitrin's attacks in the first stage are unarmed skills with its lowermost arms; nothing we haven't seen before. Once its first HP bar had been taken out, though… Its head spun around to show a different face, and its middle arms pulled out the axes. That was a style none of the scouts had seen before. Neither have I,” he admitted frankly.

*Two-weapon style… no, I can't think of any mob or boss that's used that before.* Kirito shot a very quick, discreet glance at his partner, and saw in her eyes that she was thinking the same thing. *I have some idea of how to fight that, but it's not going to be pretty.*

“Dual axes, huh.” A KoB member Kirito didn't recognize, an older fellow with wild hair and a beard, stroked his chin. “Yeah, that doesn't sound good. Were the lower arms still using unarmed skills, too?”

“No that Shivata or his team noticed,” Lind replied, shaking his head. “The problem was the unfamiliar style from the middle arms—and the fact that Vemacitrin got a large speed and attack buff when it hit that second stage. Nothing that couldn't be handled by a full raid, we think, but it was enough to force the scouts to retreat.”

“Fast and powerful. Super.” Agil rubbed his forehead, frowning. “What about adds? Does this thing have help?”

“No as far as the scouts managed to last, fortunately.” Lind raised his hands, shrugging. “But we don't know what will happen when the second lifebar is depleted. We can assume it'll draw swords with its upper arms, but beyond that…”

“So we're going in blind. That's not good.” A blonde-haired girl Kirito vaguely remembered from previous boss raids stared down at the table. “But… I guess we kinda expected that, right? This one is the halfway point, after all.”

*Yeah.* It had taken over a year, and the better part of three thousand lives, but once Vemacitrin was defeated the clearing of Aincrad would officially be half done. That was an important milestone by any measure, and Kirito would've been surprised if Kayaba hadn't prepared something “special” for it.

*I just hope he doesn't change the plot on us halfway, like so many RPGs do,* he thought. *I don't think we could handle the rules being changed now.*

“We've all known for months now that this was probably going to be a rough battle,” Asuna said now, retaking the floor from Lind. “Which is why we all have to work together, more than ever. Guildmaster Lind and I have agreed, especially in light of the number of clearers unwilling to participate in this fight, to assign parties without regard for guild affiliation. I trust that's acceptable to everyone?”

“Doesn't look like we've got much choice,” Hafner said, from the DDA end of the table. He didn't look happy about it, but then Kirito couldn't remember him ever looking happy about a boss raid—especially not an irregular one. “I just hope some of the no-shows come back after this… What about the solos, though? You guys gonna be okay without having your pick?”

The blonde shrugged carelessly; a redhead to her left gave a shaky smile and thumbs-up. Kirito, though not exactly happy himself—not that he ever was, when he had to worry about anyone
besides his partner—affected an indifferent air. “If we couldn't handle that, we wouldn't be here, Hafner. Not like we ever end up with the same party twice, anyway.”

“Good.” Asuna planted a flattened palm on the table, sweeping a serious gaze over the assembly. “In the interests of being rested for the fight, we'll set out for the boss the day after tomorrow. Let's assign parties and work out a basic strategy now; I suggest everyone get to know each other while you can. We need to be as coordinated as possible, especially if the final stages of the battle are as bad we expect.”

How, exactly, Kirito found himself at a table for six in an Algade cafe an hour after the boss meeting, he wasn't quite sure. Actually, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been in a casual gathering that size outside of people he knew well, like the former Black Cats or Fuurinkazan; usually, he and his partner both kept to themselves, out of habit as much as anything else.

Asuna, he decided, as an NPC waitress delivered drinks all around. She was pushing me around ages before she ever took charge of clearing. I guess she hasn't lost her touch.

At least he didn't seem to be the only one who seemed out of their depth. Out of the party he and Kizmel had been assigned to, only the DDA’s Hafner and the Knight of Blood Asuna had tossed their way seemed completely at ease; Kizmel looked it, sipping with apparent calm at her hot chocolate, but he knew her well enough to sense her own awkwardness beneath the surface.

“Um, I guess we should introduce ourselves?” the blonde girl from the meeting began, when the silence began to stretch on. Like Kizmel, she wore a cape, but hers was shorter, and topped possibly the first set of armor Kirito had seen in Aincrad that conformed to typical MMO eye candy conventions. “I know some of us have fought in boss raids before, but I know I don't really know all of you….”

“Good idea, young lady.” Clearing his throat, the party's KoB rep set aside his coffee and stood. “The name's Godfree. As you can see, I'm with the Knights of Blood; I'm an axeman by trade. This will be my first Floor Boss, but I've been clearing labyrinths for a good twenty floors now. Don't worry, kids, I've got your backs.”

Well, that explains why I don't know him. If he'd been involved in clearing labyrinths, though, that suggested he at least had the makings of a boss clearer. Under the circumstances, Kirito hoped that would be good enough. He sounds confident enough.

“Hafner, DDA,” the two-handed swordsman Kirito had always thought of as a soccer player said simply. “I've been around the block a few times; this won't be the first crazy boss I've fought—right, Blackie?”

Kirito grimaced, remembering the Fifth Floor Boss and the twelve-player raid he'd found himself leading against it. Victory had been theirs, without a single casualty, but it hadn't been an easy one. “Well, at least this one doesn't use the boss room itself as part of its attack patterns, right?”

“Don't jinx us, Blackie, we still don't know what that last phase is like.”

The blonde girl glanced between them, obviously confused. “Eh…? Well, never mind that for now.” Coughing into her hand, she came to her feet. “I'm Philia. I use a one-handed sword, and I'm a treasure hunter by trade—so I've been clearing since the Thirty-Fifth Floor. After all, the best loot is on the frontline, right?”

Godfree frowned, but Kirito found himself grinning. “You got that right, Philia,” he agreed. “Though you'd be surprised what shows up on lower floors, sometimes—there's a few places you
don't want to try until you're way above the normal recommended level for a given floor, and I could swear there's quests sometimes that weren't there before.”

“Well… I'm Kirito. My partner and I are usually off on our own during clearing, but we've been through quite a few boss raids together. I'll try not to hold anyone back.”

He nervously scratched the back of his head in the silence that followed. Hafner knew him and the story behind his actions on early floors, but the newer clearers didn't; Kirito wasn't sure how much of the old stories of “Beaters” were still floating around. Or how many still remembered the exact origin of the epithet.

To his relief, Godfree and the new girls only nodded, apparently oblivious. That left Kirito free to sit back down with a suppressed sigh, letting his partner take the spotlight.

Taking one last sip of her chocolate, the elf girl put it aside and pushed herself to her feet. “My name is Kizmel,” she said, inclining her head respectfully. “Late of the Pagoda Knights of the Dark Elf Kingdom of Lyusula, now of the Swordmasters. As Kirito said, we're mostly independent, but I have seen my share of battle with the Pillar Guardians. I believe you humans would say, I'll be in your care?”

Hafner and Philia took the introduction in stride; the DDA swordsman had known her for a long time himself, and if the self-proclaimed treasure hunter hadn't, she'd obviously seen Kizmel from afar often enough in recent months. The other new girl, though, looked at her with wide eyes, only now seeming to notice the pointed ears.

Godfree's reaction was another frown, mouth a flat line. “I'd heard the rumors,” he said slowly, “but I honestly thought that's all they were… Are we really going to be going into a boss raid with an NPC? No offense, Kirito, but I don't know that that's a good idea.”

Kirito's hand clenched under the table. Before he could say anything in his partner's defense, though, she reached over to gently squeeze his shoulder. “While I'm still not entirely clear on what an 'NPC' is,” Kizmel began calmly, “I have certainly come to understand Swordmasters use the term to refer to those they regard as having… lesser ability than themselves. Or intelligence.”

He tensed. No one had ever really tried to explain the term in her hearing, as far as he knew; it was honestly one of the concepts he was most worried about discussing with her. Obviously, the elf had figured some of it out anyway. Her definition was pretty close to the mark, even if she couldn't know the full truth—and that definition was more than a little insulting without knowing that truth.

“Truthfully, I'm finding that more understandable of late,” Kizmel continued, surprising him. “I don't fully understand, but I certainly have seen that the term may have merit with many in the Steel Castle. That said, Sir Godfree, I would appreciate it if you would give me the benefit of the doubt. I may just surprise you.”
Tension flowed out of Kirito's shoulders in a wave of pure relief—replaced with amusement at the way Godfree sat back in his chair, nonplussed. “You should listen to her, Godfree,” he said, deliberately cool and casual. “My friend here—” he gave the word quiet emphasis “—used to drive Lind nuts.”

“Got that right.” Hafner snorted, throwing back his drink. “Though something changed a couple weeks back, in that little mess on Christmas Eve. Not that the boss will tell us what... Anyway. Get used to it, Godfree. I know it doesn't make any sense, but Kizmel pulls her weight as well as any player.”

“I... see.” Godfree favored Kizmel with another frown, but now it was more speculative than skeptical. “Well, I suppose we'll find out for sure day after tomorrow. For now, I think there's still one of us to be introduced.”

Attention went to the last member of the impromptu party, who blushed as red as her hair—an unnatural shade Kirito assumed was from a hair dye potion. Besides Godfree, she was the only member of the party Kirito had never seen on the frontline before at all. Unlike the Knight, she looked as nervous as he’d have expected out of a newbie clearer.

*Which might mean she's smarter than he is. If he's heard about the Twenty-Fifth Floor and isn't shaking in his boots, Godfree is nuts.*

Smiling nervously, the redhead stood. “Um. Well, I'm Rain,” she began, scratching the back of her head much as Kirito had earlier. “I'm a solo, and I joined the clearing group on the Forty-Ninth Floor. This will be my first actual boss—but I've done my research!” she added hastily. “I've read up on all the other Floor Bosses and most of the Field Bosses, and I've even asked around about the more famousclearers. I won't let you down!”

Kirito had the distinct feeling Rain's gaze was directly on him with that last; him and Kizmel, anyway. On the one hand, eep; depending on who she asked, her view of him could be colored by either horror stories or Argo's brand of blackmail material.

On the other hand, it suggested she was really serious about clearing, and not just some glory-hunting amateur primed to get killed.

*Or, he pointed out to himself, I could be imagining things. With the boss we've got coming, I'm bound to be nervous about everything—I don't even want to think about what it must be like for someone fighting their first boss, knowing about The Adamantine Arachnid precedent. If I'm jumpy, Rain must be scared out of her wits.*

“Welcome to the clearers, then, Lady Rain,” Kizmel said, reaching a hand across with the table. “We'll do our best to aid you, as well.”

“Course we will!” When Rain hesitantly accepted the handshake, Philia slapped a palm down on the clasped hands. “Not many girls in SAO, and fewer still in the clearers. Heck, I think it's just us three, Liten, and Asuna-san. We gotta hang together, right?”

This time, it was Hafner Kirito found himself exchanging a bemused look with. *Don't ask me,* Hafner's expression seemed to say.

Sitting back, Kizmel leaned over to murmur in his ear, “It is, as Argo might say, 'a girl thing', Kirito. Though after all this time, I should think you'd have enough experience to begin to understand. Indeed, it's not often I see you spending time with men at all...”
Suppressing a groan, Kirito sank back in his chair. *And that's something else I don't get*, he groused to himself, lifting his cup of oolong tea to cover his expression. *There's gotta be a three-to-one male-female gender ratio in the game overall, but two-thirds of my friends list are girls. I'm not specced for this!*

Maybe Asuna was right, and he *did* have an Attract Implausible Events skill. That might explain why half his current party was female, too.

To his relief, after the introductions were finished attention was turned to having dinner, and the conversation shifted to lighter subjects. Hafner was grumpier than usual, but not too much; Kirito suspected it was as much reaction to the recent attitude of the rest of his guild as anything else. Godfree, surprisingly, didn't seem to take offense, despite the ever-growing rivalry between their guilds—though Kirito did get the impression the KoB man thought of himself as the only “adult” of the group.

Rain mostly sat quietly and listened, though she visibly relaxed over the course of the meal. Pre-boss jitters, he suspected, which was certainly reasonable enough. *He* was more than a little nervous; so it was a relief when he found himself drawn into a discussion with Philia about drop rates of materials needed to upgrade her sword.

“It's an unusual one,” the treasure hunter said between bites of takoyaki. “You've seen those ridges on the back, right? Use the right skill in the right place, and you break mobs' swords with it. Really throws 'em off. Thing is, this kind of sword doesn't drop very often, and the mats to upgrade or forge them can be really hard to find.”

Kirito nodded, munching on a grilled rib. “I know what you mean. Kizmel kept her old armor as long as she could, but finding mats for the last couple of upgrades took us to some crazy places. Then there was the sword I got from Amon, the boss back on the Thirty-Seventh. Good stats, but like your Swordbreaker, it had some weird requirements. This place on the Forty-Third—”

“I believe we agreed never to speak of that again, Kirito,” Kizmel interrupted, a piece of fried eel halfway to her mouth. “We wouldn't want the wrong ears to hear that.” She gestured at her face with her free hand, tracing lines on one cheek.

*Ulp.* Right. If there was one incident neither of them ever wanted to end up in Argo's files, that was it. For a number of reasons. Even Kizmel's boldness had its limits.

Seeing Philia's curious expression—one shared by the others at the table, he noticed belatedly—Kirito hastily cleared his throat. “Anyway, yeah. Exotic mats can be a real pain.” Eager to change the subject, he added, “Though you don't actually need a special sword to break a weapon, if you know what you're doing.”

“Whack anything long enough, it breaks,” Hafner agreed around a rice ball. “Usually you're better off going for a regular kill, but some things are tough enough it's worth the effort.”

“Actually,” Kizmel said, setting aside her fork, “it is quite possible to snap a sword long before it wears out. With a properly-placed strike.”

Godfree's bushy eyebrows went up. “Some kind of NPC trick? I heard you've got some kind of special skill set—”

“I've never seen an NPC do it, at least not on purpose,” Kirito said, visions of the Reliquary crossing his mind's eye. “We found out about it from a player.” He looked back to Philia. “Lucky me, he had a knife, not a Swordbreaker. It took him a lot longer than it would you.”
He didn't mention that he'd experimented with it himself since. Or the discoveries he'd made about just how vulnerable some weapon types really were. His reputation in some circles was bad enough as it was, without revealing he knew quite so many PKer tricks.

_I haven't had a choice, though. Sometimes, you have to know bad things to figure out how defend yourself against them._

The implications of what circumstances had led to him experiencing it in the first place weren't lost on anyone, though. Hafner in particular had a dark look on his face, probably remembering the fate of his guildmate Naga. Kizmel went back to her eel in silence, remembering, he was sure, what else they'd learned in that encounter.

Oddly, it was Rain who broke the uneasy silence. “Well,” she said, with a good effort at a smile, “maybe that'll come in handy against the next boss, if we're lucky. I mean, sure, it's supposed to be fast, but it can only be in one place at a time; with eight full parties...” The redhead brightened. “Oh, yeah! Who's supposed to be our party leader for the battle?”

Hafner snorted, folding his hands behind his head. “Oh, I dunno... maybe the crazy guy who's been through more boss fights than just about anybody? I seem to remember a reckless nut who took on one boss with just twelve people...”

Four pairs of eyes—two of them clueless, one of them amused, one...something he wasn't sure about—turned to Kirito.

Groaning, he buried his head in his hands. “Honestly,” he muttered. “It was _one time_. Can't I live _anything_ down?”

“No.” Hafner and Kizmel spoke together, though the latter offered him a sympathetic smile. “I'm afraid, my friend, that this is what comes of having a reputation. Although if, perhaps, you wore something other than black once in a while, you wouldn't always be recognized...”

“What, like putting on KoB white?” Hafner snorted again. “Don't even go there, Kizmel. You'd lose half the clearers to strokes, and Blackie would explode. And if that Kansai bastard Kibaou got wind of it, we'd lose the rest of his guild, too.”

That drew a laugh even from Godfree, but Kirito was suddenly in no mood for humor. _The rest of his guild... just like the others went down against the first quarter-mark boss..._

There were still ribs on his plate, but his appetite, for once, abandoned him.

January 12th, 2024

Tension was thick among the raid group, as they approached the enormous doors at the heart of the labyrinth's highest floor. Of course, Kizmel couldn't remember a time when Swordmasters had been truly _calm_ on the cusp of joining battle with a Pillar Guardian, but this was worse than any time she could remember.

Not that she was free of tension herself. She had only joined the clearers after the Twenty-Sixth Floor had been conquered, but Kirito had described the battle to her in frightening detail. It was only natural to be anxious about a repeat.

For once, when they paused before those doors, it wasn't Asuna who stood before the raid. For the first time in Kizmel's memory, the usually hands-off Heathcliff took center stage, resting his heavy shield on the stone floor. “I don't need to tell any of you how difficult this battle is likely to be,” he
began, voice soft but pitched to reach the entire group. “We all fear what happened twenty-five floors ago will happen again—and going by what we’ve seen so far, that fear has justification.

“Just remember this: we are not walking in without proper intelligence, as the ALS did. If we’re careful, we’ll win this battle. And when we do—” Heathcliff’s cool gray eyes swept over the group, as calm as ever. “When we do, we’ll be halfway to winning our freedom.”

There was, Kizmel thought, a subtle easing in many of her comrades’ shoulders at the reminder. She wished she could’ve shared it; indeed, she was ashamed that it was her own selfishness that kept her from sharing that small measure of relief.

Curiously, Kirito seemed as untouched by the reassurance as she was. She wondered if it was his own sense of responsibility for the lives of those around him—or if, deep down, he shared the same sentiment she felt.

Now is not the time for that, she reminded herself. Later, when we celebrate our victory.

“The Commander is right,” Asuna said, stepping to her leader’s side. “Don’t take chances, and we’ll pull through.” She turned to the doors, together with Heathcliff. “Let’s go!”

The first thing Kizmel noticed about the chamber of the fiftieth Pillar Guardian was that its ceiling was considerably lower than usual; perhaps half the average height for such rooms. The second was the number of statues lining the walls, each depicting an overweight human in a lotus position. A burning crimson glow in their stone eyes provided a surprising fraction of the room’s illumination.

Beyond that, at the far end of the room, she saw a figure sitting on a throne, one leg propped on the other. Its six arms were folded, and the calm metal face that looked upon the intruders was one of three. Everything about it was utterly relaxed, even casual; and if Kizmel was any judge, it was barely taller than Agil.

She couldn’t remember being more frightened of one of Aincrad’s monstrous guardians.

When the last Swordmaster had entered the chamber, [Vemacitrin: The Six-Armed Automaton] stood from its throne, unfolded its lowest pair of arms, and strode forward.

“Follow the plan,” Asuna called out, drawing her rapier. “Trade off, so no one draws too much aggro. Team A, forward!”

A mixed party of KoB and DDA players rushed forward to meet Vemacitrin, which was itself picking up speed. Just before the two clashed, Godfree turned a grin on their own party. “Well, at least we’re not first, eh?”

“I dunno,” Rain replied nervously, spinning her sword in her hand. “I’m not sure I like more time to think just now—there they go!”

First blood was from a DDA katana-wielder—Orochi, Kizmel thought, the one whom Klein had dueled on Christmas Eve. His blade came out in a Zekkuu aimed at Vemacitrin’s middle-right shoulder; he hit, with a screech of metal-on-metal and a spray of sparks, but the Asura responded with a heavy punch to Orochi’s stomach.

Orochi stumbled back, gasping; one of his fellows filled the gap, only to be struck by Vemacitrin’s other fist before he could bring his two-handed sword to bear. He reeled, off-balance, while the Guardian unexpectedly went for a third player with a leg sweep that knocked him from his feet.

Then it was Vemacitrin’s turn to be driven back, with the rest of Orochi’s party striking from three
angles simultaneously. A rapier's Linear took it under the lower-left arm, a spear's Straight Thrust grated against its neck, and a leaping mace's Hammerblow rocked Vemacitrin's head back.

“Team B, draw aggro!” Asuna snapped, gesturing quickly with her rapier. “C, get ready to move in!”

Team B was pure tank, led by Shivata and Liten of the Divine Dragons. They rushed in to interpose their shields while Orochi and his companions collected each other to pull back and recover. Not a moment too soon, at that; the Swordmaster who’d been knocked down had only barely been pulled away when Vemacitrin unleashed a flurry of punches. The pattern was broad enough to take two shields to block, and came hard enough to buckle the knees behind them.

*Six-strike technique,* Kizmel thought with a wince. She'd seen a couple of longer skills, but not many; for Vemacitrin to have used such so early was not a good sign.

Even so, she didn't hesitate when the time came. Her group started moving as soon as Vemacitrin's Gem Bombardment finished, and by the time the tanks had endured a Meteor Palm—at the expense of one of them being sent rolling at high speed toward a wall—Kirito was in range, and she was right behind him.

“Switch!” Kirito called out. Slipping through the gap the tanks opened between their shields, he led in with a Vertical Arc. More cautious than Orochi, after carving the V-shaped slash into Vemacitrin's forearms he spun on one foot, narrowly avoiding the Asura's counterattack. That gave Kizmel the chance to hit the over-extended arm with a Reaver; a weak opening blow, but fast, and its momentum carried her right past.

Godfree was next, spinning his axe above his head—only to have his Whirlwind repelled by Vemacitrin's Raging Upper. The clashing skills forced both to stagger back; Hafner took advantage to slam a Cyclone into the Asura's ribs.

In an impressive display of coordination, Philia and Rain took that last opening to hit Vemacitrin from either side, the blonde's Sharp Nail drawing an inverted triangle in red along its left flank, the redhead performing an admirable Snake Bite on the same arm Kizmel had hit.

Kizmel had only an instant to feel satisfaction at her group's contribution to the battle, and to plan her next move. Then Vemacitrin stuck both lower arms straight out to its sides, kicked off with one foot, and used its rapidly-spinning fists to smash everyone within reach.

*That will teach me to be overconfident,* she thought, watching the room whirl on every axis. When her head made contact with one of the wall statues, she could only be grateful she no longer felt pain.

Rain's friends had told her joining the clearing group was insane. One of them had stormed off in tears on learning of her decision, knowing—like everyone else who paid any attention to the clearing progress—what the very next boss fight was likely to be like.

She'd done it anyway, though. After months of grinding, hunting down rare mats for decent weapons, and buying up every scrap of information she could about previous bosses and the top-level clearers, she'd finally gone up and volunteered to fill one of the holes left by those unwilling to face the new boss. It was, to her, the right thing to do—the *only* thing to do.

Rain still thought she'd made the right decision. She was beginning to think, though, that her timing was bad.

*But if I do live through this,* she thought, ducking under a Fierce Punch and laying out a Horizontal
Arc in return, I'll have proven I can handle it up here. There won't be anything like this for another twenty-five floors, right?

So far, Vemacitrin had been just as the scouting report said. The mechanical Asura was hitting like a truck—the front rank of tanks had already been forced to pull back to heal, leaving Team E to take over—but no one had quite hit the red yet. Though there had been a couple of close calls. Orlando of the Legend Braves had been unlucky enough to take most of a Gem Bombardment full-on, before Nezha's chakram had managed to interrupt the attack.

“Switch!” Rain called out, pulling back from her own attack. She was only just ahead of a Raging Upper—she wasn't actually sure she would've evaded it, had her own party leader not landed a Sonic Leap to cancel it.

“Team C, pull back!” the raid leader called over the din of clashing Sword Skills. “Team D will engage!”

Gratefully, Rain skipped back with the rest of her party, letting Asuna the Flash and her party take the lead. The KoB leader Heathcliff was first in, his tower shield crashing into Vemacitrin's fists to stall them for a few precious seconds; Asuna slipped instantly into the opening. Her attack was a Linear, the simplest attack available to a fencer, but delivered with such speed that Rain didn't even see it, just the brilliant flash of light.

She did see how Vemacitrin recoiled, though, allowing the DDA's Lind to follow up with leaping overhead of a Helmsplitter. He did eat a Raging Upper for his pains, knocking him across the room and his HP deep into the yellow.

The opening that gave wasn't wasted; Quetzalcoatl rammed a spear into Vemacitrin's guts in return, while Agil and Wolfgang circled around behind. Axe and greatsword slammed into the Asura's back together, biting off another chunk of its first lifebar.

Beside Rain, Kirito winced. “They shouldn't have surrounded it,” he muttered. “It's going to—ouch.”

Vemacitrin reacted just as he’d begun to predict, with the same Whirling Fist it had used earlier. Lind was still out of range, Heathcliff merely stood his ground behind his huge shield, and Asuna nimbly leapt back out of range; Quetzalcoatl and the merchants weren't so lucky.

Kizmel flinched as Agil sailed by, roaring a curse at the Asura. “We almost have it down to its second lifebar, however,” she pointed out. “Nearly a quarter of the battle already.”

It was Rain's turn to wince; an expression she shared with Philia. Behind them, Hafner heaved a sigh. “Let me tell you about another human idea, Kizmel: please don't tempt fate like that!”

“She's right, though,” Godfree said, shaking his head. “So far, this is just like the scouts said. A little more, and—there we go!”

Asuna had just landed a Quadruple Pain, and was caught in the post-motion delay when Vemacitrin's first HP bar caught up with the damage she'd just done. The last bit of red emptied out of it—and a fraction of blue drained from the second.

In that moment, Vemacitrin's head spun, its calm face replaced with one glaring angrily. Its lower arms folded again, and the middle pair whipped out a pair of one-handed axes in a double-strike that caught Asuna across the chest, just before she could recover enough to move.

Rain was pretty sure it was the tanks of Team E that were supposed to move in when the second
phase of the battle began. Instead, the very instant the raid leader was struck, Kirito and Kizmel blurred into motion, the latter calling Asuna's name, the former yelling a wordless war cry.

“Dammit, Blackie!” Hafner snapped. “Don't be reckless—! Oh, who am I kidding, anyway?” Grumbling to himself, he took off after them, already swinging his heavy sword back to charge up a skill.

Suddenly gripped by fear, Rain almost didn't follow. When Philia barely hesitated, though, and even Godfree started moving quickly, she did her best to push back that anxiety, gripped her well-crafted sword tight, and forced herself to join the charge.

They weren't the first to face the Asura's second phase, though. Even as they rushed to attack, Vemacitrin was already on the move, rushing ahead faster than before to meet the still-recovering Team B. Its axes flashed in a blur, before the tanks could get their shields into position.

Rain couldn't see exactly what happened next. Too many other players were moving around, and she didn't recognize the skill the boss was using. She could hear the yells, though, and caught flashes of light from Sword Skills and—she thought—Vemacitrin's axes bouncing off a shield.

If any of its strikes were being blocked, though, it wasn't by enough. The next sound she heard, next flash she saw, were proof of that.

A crash like shattering glass, a bright blue light, and azure shards scattering through the air, as the last echoes of a scream filled the boss chamber. Beowulf of the Legend Braves, a guild infamous in the early days of the death game, had paid the final price for his crime.

The shattering of Beowulf's body was like a punch to Asuna's stomach, smashing through the detachment she'd gradually built up as a raid leader over the past year. Since the Twenty-Fifth Floor's disaster, fatalities on the frontline had been few and far between, with none at all in over ten floors now.

Worse, this one was personal for her. After everything she and Kirito had gone through to first shut down the Legend Braves' upgrade scam, then save their lives from the consequences…

“Beowulf…! Damn you!”

The cries of anguish from Nezha and the other survivors of the guild snapped Asuna out of her shock before it could take her too far into that darkness. “Team E, hurry it up!” she shouted, in a voice she hardly recognized. “Team C, don't be reckless!”

Like they're going to listen right now, a corner of her mind thought, watching Kirito and Kizmel fling themselves into the fray again, blades glowing bright. They always have to be the heroes…

Someone had to hold off Vemacitrin long enough for the reserve tanks to get in position, though, and there was no one Asuna would've trusted more to keep up with the boss' new pattern. In the meantime, she couldn't just sit back and watch, even as Sword Skills started clashing in a brilliant lightshow at the center of the room.

“Team F, help B get healed up!” she ordered, gesturing with her rapier for emphasis. “G, H, as soon as E's drawn off aggro, get in there!”

Players scrambled around in what would've looked to Asuna like pure chaos just a year or so before, even as in the center of it all Kirito and Kizmel forced Vemacitrin's axes off to the sides with bright crimson flashes. The two other men of the party hacked away at the Asura's middle arms, while the
girls stabbed it in the back; closer to Asuna, some players ran one way, more another, while she stood back and barked orders.

It looked like chaos, but Asuna knew it wasn't. Beowulf was dead, yet the raid was far from breaking; even the Legend Braves, she was sure, would collect themselves enough to rejoin the fight when the time came.

She didn't know if they would ever join another, but they would see this through. For now, that was the important thing.

Team E's shields were in place by the time her old partner's party had to pull back to recover, to Asuna's relief. They had to brace against Vemacitrin's buffed speed and power, once they got its attention, but somehow they held. Two of them were driven clear to the floor in moments by Vemacitrin's windmilling axes—but they held, until first Team G got around to unleashing a barrage of Sword Skills from behind, and then H when Vemacitrin whirled on G.

Two members of H were flung across the room, and one of G was sent reeling away with his sword arm lopped off. Even still, they held. Vemacitrin's second lifebar was whittled down, bit by bit, carved down to half only fifteen minutes after Beowulf died.

By the time Asuna's Team D drove in again personally—Heathcliff splitting off to make up for Beowulf's loss from Team B—the boss was down to only a quarter of that second lifebar. Almost twice as long as the scouts had managed to last, and only one death. They were holding strong.

Though as Asuna drove a Linear in toward Vemacitrin's gut, she wasn't sure she would. Hers was an AGI build minoring in STR; her armor wasn't exactly the greatest. It took Agil and Wolfgang holding off its axes, and her own speed, to get her into that range without her HP being carved up.

Still. She was the Flash, and if she didn't have Kirito's ridiculous reflexes, she was even faster than he was when she actually got moving. Her simple Linear rocked Vemacitrin back on its heels—giving Lind the chance to carve up its back with a Treble Scythe—and she was already leaping back again by the time it could recover. Ducking beneath its attempt to take off her head with a scissor-like pair of converging slashes, she darted right back in to sting its right foot with an Oblique.

Ten percent of its second lifebar left. They were holding.

Another ten minutes, with each team rotating in and out, some having to heal more than others. Team D was back in the fray once again when the last fraction of the second lifebar was chipped away; Asuna had just pulled back from a Triangular, hissing wordlessly as a retaliatory double-chop took off twenty percent of her own HP, and almost her right arm with it. Wolfgang was bringing an Avalanche right down on Vemacitrin's head—

At the moment the third lifebar was reached, Vemacitrin's head spun on its neck once again, its axes fell abruptly to the floor, and its upper arms whipped out in a blindingly-fast blur.

Wolfgang didn't even have a chance to scream as his right arm spun away, taking his sword with it. In the same moment, his head went sailing off in another direction, it and the rest of his body shattering with shocking suddenness before they ever reached the ground.

The rest of Team D leapt, stumbled, and rolled back, far too late. Vemacitrin held a gleaming katana in either hand, already recovered from the twin-Iai strike, and its third and final face bestowed a frozen, bloodthirsty grin on them all.

The frozen tableau might've been an instant; it might just as well have been an eternity. It was broken
by a harsh, metallic laugh bursting from Vemacitrin's throat, as it leapt for the healing players at the edge of the boss room.

Most of the time, Kirito hardly thought about Kayaba Akihiko himself anymore; he was too busy surviving the world of Sword Art Online to spare much concern for the unseen mastermind behind all the death. Someday he had every intention of hunting down the mad programmer himself, but in the meantime he had to just survive.

Watching Wolfgang, one of the Twelve-Man Raid on the Fifth Floor, follow Beowulf into death left Kirito mentally cursing Kayaba's name with every expletive he knew.

Worse, he had a horrifying dread that the merchant wouldn't be the last death in this battle. Better than probably any other player in the game, he knew what kind of threat Vemacitrin's new style represented.

Because he knew that, despite his surging fear, Kirito threw himself into a leap, yelling at the top of his lungs, to block Vemacitrin's rush toward those still on healing rotation. His Sonic Leap crashed into Vemacitrin's back, staggering it just slightly; as he'd counted on, Kizmel dashed in after him, using that opening to carve a Reaver into the Asura herself.

By rights, that should've gained them enough aggro to at least distract the boss from players who hadn't even been attacking for several minutes. Vemacitrin's AI apparently wasn't so kind, though, and after that short stumble it only let out another metallic laugh and kept right on going. Twin katana flashing, it bore down on an unlucky lancer, a solo Kirito knew only vaguely from previous boss fights.

Kirito launched himself forward again, this time thrusting a Vorpal Strike right at Vemacitrin's spine with a wordless scream. This time, though, an attack with double the reach of his own blade wasn't quite enough. His sword fell short by precious centimeters, doing nothing to stall the Asura's advance.

The lancer screamed, terrified, scrambling back. Vemacitrin cackled, and its swords whirled like fans; once, twice, three times each, spraying red particles into the air with every blow.

The sound of shattering glass filled the boss room again, silencing the lancer's screams. Still cackling, the Asura whirled to pursue an axeman who'd turned tail and fled; instead of running, Vemacitrin took off in a low, long leap that brought it down within a couple of meters of the unlucky player.

This time, neither Kirito nor Kizmel was even in a position to try and do anything. He was almost to the point of trying to throw his sword, if only to distract the boss, knowing it wouldn't do any good —

With twin screams of their own, Philia and Rain crashed into Vemacitrin from the side. The blonde's Swordbreaker snapped back and forth through the Asura's left arm; the redhead drove a brutal Vorpal Strike through its mid-left shoulder and deep into its guts.

That, finally, was enough to distract Vemacitrin from its weaker prey. Stunned briefly by the blade buried in its ribs, as soon as the immobility wore off it turned quickly on one foot, almost throwing Rain from her feet. Desperately, she ripped her sword free and scrambled back, while Philia triggered a Horizontal Arc to try and block.

Vemacitrin's twin blades rushed down in a “V”, knocking Philia's sword out of the way and almost taking her arm with it, clearing the way to a frantically-guarding Rain—just as another yell filled the air. Hafner dropped a Cascade square on the top of the Asura's head, and with a grunted “Ho!”
Godfree buried the head of his axe in its back.

Then Kirito and Kizmel were in range again, and the next few moments with a confused flurry of steel-on-steel that even the Black Swordsman couldn't consciously keep up with. Here he caught one of Vemacitrin's katana with part of a Vertical Arc; there, Kizmel battered the other blade aside and ripped into the boss with a Treble Scythe. Hafner took a vicious stab to the stomach with one katana, while the other bit into Godfree's shoulder and nearly took off both his arm and his head.

Kirito was vaguely conscious of his HP, and his teammates', going down, but in those frantic moments all that mattered was cutting down more of Vemacitrin's HP. *As long as we keep hurting it, nothing else matters! We just have to kill this thing! “Die, dammit!”*

The only response he got was another of those grating, metal-on-metal-scream laughs, followed immediately by a sudden spinning attack Kirito actually recognized as a variation of a skill from another two-weapon style—only stronger. Strong enough to throw all six of Vemacitrin's attackers into the air and away in all directions.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl in Kirito's perception. Sailing away toward a wall—not for the first time in that fight—he could see Vemacitrin look over its victims, as if gauging which of them to try and finish. Quickly, and not surprisingly, its manic gaze settled on Godfree, still trailing red from the blow that had nearly killed him before.

Vemacitrin set itself, cackled. Sheathed both katana, blatantly telegraphing its next attack. Took a single step toward the helpless Knight,. Began to draw again, a motion so fast only Kirito's adrenaline-spied perceptions could even recognize it.

Tumbled from its feet, as the surviving Legend Braves body-checked it as one. Piling on with incoherent screams of rage, Orlando, Enkidu, Gilgamesh, and Cuchulainn drove their swords into the Asura with frenzied force, while Nezha rolled free to gain the distance for his chakram to add to the punishment.

Kirito wasn't heartened. Between the damage he incurred from landing and fear for his comrades, recognizing what was going to happen next only dropped his spirits lower. “Get back!” he choked out, hand scrabbling to pull a healing potion from his belt pouch. “It's going to—!”

Vemacitrin surged upright, hurling the Braves off with sheer muscle power. Its swords came out again a moment later, one of them slicing off Enkidu's hands at the wrists with casual ease, the other intercepting Nezha's chakram. The blade arced off into a corner of the boss room, while Vemacitrin turned to slam a kick into Enkidu's chest, knocking him flat on his back.

Kirito's hand tightened around the now-empty potion, gripped by helpless fear and rage, knowing if he attacked now he'd do nothing by die himself. The Braves had saved his party, and now…

“Number Three!”

The unorthodox battle cry was the only warning Vemacitrin had before a rapier pierced its back with inhuman speed; a roar of anger heralded a heavy axe following it in, biting deep into the Asura's back.

The Legend Braves' attack had been reckless, but it had saved lives—and bought enough time for others to save theirs.

“Pull back, all of you!” Asuna ordered, ducking under Vemacitrin's whirling retaliation. “Kirito-kun, that goes double for your party! No arguments! Heal *now*; we'll need you at your best!”
Kirito didn't like that order. At all. But as Asuna danced with the Asura, barking more orders all the while, he could say nothing to disagree. His entire party was in the red, an experience he'd never had before and devoutly hoped never to again.

Actually, he was pretty sure what he was actually feeling was sheer, howling terror. For himself, or for others, he couldn't quite say for sure.

“We should do as she says, my friend,” Kizmel said wearily, dropping to a rest beside him. “This battle is far from over.”

“Elf-girl's right,” Hafner agreed gruffly, handing out potions to the other girls of the party. “We're getting a handle on this phase's attack patterns now, Blackie. Let the rest of 'em handle it 'til we're ready.” His gaze flicked to Godfree, who was downing his second potion already. “I don't know about you, but I've got a bad feeling about the last phase.”

Kirito shivered. In the center of the boss room, Asuna and Lind were somehow coaxing order back into the chaos, but he couldn't help but feel Hafner was right. Both state changes so far had killed at least one player—and unlike the first two, he couldn't even guess what the last phase of the battle would be like.

A quick glance told him Vemacitrin was already below half on its third lifebar. Whatever was going to happen, it was going to happen all too soon.

Those who became “clearers” in SAO generally had one thing in common: a determination to clear the game that bordered on insane, given the odds they faced on a routine basis. Especially those who had persisted after the disaster of the Twenty-Fifth Floor, and chose to risk the precedent that represented by taking on the Fiftieth. What drove that determination, and how skilled they actually were, was considerably more varied.

Hafner didn't consider himself any kind of hero, and he knew he was far from the best among the clearing group. As far as he was concerned, somebody needed to fight on the frontlines, if any of them were going to get out of the death game alive; that was what had driven him to follow Diavel against Illfang, and brought him into Lind's Dragon Knights.

The kind of elitism some of his guildmates indulged in, and Kibaou had gone too far against, was no concern of his. What mattered was clearing the game and getting back to the real world, and if that meant relying on oddballs like the Black Swordsman and his NPC partner sometimes, he was entirely prepared to do so. It didn't matter if he wasn't that good himself; he'd just do his own part, as well as he could.

Which, if Hafner did say so himself, wasn't exactly bottom-tier among the clearers, either. He had survived The Adamantine Arachnid, after all—which was exactly why he smelled a rat with Vemacitrin. After so many boss fights, especially knowing going in what kind of precedent lay behind the fiftieth boss, he hadn't been surprised by just how bad the second phase of the battle had been.

Now that they were late into the third, with three dead already—no, he corrected himself with a wince, four now—Hafner was forced to admit to himself he hadn't expected it to be this bad.

Should have, though, he berated himself. After healing up and waiting for his team's turn to come up again, he was pitting his heavy blade against Vemacitrin's twin katana, and even with five other players he wasn't enjoying the experience. That damn spider was bad enough… damn you, Kayaba, and the PC you rode in on!
It didn't help that his two-handed sword was not a weapon meant for quick blows. He managed to knock one of Vemacitrin's blades aside with the first blow of the back-and-forth Cataract, and even landed a solid hit to the ribs with the second strike, but Hafner knew full well he couldn't have done it without help.

The way Kirito and Kizmel's incredible reflexes somehow kept pace with Vemacitrin despite its speed buffs was probably the most immediate reason he hadn't been shish-kebabed already; the way the other two girls kept somehow stabbing the boss in the back was another big help.

Hell, even Godfree was helping spell him here and there, which was better than Hafner really wanted to admit of a member of the KoB.

This ain't over yet, though, he thought, swearing as one of Vemacitrin's blades carved a gash in his gut before he could quite get away. If it's this bad now, when we haven't quite got it down to the last lifebar... Dammit!

“Team C, pull back! E, back up B while they draw aggro!” Vice-Commander Asuna gestured sharply with her rapier, still looking as composed as she had when the battle began. “Team D will attack next!”

Gratefully, Hafner retreated with the rest of his party, happy just to not have been knocked flying during that round. Vemacitrin's fondness for AoE was really starting to get on his nerves.

“Is it always like this?” Rain asked, when they'd all drawn back to the far wall. Her hands were shaking as she lifted a potion to her mouth, but to her credit she didn't look like she was about to break.

“Not usually,” Philia told her, dropping into a crouch to rest. “I've only been clearing for about fifteen floors, but this is only the second boss fight I've been in where anybody died. Most of the time, it's... scary, but not like this.”

“The gimmick bosses can be bad,” Hafner said, after draining a potion of his own. “Or just plain weird. Remind me to tell you sometime about the Fifth Floor's big golem... But it looks like we were right after the spider: the quarter-bosses are bad.”

“On the bright side,” Godfree put in, with a grin Hafner thought looked more than a little forced, “after this, we should be in the clear for another twenty-five floors.”

Yeah, Hafner agreed silently. On the not-so-bright side, if Vemacitrin is bad, whatever's on Floor Seventy-Five is gonna be murder...

“Tanks, get back!” Kirito suddenly shouted, startling the rest of the party. “You've got too much aggro, and another hit will—”

Hafner looked up just in time to see what he meant: Vemacitrin had taken enough damage from the last round of DPSers that, in the process of drawing aggro to themselves, the tank groups had just about finished off its third lifebar. Just a little bit more, even from defense-focused builds, would tip the scales, and none of them knew what would happen after.

Whatever it was, it would be far, far safer if a freshly-healed party bore the brunt of it, rather than tanks who'd just endured a battering.

Whether they understood Kirito's warning or not, though, didn't matter in the end. Nezha's chakram was in flight, and it carved a glowing bite out of Vemacitrin's head while the Black Swordsman's voice was still echoing.
This time, the moment the Asura’s HP was reduced by another lifebar was heralded by a loud, harsh laugh that boomed powerfully enough to make Hafner's ears ring. At the same time, its other arms unfolded again, and all six limbs took on the crimson glow of a Sword Skill.

*Oh, hell no!*

If Kizmel never saw a six-armed foe unleash a skill with every limb at once again, it would be too soon. She couldn't make out exactly how many hits were involved, but in the first three seconds after its final lifebar was touched, Vemacitrin battered three members of Team E so hard they went flying across the room. One of them shattered just after his feet left the floor, while the other two very nearly followed.

And Vemacitrin’s attack was far from finished.

The skill pulled it through the gap left by the scattered tank group, barreling straight into Team H. They split in all directions at the Asura’s approach, but the leader couldn’t quite move fast enough; a blur of fists and katana tore him apart more viciously than Kizmel had ever seen, even in the war with the Fallen Elves. Even as his terrified scream echoed, he was cut quite literally to shattered pieces.

Still, Vemacitrin was not done.

She’d never seen a skill like the one that led the Guardian careening in a circle around the chamber, not even in her recent training with Kirito. One party after another was hit by Vemacitrin's charge, and if not all of them suffered fatality, it was a very near thing for the survivors.

The most that could be said was that by the time it was Team C’s turn, they at least knew what was coming. The problem, of course, being that none of them were even close to full health again yet.

Even so, she and her partner lunged to protect the less-experienced members anyway, putting themselves between Vemacitrin, the other girls, and Godfree—and in a move that filled Kizmel's veins with cold fear, Kirito arranged to put himself slightly in front of her, as well.

There was no time to argue or plead, even if there'd been reason. Vemacitrin was bearing down on them, manic grin frozen on its metallic face, all arms ready. A pair of heartbeats, no more, and it would be on them… and Kizmel could see in the corner of her vision what would happen to the both of them when it struck.

*If we can only save Philia and Rain, at least. Please—!*

Impact. A loud scream. The distinctive sound like shattering glass, and a bright blue flash—followed by the sensation of her body colliding with cold stone and warm cloth?

Kizmel shook her head, trying to clear it. How could she possibly be alive, after taking a hit like that in her condition? It made no sense—

*“Hafner!”*

Her senses steadied, finally showing her what she’d actually hit: the floor, and her own partner, having taken a blow that knocked them both aside without actually harming them. Above them, having appeared as nearly as she could tell from absolutely *nowhere*, Heathcliff held his massive shield firm against Vemacitrin.

As Lind’s anguished scream had warned her, Hafner was nowhere to be seen, and his lifebar was no
longer hovering in her vision.

*He saved us,* Kizmel realized numbly. *He pushed us aside and took the blow… for us… Why…?*

She wasn't sure it would even matter. The entire raid was in disarray, entire parties scattered, several dead, more sprawled on the cold stone floor. It was, by any measure, a rout. Kizmel could even hear Asuna shouting something that sounded like it might be a call for a retreat.

“We stand here!” Heathcliff shouted into the chaos. Pushing forward with his shield, he forced Vemacitrin back a pace, its devastating skill stopped cold. “Everyone, heal and regroup! I'll buy you time! We stand here!”

Easier said than done, as far as she was concerned. The Asura recovered quickly from the KoB commander's assault, arms glowing as it prepared another Sword Skill—but in the fraction of a breath before it could unleash it, Heathcliff's shield glowed in turn, and with a wordless shout he charged Vemacitrin. With a sound like a ringing bell, the Shield Rush technique that was the sole providence of Heathcliff's Holy Sword skill dispelled the impending attack, and kept on going to force Vemacitrin clear off its feet.

“We stand here!” Heathcliff shouted again. “Pull yourselves together! We haven't lost yet!”

That, finally, brought Kizmel back to her senses, and soon she and Kirito were helping each other up. “Pull back and heal, just like before,” Kirito told a shivering Rain, pulling her to her feet next. “I don't know how long we have, so let's hurry.”

“I've got a couple of healing crystals,” Philia said shakily, almost clutching Kizmel as the elf girl helped her up. “I was saving them for—well, something like this.”

“I don't know if it'll do us any good, though,” Godfree bit out, looking more rattled than either of the girls. He got to his feet without assistance, but his eyes were wide, and his stance unsteady. “If we get hit like that again—”

“If we give up now, it's all over!” Kirito said sharply. “We've got the boss down to its last lifebar; we won't get another chance like this!”

Kizmel feared he was right. As rattled as the survivors were now, they still had more than enough fighters to win, if they could only regroup. If they were routed now, after the casualties that had been taken, she wasn't at all sure another attempt would ever be made.

*In a true war, such casualties are mercifully light,* she thought, drawing back with the remains of the party to the far wall. *My people would press on, accepting the losses as the price of victory—but few of the Swordmasters are truly warriors. It's nothing short of miraculous that they've held the line this long.*

Some of them had found that warrior spirit within themselves, though. Asuna stood tall even now, bellowing orders that gradually brought order back to the raid one more time; her armor was tattered, rapier looking little better, yet her spine was stiff and her voice strong. “The Commander is right! Regroup, heal up, and get ready to finish this! Knights of Blood, we stand here!”

“You heard her!” Lind's voice was hoarse, face ashen, but he stood his ground, gesturing sharply with his scimitar. “If we run now, our sacrifices will have been in vain! Divine Dragons, we will *not* let that happen!”

If she'd had the energy, Kizmel might've favored the guildmaster with the human gesture of applause. She had many differences with the man, but she couldn't help but acknowledge his
leadership in this moment. Between him and Asuna, the raid gradually rallied, parties reforming around the survivors. A force of warriors once again, not a beaten-down rabble.

The one who truly impressed Kizmel in that moment, though, was the man who made that rally possible. As precious seconds turned, impossibly, to minutes, Heathcliff stood between Vemacitrin and the battered clearers. She knew as well as any knight how being pushed to the brink could draw out skill and strength a warrior might never have realized they had, and in this dark hour it seemed the KoB leader had found his.

The final phase of the battle had seen Vemacitrin dominate the battlefield with its powerful rushing technique, but Heathcliff refused to allow it the opportunity to use it again. Any time the Asura tried anything with more than a moment's preparation, the red knight's shield hammered it. In that gap, his sword licked out, scraping at Vemacitrin's life a sliver at a time.

Time and again, in the minutes after the charge that claimed Hafner's life, Vemacitrin's blades and fists struck a solid blow with lesser skills, but Heathcliff stood firm. His heavy shield bore the brunt of the majority of the Asura's strikes, with only a small few reaching past; his own life was carved away, little by little, yet far more slowly than for anyone else.

Kizmel had no idea how Heathcliff had acquired the skill to use his shield and sword in such a powerful combination, but she was grateful for it. More than once, Vemacitrin tried to break free and assault the still-weak clearers, only to be blocked by the red knight interposing his shield with impressive speed. A minute, two, five; Heathcliff held the line.

Even he cannot win this battle himself—but he won't have to.

Swordmaster lifebars climbed back, point by precious point, toward full, and as even Heathcliff's started to fall perilously close to the halfway mark, Kizmel tossed aside one last potion to shatter on the floor, and drew her saber once again. “I'm ready,” she announced. “Kirito?”

“Just a second,” her partner replied absently. His health, too, was blue again, but he was doing something with his menu now. “If I'm right—”

“Good to go here.” Philia stepped up, and if her sword wasn't quite steady, her blue eyes were. “Ready when you are, Kirito.”

“Me, too.” Rain swallowed hard, bringing her blade up. “If you guys are going back in, so am I.”

Godfree hesitated, hands flexing nervously on the haft of his axe. “This might be too much for us, my friends,” he said anxiously. “The speed and strength buffs on this last phase—”

“Then stay back and out of the way.” Kirito's voice was uncharacteristically cold and abrupt. He made one last, forceful gesture at his menu, and the sword on his back disappeared in a blue flash. “We can't afford to stop now.” A different blade materialized in its place, and he drew it in one smooth motion. “Come on, girls. Asuna will be giving the order any second now.”

Kizmel raised one eyebrow at the sight of the Baneblade—a weapon inferior to the one he'd just switched out, going by the Swordmasters' numerical reckoning—but nodded without comment. She would trust his instincts, as she always had before.

Beowulf, Wolfgang, Hafner—you will be avenged.

“Time!” Asuna shouted. “All teams, move in! Pull back and heal when you need to—otherwise, give it everything you've got!”
Heathcliff had bought them precious time, against all odds. Now, with Vemacitrin having shown its last stratagems, the Swordmasters were ready to finish.

“Now! Charge!”

Before, the Swordmasters had used a slow, cautious strategy against Vemacitrin, never knowing when it would reveal another unexpected skill or greater strength. Now, at the last, it was clear that the only true “defense” against the Asura's final fury was to keep it from doing anything at all.

Heathcliff's HP was barely a sliver above half when the remaining Swordmasters made their assault. When Asuna led them in, accompanied by Lind and followed closely by Kirito, the KoB guildmaster leapt clear, healing crystal in hand. He had held the line long enough; now was the time to end it.

Kirito was the first to raise his voice in a wordless yell; Kizmel quickly joined him, and soon the chamber was filled with the battlecry of the Swordmasters, matching Vemacitrin's laughter.

*Enough!* Letting Kirito and Asuna take the lead, Kizmel took a leaping step to the side of the main assault, halting twice the length of her saber from Vemacitrin. She turned the momentum from her charge into a spin, bright crimson light bridging that distance from her sword to the Asura. *This ends now!*

Together with Asuna's Flashing Penetrator and Kirito's Vorpal Strike, her Dancing Hellraiser tore into Vemacitrin's last strength, leading the Swordmaster tide.

Rain had never been in a boss fight before, but she had seen one massed assault before. Witnessing the field battle with The Hobgoblin had, in fact, been one of the things that inspired her to try and join the clearing for real, seeing what an entire raid of clearers could do.

Even so, that hadn't come close to preparing her for the final charge against Vemacitrin. The previous strategy abandoned in favor of just hitting it as hard as they could, the once-orderly battle had dissolved into players vying for opportunities to run sharp objects into the boss, driven by sheer terror and more than a little rage at the deaths they'd suffered so far.

Rage Rain shared in full. She'd known some of the players who'd died, and those she hadn't, she never would now. That was enough to drive her as furiously as any of the others. She'd been stopped from knowing people important to her before; she put that pain and anger into a Vorpal Strike of her own, right behind Kirito's.

“Stop laughing!” she shouted, when Vemacitrin's only reaction to the latest attacks on it was another of its grating cackles. “Just *die* already!”

She was almost thrown from her feet before she could recover from the post-motion, shoved aside by a screaming lancer; the order Vice-Commander Asuna had managed to impose was falling apart again in the heat of close combat. In a way, though, Rain was grateful, since it knocked her out of the path of Vemacitrin's next attack.

It was on its last lifebar, and that lifebar was being drawn down slowly but steadily; but if Vemacitrin was dying, it wasn't dying without a fight.

It was hard for Rain to follow what happened from then on. The scream of metal-on-metal was louder than she'd ever heard, skill after skill biting into the Asura, preventing it from launching another of skills that had nearly wiped out the raid. The players themselves added to the din with their voices, and the brightly-colored flashes were nearly blinding.
Here, she managed to drive in a short Vertical; there, Agil landed a Beheading Blow against Vemacitrin's neck. She caught a flash of Orochi plunging a Hirazuki into the Asura's chest, before being flung back by a Fierce Punch.

A brief, bright flash, and one entire section of the assault was thrown away by another of Vemacitrin's twin-katana skills; an abruptly-silenced scream and a shattering sound told Rain another player had died.

Her own teammates rushed into the gap, Kirito wielding a rusty-looking sword she'd only heard rumors of. Shining strangely through the tarnish, he swung it with the *snicker-snack* of a Snake Bite—and Vemacitrin's upper-right arm flew away, taking one of its katana with it.

Kizmel took advantage of the momentary stagger forced on it by the loss of its limb, launching into possibly the longest Sword Skill Rain had ever seen. Angled slashes came down again and again, from the left, the right, and the left again, hammering Vemacitrin a full eight times before it ended.

The post-motion was painful, though—almost a full second of immobility, during which the Asura's remaining pair of right arms slammed together into Kizmel's stomach and chest, catapulting her away. At the same time, its left limbs began to glow for another skill.

Asuna the Flash blurred into view at that moment, rapier stabbing once, twice—six times, etching a cross of red wounds on Vemacitrin's chest. The sheer inertia of the thrusts drove it back on its heels; Lind was waiting behind it carve up its back.

Vemacitrin was probably the most powerful boss yet. Almost a full raid of players all trying to get a piece of it at once was finally beginning to overwhelm it.

It was still dying hard, though. Rain only barely avoided a Raging Upper in the process of slicing a Sharp Nail into it; its remaining katana almost took her head off as she tried to retreat, and did hit her shoulder hard enough to send her spinning away. Kirito and Philia made it pay for it right after, Baneblade and Swordbreaker going for its surviving right arms.

She didn't know how long the battle took, once the final assault began. She only knew a flurry of swords, the cacophony of clashing metal and screaming voices, and the desperate struggle to kill Vemacitrin before it killed her.

It did kill at least one more player along the way, a young KoB member Rain didn't know whose saber shattered under Vemacitrin's blade, before it pounded four fists into his chest all at once. Then Philia was darting in again, screaming like a banshee, hooking the ridged back of her sword under the Asura's katana.

A flash, a shriek of tortured metal, and Vemacitrin's sword snapped in half.

“That's it! Let's wrap this up!” Agil's axe whirled overhead in an azure arc; came down like he was chopping wood, and lopped through the Asura's now-weaponless arm just as easily.

It tried to retaliate with its fists, still laughing madly—only for Heathcliff to suddenly reenter the fray, smashing his shield into Vemacitrin to knock it off balance once more. “Now!” he called out. “Finish it!”

Only then did Rain check its HP again, and realized it really was almost over. Barely five percent of its last lifebar remained, flickering a deep red.

With a yell, she joined the rush to tear the boss to pieces once and for all.
Swords stabbed and cut, staves and maces smashed; axes whirled and hacked off two more of Vemacitrin's arms. Asuna and Kizmel took it from the sides, unleashing lightning-quick stabs and slashes faster than anything Rain had ever seen. HP draining away rapidly, the Asura settled into the pre-motion for its AoE spin one last time.

"Not this time, you bastard!"

Coat streaming behind him, Kirito took Vemacitrin full in the front, Baneblade blurring into motion in yet another skill Rain hadn't seen before. Three fast slashes, left-right-left, the last leading right into a complete spin; two more of those, ending with him facing the boss again, and he kicked up in a backflip that ripped his sword from between Vemacitrin's legs clear up through the top of its head.

At long last, Vemacitrin's laugh grated to halt. Finally deprived of all six arms, it stood there in silence for a moment, as Kirito's boots touched the floor again. Then, slowly, it began to split apart along his last cut, falling toward stone in two halves—and shattered, an instant before impact.

I'm still... alive?

This isn't the worst boss fight I've ever been in. The Commandant... that one was worse, in more ways than one. But this one is close.

Kirito didn't even bother looking at the Congratulations! notice, and paid no attention at all to the victory fanfare that accompanied it. He did take notice of the Last Attack Bonus message—yet another new sword, something called “Elucidator”—but that was only to buy himself a moment to steel his nerves for what he really had to do.

He was still counting the dots remaining on his map when Asuna's voice broke the silence. “…Eight dead,” she said, her whisper carrying through the stillness of the boss chamber.

A murmur swept through the room at her quiet announcement, and Kirito winced. That was no worse than the Twenty-Fifth Floor boss—better, really; the reinforcements had lost eight members that day too, but the ALS had been nearly wiped out before that—but considering they'd gone into this battle prepared for trouble, the numbers were worse than they appeared.

And it could've been even worse than that, he thought bitterly. Would've been, if it weren't for... He sure wasn't any kind of hero today.

"It's not too late!” another voice burst out. “We can still bring somebody back, at least—c'mon, Black, get the revival item out, hurry!"

Shoulders tensing, Kirito turned to face Orochi, uncomfortably aware that all eyes—including his own surviving party members—were on him now. The Dragon Knight was staring at him with wild, angry eyes—and he had no idea what to say. “Orochi, I…”

“Hold up a second,” Agil put in, stepping forward with a glare. “Who exactly are you planning on reviving, Orochi? The DDA ain't the only ones who lost somebody today! Wolfgang—"

“The KoB took casualties, too.” Godfree pushed himself up from where he'd spent the last stages of the battle, looking shell-shocked. “This isn't a decision that can be made unilaterally. We need to discuss—"

“What's there to discuss?!” Orochi said angrily, gesturing sharply with his katana. “Hell, the DDA should've been the ones to get that item in the first place! After everything, we should have first call on it!”
“Why, you—!”

As the guilds and solos disintegrated into bickering, Kirito closed his eyes. *Not again. This is just like after Diavel died. This is exactly what I wanted to prevent by getting that guild flag. We're halfway up now, we can't afford to be divided like this now!*

*And it's all for nothing, because it isn't even—!*

A hand on his shoulder startled him, and he looked up to find Kizmel by his side. Her gaze was serious, but as reassuring as ever. “Kirito-kun,” she murmured, too low to be heard over the argument. “I'm here.”

...Yeah. *You are, aren't you? Just like always.* She couldn't help what was going to happen, when he said what he knew he was going to have to say, but he knew she wouldn't fault him for it. He couldn't be sure how Philia or Rain would take it, but he knew he could trust his partner.

*Heh. How crazy is my life, that I get along with NPCs better than human players?*

“That's enough!” Asuna shouted into the chaos. Her rapier was sheathed, and she was considerably shorter than any of the belligerents, but she put enough fire into her voice and glare to match any of them. Hands on her hips, she continued, “Eight players are dead now, and bickering about it isn't going to bring them back! We're halfway up now, and we need to keep going—”

“Don't try to change the subject, 'Vice-Commander'!” Quetzalcoatl snapped back. Fists clenching, he started to stalk toward her. “Once we get that item from the Beater over there, it'll only be *seven* dead, so just shut up and—”

“I don't have it. And if I did, it wouldn't matter anyway.”

The argument stopped dead at Kirito's cold declaration, and all eyes turned to him again. “…What did you say, Black?” Orochi said slowly. “What do you mean, you don't have it? You expect us to believe a Beater wouldn't keep a drop like that to himself?” His lips curled in a sneer. “Or did you get careless and have to use it on your pet right after you got it?”

Kirito had started out having to force the same cold arrogance he'd affected to head off a witch hunt over a year before. Hearing Kizmel—his partner, his *friend*—be called a “pet” set off a burning anger, and he had no trouble at all aiming a glare at the DDA player.

“I wasn't fighting to get it for myself, Orochi,” he said flatly. “I didn't even think it existed. I was helping out a friend, that's all.”

“Oh, a 'friend'. Like you've got any that aren't AI? Tch.” Quetzalcoatl tossed his head in derision. “Well, we know damn well it *does* exist, so why don't you tell us who you 'gave' it to, so we can—”

“If you even *think* about that, you'll regret it,” Kirito said softly, fingering the special blade he still held. “Kizmel and I don't have anything to do with guilds. Think about that for a second.” He let that implied threat hang in the air for a moment, then sheathed the Baneblade. “Not that it matters. Like I told you, it wouldn't matter now. Didn't you pay any attention to Argo's newspaper? The Stone has to be used within ten seconds. It's way too late now.”

From the way the DDA members—and even some of the KoB, he noticed—looked at each other, he suspected some of them either hadn't read it, or hadn't believed it. Which, he thought, wasn't as surprising as it might've been; Argo had a well-earned reputation for honesty, but he supposed it was fair to suspect she might be biased about things he was known to be involved in.
"They're idiots if they do think that, though. If they knew how much blackmail material she has on me…"

"Even ten seconds might've helped at least one," Lind put in at last, favoring Kirito with a look the latter couldn't quite interpret. "Heathcliff blocked the boss less than ten seconds after Hafner died, Kirito."

Kirito flinched. The truth was, that one he couldn't quite deny. He'd been hit with Tumble status when Hafner bowled Kizmel into him, but he'd been perfectly capable of using items in those precious seconds. If he had still had the Divine Stone with him—

*It would've been close, but I might have been able to get it out in time. Maybe. Between the Tumble and how disoriented I was—scared, even—it would've been hard to get it out in under ten seconds. And if Heathcliff hadn't been there, there's no way I could've.*

He thought about trying to explain that. Explain how slim the chances really would've been, and just why he hadn't had the Stone anymore in the first place. But even if—if—Lind had accepted it, he could see his guildmates wouldn't have. From the look of it, he wasn't sure everyone in the KoB would have, either, despite Asuna undoubtedly vouching for him.

*And you know what? I don't have it in me to deal with this anymore.*

"Believe what you want," Kirito told the room at large, suddenly feeling every bit of the fatigue his virtual body ignored. "We just cleared the Fiftieth Floor; we're halfway to winning Kayaba's game. If you want to waste time worrying about what might've been, go ahead. *I'm* going to go and get the next floor open so the rest of the clearing group can get to work."

With a few quick motions, he brought up his menu, dissolved the party—not risking even looking at Philia or Rain, after the way Godfree's attitude had changed—and quickly sent a new invite to Kizmel. As soon as she accepted, he turned on his heel in a swirl of black coat, and headed for the now-open door where Vemacitrin's throne had been.

Kirito had made it most of the way when he heard light footsteps, and a hesitant voice. "Kirito-kun—"

"Kirito," Lind called, interrupting Asuna. "Hafner died for the two of you. I trust you'll remember that."

He paused only briefly. "I know, Lind. He couldn't for the life of him understand Hafner's decision—Heathcliff had been the true hero of the day; he had no doubt the tale of him holding off the boss for ten minutes, by himself, would be all over Aincrad by morning—but he had no intention of forgetting it.

*Too many have died.* Kirito stepped through the door and onto the first steps leading up, only Kizmel's presence at his side holding any of the chill at bay. *For all that I'm starting to love this world, I can't stop now. We still have fifty more floors to clear…*

The staircase leading up to the next floor was longer than usual, Kizmel noticed. Part of it, she was sure, was related to how much lower the guardian chamber's ceiling had been than the norm, but it seemed to her that that couldn't quite explain all of it.

Of course, she also suspected she only noticed because she was trying so hard not to think about what had just happened. About how the Divine Dragons had made clear their feelings toward her and her partner—or about how costly their latest victory had been.
Eight Swordmasters dead, Kizmel thought as they climbed. *More than any have fallen in such a battle as long as I've been with them, yet far fewer than were lost among the Royal Guard in the war with the Forest Elves. Fewer even than fell in our last assault on the Fallen Elves' Twilight Citadel.*

...*So why does my heart ache so much more for the Swordmasters than it ever did for my comrades?*

She hadn't even known most of those who'd died against Vemacitrin. Not well, at any rate. Hafner was the only one whom she'd known more than distantly, yet she felt their deaths more keenly than any of her own people save Tilnel.

...*I don't understand...*

A warm breeze gradually drew her out of her dark thoughts, a feeling totally at odds with the winter air of the previous floor. Aincrad's unnatural origin made itself known afresh, and when she and Kirito finally emerged at the top of the stairs, she found out exactly how.

Where the Fiftieth Floor had been experiencing much the same season Kizmel's home on the Ninth would have been that time of year, the Fifty-First was warm and damp. Warm, damp... and sandy?

“...Is this... a tropical island?” Kirito muttered in clear disbelief.

“It seems so, my friend.” The staircase from the previous floor's labyrinth had left them at the top of a hill overlooking a beach. A beach, with straw-roofed huts built on poles reaching out over the water; water that stretched out as far as could be seen, broken only by other islands and a wall marking the very edge of the floor.

Only then, seeing the moon reflecting off that water, did Kizmel realize night had fallen; the Pillar Guardian had taken even longer to defeat than she'd thought. *Which means if it is warm now, morning will be even worse. ...Speaking of which...*

“Y'know, I don't even care right now,” Kirito said, expressing her own opinion with a slump of his shoulders. “I'm too tired for this... Let's find an inn, Kizmel.”

“Agreed.”

To her relief, one of the buildings seen from the staircase was exactly what they were looking for—technically, Kirito referred to it as a “bungalow”, but she failed to see any practical difference—and soon they were in a room built out over the water. Thankfully, she thought, a well-ventilated room, allowing the sea breeze easy access.

One thing Kizmel did find puzzling though, as she traded her cape and armor for a nightgown (behind Kirito's back, in deference to his peculiar human modesty). Instead of the beds she was accustomed to in human dwellings, the room contained what looked for all the world like a pair of nets tied to vaguely resemble beds. “Kirito... what are these?”

“Hammocks, I guess. Fits with the sea theme, anyway.” Kirito eyed them with obvious hesitation. “It's been years since I saw one... They're pretty comfortable, actually, but there's kind of a trick to getting into them.”

He wasn't joking, she soon found. The first time he tried to climb into one of the “hammocks”, she had to stifle a giggle when the contraption promptly flipped over and dropped him right on the floor. The second attempt almost tossed him clear out the nearby window.

Only with the third did Kirito manage to actually settle into the hammock and stay there; and after a
few tense moments in which he obviously wondered if it was some kind of trick, he relaxed with a sigh. “Ahh… that's better. C'mon, Kizmel. Try it out.”

Moving carefully, she took hold of the edge of the hammock, trying to imitate his motions. Once she was sure of her grip, she gently swung herself up and in—and unlike her partner, she managed to stay in place on her first attempt.

“K-Kizmel?! Wh-what are you…?”

Of course, the fact that Kirito was already in it did seem to help stabilize it.

“Just this once, please, Kirito-kun,” Kizmel murmured, shifting to rest her head on his shoulder. “After this last battle… I don't want to be alone tonight. I fear my sleep will not be peaceful.”

*Not after Hafner's sacrifice. What was he trying to accomplish…?*

Slowly, she felt arms curl around her back. “…Okay,” Kirito whispered back. She could feel his heart beating fast, but he still drew her closer, as she'd hoped he would. “I could probably use the help keeping away nightmares tonight, too…”

“Thank you, my friend.” Physical contact wasn't something often sought by the Dark Elves; Kizmel, though, had found it increasingly a comfort, in the months she'd traveled with Kirito. Especially since the realization she'd come to during the Yule Festival.

In the wake of Vemacitrin's defeat, there was nowhere she would rather have been.

“…Halfway there, huh?” she heard Kirito murmur, as she edged toward sleep. “Fifty floors to go…”

“Mm,” Kizmel hummed in agreement. Another year, perhaps a little more, she mused to herself. Well… one way or another, we will prevail. Hafner, Wolfgang, Beowulf… Everyone. Your sacrifices will not be in vain. I will remember you, always.

She made that vow to herself, committing the day's fallen to her memory alongside the Moonlit Black Cats. Then, knowing there was nothing more she could do for the dead, she focused on the living beat beneath her, and let the sound of Kirito's heart lull her into exhausted sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Note: when Argo does not appear, you know it's gonna be a rough one.

And here we have, among other things, the remaining two characters from the fic's tags finally showing up. (Well, technically Philia had a cameo earlier, but eh.) You'll be seeing them more from here on out.

So. Very dark one here, establishing both Laughing Coffin and just how bad some of the bosses can get. Don't get used to that mood; next arc is a breather, and a long one at that.

But it does have plot. Consider plot, actually. If Chapter XII served to further the larger plot surrounding the SAO Incident, Chapters XIII through XVI are more about the more personal plot of Kirito and Kizmel.
...I'll try not to take quite so long getting those posted here...
Chapter XIII: Serenade of Water I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter XIII: Serenade of Water I

January 13, 2024

...Warm...

Pulling himself out of muddled dreams that seemed to jump back and forth between battles with a steel monster and peaceful times in a forest camp, Kirito's first thought was that it was strangely warm for a winter morning. The second was that there was more of a weight on his chest than he was used to, making him wonder muzzily if he'd put on too many blankets.

Very soft blankets, at that. And... had he gone to sleep somewhere with an open window? That strange, warm breeze on his neck, one that sounded almost like breathing...

Warily, Kirito pried his eyes open—and only the bright sunlight that showed he'd slept later than usual kept his eyes at a squint, instead of going wide with surprise. It was only with an effort that he stifled the undignified squeak that would've gone with it.

He was neither under blankets, nor feeling any kind of breeze. It was Kizmel's warm, soft body lying atop him, and her breath gently brushing his neck. Her lilac hair brushing at his chin.

Somehow, Kirito resisted the reflex to leap out of bed. For one thing, he wasn't in a bed, he was in a hammock, and any kind of abrupt movement was going to get both of them dumped on the floor. For another, as he firmly ordered his racing heart to slow down, he couldn't deny that he was actually kind of comfortable, as embarrassing as the current situation was.

_The nightmares weren't as bad as I expected them to be_, he thought, gazing down at his still-sleeping partner. _I guess she really did have a point_. Having Kizmel climb into the hammock with him had been startling, but the company apparently had kept his night more peaceful; from the look of it, it had been much the same for her. If the losses against Vemacitrin had kept her from sleep, he certainly couldn't tell it from her face now.

Slowly, hesitantly, Kirito brought his hand up to rest on the elf girl's head. When she showed no reaction, breathing staying slow and regular, he swallowed hard, and gently moved his hand down along her hair. That, she did seem to react to, but only with a faint curving of her lips, and a slight tightening of her grip on him, still showing no sign of waking.

He blushed, both at Kizmel's sleeping reflex and his own daring, and continued stroking her lilac hair. He had no idea what he was doing—he was a borderline _hikikomori_ who'd never even held a girl's hand, little more than a year before—but somehow, this once, it felt right.

Kirito didn't care, just then, that there was a message notification blinking in the corner of his vision. Normally he'd have been up and about hours before, ready to get a jump on exploring the new floor; this morning, resting with his trusted partner felt much more important, just for a little longer.

...She's beautiful...
Not a thought he would've willingly spoken aloud to anyone. Klein and Asuna would've teased him, most other players would've pointed out her looks were pre-programmed; Argo would've instantly sold it to the highest bidder. Kizmel herself... he didn't know exactly how she'd react, and wasn't at all sure he wanted to find out. Or rather, that he was ready to; he still wasn't sure how things had changed after Christmas.

*It's true, though. And who cares if she was “designed” that way? Doesn't make it any less true than if it were a genetic accident like the rest of us. And if Diavel's ghost was right, then she's...*

Deep in thought, Kirito's hand idly slipped from Kizmel's hair to trace the edge of one long, pointed ear—that, finally, provoked a twitch and a light gasp. Her eyes fluttered open, and he froze as her gaze sleepily drifted up to meet his. Curious violet met suddenly-anxious black; his immobility broke, and he tried to pull his hand away in a hurry.

Kizmel caught it before it he could move far, and to his surprise she smiled. “Good morning, Kirito-kun,” she murmured. “Did you sleep well?”

“Y-yeah,” he got out nervously. “Well, not great, but... better than I thought I would. After... well, everything.” Kirito would've scratched the back of his head, but one hand was still caught by hers, the other trapped beneath her. “How was your night, Kizmel?”

“Not as untroubled as I would have preferred, either. Yet restful enough, I think.” She gave his hand a light squeeze, and finally released it; then, somewhat to his discomfort—emotionally, at least—shifted to rest more easily against him. “I appreciate the company through the night, my friend.”

He looked away, face flaming. “L-likewise,” he said in a mumble. “I was kind of expecting not to get much sleep at all, honestly.” *Especially with you here,* he added to himself. *But... this wasn't that bad at all. Except for being terminally embarrassing, anyway.*

“Such ordeals are always easier to bear with family. And friends,” Kizmel added, after a strange hesitation so brief he thought he might've imagined it. “Mm... I see we've slept late. Likely best if we got up, Kirito-kun.” She chuckled softly, a wistful look in her eyes as she lifted her head from his shoulder. “Not that I would object to staying here a little longer, of course...”

*Urk.* “W-well,” Kirito offered awkwardly, “I should probably check my messages real quick anyway, before we get too far ahead of ourselves...” *What am I saying? This is—I shouldn't be—*

She smiled again, letting her head sink again. “Mm. Yes, I suppose I should, as well.” The elf twisted a little, rocking the hammock as she moved just enough to open her menu with a wave of her hand.

Determinedly ignoring the sensations her motions caused, Kirito followed suit. Quickly navigating to his inbox, he found four messages waiting for him, two of which were more or less what he'd expected: one a short but sincere missive from Asuna, assuring him that he was still welcome among the KoB—a sentiment he fully believed from her, but was less sure of from the guild as a whole—the other a terse request from Argo for a meeting at a nearby cafe.

Less expected was an also-brief message from Klein. *[I heard about yesterday's boss fight from Argo; you doing okay, buddy? Anyway, be seeing you soon, with the rest of the gang.]*

Puzzling as the samurai's last comment was, it concerned him less than the last message waiting for him. [*Before you go all martyr on me, this ain't your fault, Kirito,*] Agil's PM read. [*I know those DDA blockheads are full of it. But after what happened to Wolfgang, I think I'm done clearing for a while. I'm setting up a shop in Algade. Stop by next time you need to buy or sell something on the*
Kirito let out a slow breath, barely noticing the way it moved Kizmel's hair. He wished he could say he was surprised by Agil's decision, but after losing one of the merchants the big axeman had partied with from early on, he was only relieved that it wasn't even worse. The DDA had, after all, done a pretty good job of making him look like the bad guy.

At least if he's joking about Kizmel and spouting that line about his prices, he's coping. ...Well, it's not like we haven't all had to learn; anybody who's been on the frontlines as long as we have has lost somebody.

A light cough, brushing against his neck, brought Kirito's attention back to the present. “All seems as well as could be expected,” Kizmel said, looking up at him again. “I assume Argo contacted you, as well?”

“Yeah. I figured she would, after yesterday. I hope she's got some info about this floor by now, too, though even for her this might be a bit soon.”

“At the least, I'd hope she has suggestions for dealing with this heat. Tropical islands are not an ideal place when we need to be wearing armor.” She sighed. “Well, we'll do as we must. If we can get out of this hammock, at least. ...How do we get out, Kirito-kun?”

Kirito had just started to wonder about that himself. Just by himself, he'd have given it fifty-fifty odds the attempt would drop him flat on the floor; with Kizmel lying on top of him, it was an even thornier issue. “Um. Normally I'd suggest you get up first, but I don't know how that would work here, either...” He hesitated, giving the situation careful thought—or at least as careful as he could manage, distracted as he was. “Maybe... like this?”

Several moments of careful movement followed, as he tried to get disentangled without doing anything Asuna would've murdered him for—Kizmel's reaction was less certain—and she tried to help. For a second, he even thought he had it, and gripped the side to pull himself free—

Center of mass on the hammock shifted too far, and suddenly the room was spinning dizzily around him. An instant later, his back hit the floor with a thud, weight landed solidly on his stomach, and he was sandwiched between hard wood and warm softness, some of which was in his hand.

When the world steadied again, Kirito found himself looking into Kizmel's eyes from far closer than he was used to. Wide, surprised eyes, he noticed, accompanied by a rare blush. Um...?

It took only another second for his brain to kick back in and inform of what, exactly, his hand was on, and he yanked his arm away like he'd been burnt. “S-sorry!” he blurted. “I didn't mean—!”

Surprising him again, Kizmel only laughed. “Fear not, my friend. I'm not angry.” After a hesitation just long enough to puzzle him, she pushed herself to a sitting position on his legs, and from there to her feet. Extending a hand to help him up in turn, she said, “Shall we go? Argo is doubtless waiting for us.”

“Ah. Right.” Yeah. Argo, with her news. Something normal. Grateful for the chance to put some routine between himself and the very strange morning, Kirito set about reequipping his armor and sword. The new one he'd gotten from Vemacitrin, unfortunately, had such colossal STR requirements he couldn't use it yet, and that battle aside the Baneblade wasn't up to par any longer, but his current main weapon was still serviceable enough.

He was so focused on normal routine that he only remembered how different Kizmel's idea of
“normal” was when light flared in front of him. Startled yet again, he caught a brief glimpse of smooth, dusky skin before he could whirl toward the door with a yelp.

Kizmel’s laughter followed him out.

If there was one thing that truly convinced Kizmel of the real nature of the Swordmasters, she reflected as she and Kirito left the inn behind, it was the music that followed them around. It was one of the oddest of the charms that set them apart from the native humans of Aincrad, yet if they’d truly been drawn in on the assumption that it was all a game, it did make a certain degree of sense.

Despite the events of the previous day, she found herself humming along to the jaunty tune of the Fifty-First Floor, feeling oddly cheerful. Well, she mused, it has been an auspicious beginning to the day. Though I do wish Kirito would relax more. I know human mores are very different from elven, but surely he should be getting used to this by now? …Perhaps I should ask Argo. Carefully.

Though that would hardly be the only thing to ask the Rat about, even leaving aside recent events. On the walk from the seaside inn to the central village on a hill overlooking the beach, Kizmel was very puzzled by the attire of the Swordmasters who’d gotten an earlier start to the day. That some would be indulging themselves in such a way wasn’t too surprising, but—

“…Why are so many players in swimsuits?” Kirito muttered, obviously as confused as she was. “I know the weather’s nice, but don’t tell me everybody’s taking the day off.”

“Well?” Kizmel replied. “I doubt it. Strange that they’d risk being so unprotected, however.” Not that it wasn’t a tempting option, she had to admit. Even with the sun having risen high enough for the floors above to block it, the Fifty-First Floor was by far the hottest in her memory. Her own armor was nearly unbearable, even with the Swordmaster immunity to pain; how Kirito was able to stand wearing his black leather coat, she couldn’t guess.

She could tell he wasn’t comfortable, though. “Argo probably knows something—and right now, I think it’ll be worth whatever she charges for it. …Here we are.”

At the edge of the island’s village closest to the beach, they found a well-ventilated building that proclaimed itself to be Thelema’s Seaside Cafe, the place Argo’s message had specified. Inside were a number of ordinary humans and one or two Swordmasters, mostly gathered by the bar at the north end; off in one corner—beside a large, open window, Kizmel noticed—sat Argo the Rat at a small table, sipping a fruit drink.

Like every other Swordmaster they’d seen that morning, she had eschewed armor in favor of swimwear. Less revealing than what Asuna had once given Kizmel, yet more so than Asuna’s own.

When the information dealer spotted the new arrivals, she grinned and waved them over. “Kii-bou, Kii-chan! Glad to see ya in one piece. C’mon on, make yourselves comfortable. And ditch the armor; this is a Safe Area, no sense sweatin’ yourselves to death.”

Exchanging a quick glance with Kirito, Kizmel dismissed her armor and cape, while he removed his heavy coat. “I take it you’ve heard the details of yesterday’s battle, Argo?” she asked, as she and her partner took the chairs opposite the Rat.

“You’ve heard the highlights upfront.”

“Yep,” Argo said with a sober nod. “Prolly more of the aftermath than you guys. Care for Argo’s After-Action Report? Ten thousand Cor. An’ I’ll give ya the highlights upfront.”

Kirito handed over the money without hesitation, his expression grave. “What do you have, Argo? We already know the casualties…”
“First thing, I'd steer clear of the DDA for awhile, were I you.” For once, there was no humor in the girl's eyes; never a good sign, in Kizmel's experience. “They've stirred up the old Beater nonsense again, an' while I don't know if many other players buy it this time, most of the Dragons really seem ta be into it.” She gestured with her drink, grimacing. “Hard to say what Lind's thinking 'bout it, but I do know he ain't happy.”

Kizmel nodded, eyes dark. Lind at least likely realized that they'd given the Stone to Fuurinkazan, but judging from his reminder as they were leaving, the knowledge hadn't mollified him. Whatever his course was from here, it was unlikely to be friendly to them.

“For what it's worth, it doesn't look like they're tryin' for a witch hunt or anything this time,” Argo went on after a moment. “Mostly, they're spreadin' word Heathcliff was the MVP this time around.” She paused to take a gulp of her drink, and snorted. “They hate the KoB's collective guts, too. Guess they figure building him up is worth takin' ya down a peg, Kii-bou.”

Kirito shrugged, a bitter smile playing at his lips. “Yeah, well, it's not like they're wrong this time. I got the LA, sure, but everybody was spamming Sword Skills at the end. Heathcliff was the one who kept the boss off us long enough to get that far.”

“Bah!” She rolled her eyes over her fruit drink. “Yeah, sure, really impressive, he's a hero, all that stuff. I'd be more impressed if he didn't let Aa-chan run things the rest of the time… Well, whatever. There is some good news: with the big scary Fiftieth Floor outta the way, more clearers are comin' back to the front, plus some newbies. Shouldn't be any manpower shortages for awhile.”

“That is good news,” Kizmel agreed, remembering how empty the previous floor had been. Only the strongest, bravest clearers had risked any of it, let alone the Pillar Guardian. “Assuming, of course, that this floor is not so hazardous as to drive them back again.”

Argo grinned—with enough fang showing to make Kizmel want to make a hasty retreat of her own. “Don't worry yer pretty head, Kii-chan. Fifteen thousand for Argo's Vacation Guide, and the map to enlightenment will be yours.”

Vacation Guide? The elf traded a wary glance with Kirito. “Perhaps,” she said carefully, “this is something to be discussed over drinks, Argo.” Preferably strong ale… no, probably not a good idea so early in the day. Unfortunately.

Soon enough, more Cor had changed hands, and Kizmel and Kirito had drinks of their own. A welcome distraction, as far as the elf was concerned, given Argo's habits; also worthwhile for its own sake, though, as she'd not had the opportunity to sample human tropical fare before.

Once she had a glass of a somewhat bitter concoction called “lemonade” in hand, she fixed the Rat with a wary gaze. “All right, Argo. What do we most need to know about this floor? I can't image you've learned much so far.”

“Not that much, no,” Argo admitted cheerfully. “But I've got a few juicy bits of info already. First off, the early birds tell me the monsters on this floor are lots easier than on the Fiftieth. About what we'd normally expect for the usual level curve.”

Over a “fruit smoothie”, Kirito nodded. “Makes sense. Breather level, right?” At Kizmel's puzzled glance, he explained, “Whether you go with the Swordmaster 'constructed world' view or your Great Separation, it's obvious by now that Aincrad was created as a game, right? In game design, it's not uncommon for a hard boss to be followed by easier content.”

“I… see. I think.” Forcing down a bristle at the reminder that the sorcerer Kayaba seemed to regard
their lives as game pieces, she found herself nodding reluctantly at the logic. She had had little time for games in her life, and never the structured sort Swordmasters favored, but she'd learned enough from Kirito to follow the concept.

“Breather level,” Argo confirmed. “So far, anyway. Trick is, this floor's got lots more water than even the Fourth. Way too much to swim, an' the tiny gondolas wouldn't cut it, either. Turns out, though, that there is a shipyard a bit southeast of here.” Setting aside her drink, she leaned over the table and brought up her map. “We're here at the southwest edge of the floor, on Ousetta Island. Just a short swim away is Torvan's Shipyard, which my contacts say has some good-sized sailboats.”

Looking over the map himself, Kirito frowned. “Yeah, that's probably only a few minutes if you know the trick to swimming here… But that's still farther than I'd like. We can't swim with armor, and there's bound to be mobs out there…”

Argo’s grin was one that showed clear anticipation; the kind Kizmel knew meant she was about to obtain more blackmail material. Exactly the kind of expression that reminds me of why she can never learn what happened eight floors ago. What is she plotting now…?

“That, Kii-bou, is the real trick about this floor,” the Rat said cheerfully. “’Cause it so happens if you wear regular armor around here, you're gonna start taking Heat damage in minutes. On the flip side, there's a massive defense bonus to swimsuits. Coupla guys say the smaller the swimsuit, the bigger the bonus, but since I didn't see 'em in tiny stuff themselves, that's prolly wishful thinking; nothin' I'd sell ta impressionable girls. Still, I got confirmation on the main info.”

Kizmel found herself actually relaxing. From her point of view, that wasn't so bad; indeed, it had serious potential, as far as she was concerned. If, at least, she could get her partner past his irrational terror of the entire subject.

That aside, she wasn't surprised to see Kirito first go pale, then bright red as the implications sank in. Probably, she reflected with some amusement, remembering that most Swordmasters he actually socializes with are women. Well, my friend, I'll just have to find a way to… focus your attention, won’t I?

Seeming to realize both Argo and Kizmel were watching him, Kirito abruptly coughed. “Uh. Right. So… swimsuits really are armor here. Okay, got it. Um… got any info on actual quests yet, Argo? Actually, come to think of it, I need to go see a blacksmith before that.” Noticing the looks that got him, he lifted his hands defensively. “No, really, I do! I made a lucky guess that Vemacitrin would count as 'evil' for the Baneblade, but it didn't do as much damage as it should have with that bonus. I want to know if any blacksmith has gotten their skills high enough to work on it. Especially with… well, you know.”

That was enough to briefly shake Argo's smirk. They'd all heard grisly rumors lately about an increasing in player-killing, after all; worse even than the reports Asuna had brought them at Christmas. Though if Kirito was reaching the point of contemplating the Baneblade's special powers…

“Fine, fine, you do that, Kii-bou. I don't want you riskin' yerself more than ya have to.” The Rat's smirk came back. “One last thing before ya go, though: there's still a Sunburn DoT even with swimsuits, unless you use an item the local shops carry.”

Kizmel raised an eyebrow, watching with some amusement as her partner took on an expression of utter dread. “You mean…?”

“Yep.” Argo's grin was all predatory fang now. “Gotta get every exposed spot, too. Even the hard-
to-reach ones.” Her gaze flicked meaningfully to Kizmel. “But that's no problem, eh, Kii-bou? Kii-chan can help ya out. An' I'm sure you wouldn't mind returning the favor, right?”

Escaping Argo was the most immediate reason Kirito had for bringing up his need to visit a blacksmith, but it wasn't the only one. The Valiant Edge he'd been using since the middle of December was a fine sword, yet was reaching its limit, and the blade he'd gotten from Vemacitrin he couldn't even use for a few more levels. Since NPC shop weapons were well below his standards, that left trying to find a quest with a good enough drop, having a new one forged, or finally getting a handle on the Baneblade's unique upgrade methods.

Option One meant talking to Argo longer; Options Two and Three both required a blacksmith. Under the circumstances, there was no question which Kirito would pick.

Returning to Algade via teleport, he took a moment to actually appreciate the scenery on arrival. The whole time the clearing group as a whole had used the town as a base, the specter of the upcoming boss fight had kept him from really taking it in; now he could really spare the attention to see what there was. *I actually can thank Argo for that,* he thought ruefully. *I'll give the Rat this much: it's hard to sulk when she's in full-troll mode.*

Though Kirito also had to admit Algade had the potential to set him off all over again. It reminded him all too much of a small shopping district in Taito Okachimachi, in a world he hadn't seen in over a year. The more so now that the frontline had moved to the next floor, since…

“Oh, my,” Kizmel murmured, as they made their way down narrow streets toward the location Argo had supplied. “The clearing group has moved on, yet it seems as if there's even more Swordmasters here than there were yesterday. I don't believe I've seen so many since the earliest days after your arrival.”

“Allgade seems to be a good place to set up shops,” Kirito mused. “Word must've gotten around quick once the boss went down… And I guess I'm not the only one who thinks this town is a lot like home.” Looking around as they walked like a tourist, he himself half-expected to see a stereotypical ramen shop every time they turned a corner. It was even starting to feel strange not to have a phone in his pocket, for the first time in at least six months.

“This resembles your home? I see…” The elf girl, already obviously interested, seemed to grow more intent in her inspection of the town. “It's very different from my people's cities, but… charming, in its own way. I believe I can see some of the appeal myself.”

“Heh. Just wait 'til you see downtown back home. I don't think 'charming' is the right word for…” He trailed off, remembering with a jolt just who he was talking to. With a fellow player, it would've been one thing, but with her…

Risking a quick glance at Kizmel, he found her wearing a small smile. Wordlessly, she reached over to lay a hand on his shoulder, as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. *Who knows, maybe she does. She already knows what I think this world is; she must have some kind of idea of her own about what that means. Though what she thinks she can do about it… Ahh, forget it. Whatever happens, there's no way we need to worry about it for another year, at the rate the clearing's going.*

The silence that fell for the remainder of the walk through Algade's bustling streets was, surprisingly, not too dark. Even so, Kirito was grateful when they reached their destination, a simple shop with a sign declaring *LWS* above its door. When he pulled open the door, a cheerful voice rang out, “Welcome to Lisbeth's Weapon Shop! I'll be right with—oh, Kirito! Kizmel!”
“Hi, Lisbeth,” he replied, stepping into the front room of the weapon shop. It was a simple room, with a couple of racks of weapons on display, a counter, and an open door leading to the actual smithy. The girl he’d come to see was just coming to the front, smith’s hammer resting casually on one shoulder. “Nice shop you’ve got here.”

“Eh, it’s okay,” Lisbeth demurred, setting her hammer down on the counter. “I’m hoping to find someplace more, I don’t know… personal, I guess? But this is better than just having a stall outside… And didn’t I tell you to call me Liz?”

“Right, right, sorry…” Kirito chuckled, rubbing the back of his head. Truthfully, though, he was relieved by Lisbeth’s casual air. He’d known the blacksmith since the Thirty-Seventh Floor Field Boss, and he and Kizmel both had made use of her services a fair few times since; he thought they’d built up something of a rapport, but the aftermath of Vemacitrin had had him worried.

*Something tells me if I said that to her, she would hit me with that hammer…*

“I see you’ve changed your look, Liz,” Kizmel remarked, raising an eyebrow. “Does pink have some significance among Swordmasters? And I must admit, I don’t believe I have ever seen a blacksmith apron quite like that before.”

Kirito realized with a start that his partner was right: Lisbeth’s formerly-brown hair had changed to a bright pink since their last meeting, and her usually-practical outfit had taken on elements he’d have thought more suitable for a maid than a macer/blacksmith.

*And I didn’t even notice. Man, I’ve been in Aincrad too long.*

“Asuna’s idea,” Lisbeth said with a shrug, suddenly looking self-conscious. “She thought it’d bring in more customers. I think it’s silly, but y’know, I really have had more business lately… But you guys don’t fall for that kinda stuff, so what do you need? Maintenance after that big boss fight?”

“It’s probably not a bad idea, actually,” Kirito admitted, remembering the punishment even the survivors had taken against the metallic Asura. “But what I really wanted was to ask if you had any new ideas about this.” Unslinging his baldric, he handed over the Baneblade.

Lisbeth took it with a dubious expression. She’d examined it for him once before, and had told him the only information the blade’s status window gave her was that she “lacked the skill to work such ancient metal”. Exactly what that meant, none of them could say; it might’ve meant that her Blacksmith skill was too low, or that the Baneblade simply couldn't be tempered in a normal way at all.

Still, she examined it dutifully, clicking on the sword to bring up its status window. After a moment, her eyebrows went up. “Huh. That’s interesting… Now it says, 'Bathe the blade in the Flames of Hyrus' Forge to purge the tarnish of ages’.”

*Hyrus' Forge?* Kizmel repeated, beating Kirito to it. “Do you have any idea what that means?”

Liz bit her lip. “Well, ‘forge’ pretty obviously refers to a smithy, and Hyrus… Wait a sec. Another of my regulars was in this morning, talking about some quest on the new floor that mentioned something about that.” Handing back the Baneblade, she swiped a hand to open her menu. “Hang on, I’ll send her a message… There we go.”

“Thanks, Liz,” Kirito said sincerely, slinging the weapon back over his shoulder. “I’m going to need a better sword soon, and the one I got from the LA on the boss has too high an STR requirement for me to equip it yet.”
She rolled her eyes. “Typical loot weapon; either wimpy, or too good. Mark my words, Kirito, give me another couple months and I'll be making swords so good you'll never look at another drop weapon again.”

“I'll be looking forward to it.” He would, too. Any MMO player knew crafted weapons blew drops and quest rewards right out of the water, at least at high levels. He had no doubt Lisbeth would be the first player to forge legendary weapons.

“You'd better be.” Liz smirked. “Anyway. How about I fix up the rest of your gear while I wait to hear back? You're not gonna want to challenge a new floor without everything in top condition, even if it is supposed to be an easy one.”

There was no arguing that, so Kirito handed over his Valiant Edge, while Kizmel passed over her Riot Saber and somewhat dented breastplate. Lisbeth took it all to the back room, and as the sound of her hammer began to ring out, Kirito made a mental note to visit a tailor soon, as well. Both his coat and Kizmel's Cloak of Illusion—the latter a replacement for the Mistmoon Cloak, which had gotten incinerated by the Forty-Ninth Floor boss—were getting a bit tattered.

*Not that it's likely to be urgent,* he thought nervously, remembering Argo's words. *A defense bonus to swimsuits... I won't blame some of the clearers if they skip this floor completely. I'm going to be self-conscious enough as it is, and I'm not that out of shape.*

Certainly his partner wasn't—which, of course, was the real problem. The one good thing he could say about it was that it was going to be very, very hard to brood about the recent casualties for the next week or so.

From the look she was giving him now, Kizmel knew it, too.

Kirito was startled out of that train of thought by the smithy's door suddenly opening again. “Hey, Liz, got your message! So who's—oh, hi! Nice to see you two again!”

Turning to the entrance, he was surprised to see none other than Philia walking in, followed closely by Rain. The self-proclaimed treasure hunter was in high spirits, despite the previous day's battle; the redhead, by contrast, did seem to be affected by it, but rather than fear, her bearing spoke of newfound confidence.

*I guess we've got ourselves a new clearer for real. Good; we're going to need all the help we can get, after yesterday.*

Better yet, to his profound relief, neither of them was looking at him with any kind of reproach. Since as far as he knew, neither of them knew the details of the Divine Stone of Returning Soul, he'd been worried.

“Philia, Rain,” Kizmel said, favoring the pair with a slight bow and a smile. “A pleasure to see you both again, as well. Given what transpired yesterday, well…”

“It was pretty scary,” Rain admitted, resting a hand on the sword sheathed on her left hip. “But, y'know, I pretty much went into that figuring if I lived through it, I wouldn't be scared by much else for awhile. And here I am, still alive.”

“And if you were worried about what the DDA said, don't be,” Philia said, tossing her head. “I may not know the whole story there, but I've been on the frontlines long enough to know what they're like. Always picking fights about who was where first…”

“They didn't used to be quite that bad,” Kirito told her, remembering the earliest days of clearing.
Back then, he thought, that particular issue had been more on the ALS side of things. “Though they
did have their own problems even then…” He coughed. “Anyway. Philia, you're the one who told
Liz something about Hyrus?”

“Yep! Rain and I got up right around dawn—we partied up after the boss, figured two swords were
better than one after that—and started chasing after quests. Well, right up until we started taking Heat
damage and remembered our gear needed repairs, anyway.” She scratched the back of her head,
looking sheepish. “Actually, I was thinking of talking to you about it anyway. There were some
weird things in the quest description about special requirements—”

“It said something about the Treaty of the Three Races,” Rain put in. “As far as I know, you two are
the only clearer who've done any quests involving that, so…” When swordsman and elf alike turned
a sharp look on her, it was her turn to look sheepish. “I did say I researched the clearers before I
joined the group. Argo said she didn't sell that info to just anyone, but she thought it might come in
handy for me someday.”

Argo… just what is she playing at? Still, that wasn't what really got to Kirito. On the one hand, that
suggested the quest really did have something to do with the Baneblade questline, and that they
weren't too likely to have other players competing with them on it. On the other—

Looking over at Kizmel, he knew she was thinking the same thing he was. On the other hand, those
quests are the ones most likely to be specifically for us. And I still don't know what Kayaba's playing
at. Why is he so interested in us?

Kirito quickly decided not to mention that part to the girls. Philia and Rain were under enough stress
just fighting on the frontlines; they didn't need to worry about the bigger picture, especially since it
didn't really have anything to do with them. “Well,” he said after a moment, “I'll be glad to buy any
info you girls have about it. I'll even pay Argo's rates.”

He would, too. Anything to do with that questline would be worth it.

To his surprise, Philia laughed. “Sell it? Nah. What’s the fun in that? We'll give it to you free, Kirito
—if you let us in on the quest. A share of the other treasure, that's our price.”

Kirito blinked. The last time anyone besides Kizmel or Fuurinkazan had actually wanted to team up
with him outside of a boss fight... actually, he couldn't remember. “Um. Philia, are you sure…?
Rain. If Argo sold you that, she must’ve told you these quests are usually pretty specific to me and
Kizmel.”

“So we have to let you guys do some of it by yourselves. So?” Rain tapped the hilt of her sword, a
light smile playing at her lips. “I think the quest will be fun enough just being there for it. Besides, I
might learn a few tricks, working with two of the top clearers.”

“Besides, there's got to be more treasure than just that forge thing!” Philia said enthusiastically. “A
limited quest? Those always have the best stuff!”

Well... she has a point there. He didn't remember much of any worth in the Reliquary quest besides
the very end, but then he strongly suspected that one had been written on the fly. This quest, Kayaba
—or Cardinal—would've had more time to prepare.

Kirito glanced at Kizmel, silently asking her opinion. “Why not?” she said, smiling in a way that
made him just a little nervous. “Sometimes it's nice to have some company, my friend. As Rain says,
this could be fun... in many ways.”
He didn't want to ask what she meant by that. Not with *that* look on her face. Asuna's smiles could be dangerous enough, promising punishment behind a guise of friendliness. Kizmel's smiles were sometimes just a little too close to Argo's for his comfort.

Any need to think of a safe reply was, thankfully, broken by a clatter from the direction of the smithy proper. “All right, guys, all done!” Lisbeth announced, setting swords and armor on the counter. “And I see Philia and Rain are here! …Hm? Did I miss something?”

Once Lisbeth had finished with the equipment repairs, Kirito's reprieve was over. There was nothing to be done but return to the Fifty-First Floor, and face what promised to be an entire floor's worth of discomfort—even more of it than he'd expected, with the additions to his party.

*I am so avoiding Argo as much as I can 'til this floor is cleared,* he vowed to himself, as the newly-formed party of four materialized in Ousetta Island's Teleport Plaza. *Probably a good thing this quest is likely to keep us out of the way of the main clearing group a lot of the time, too.*

Kirito thought he'd caught a glimpse of Asuna on the way to the meeting with Argo, among the players already geared for the floor. Dealing with her likely modesty issues at the same time as accompanying three other girls…

He would've shivered, were it not for the heat. As it was, he was quickly and forcibly reminded of just why the special gear was needed. “Let's get to the inn, quick,” Philia said, fanning herself with an expression of discomfort. “The sooner we get changed, the better.”

“Yeah,” he said with a defeated sigh, “I guess you're right.” *Let's get this over with.*

A short walk to the inn later, and a shorter time behind a closed door, and Kirito found himself waiting on the beach for his companions to emerge. The girls had insisted on meeting him there, rather than waiting for them at the inn. He wasn't sure why, though they had at least agreed to the concession of picking a spot far away from the other players who still crowded Ousetta.

He was grateful for that concession, as self-conscious as he felt. Black longcoats had been his standard equipment ever since Illfang; now, he was wearing the same black trunks he'd once used in the Reliquary quest, with the Valiant Edge incongruously slung over his shoulder. Kirito felt ridiculous, and was convinced he looked even worse.

*Not to mention, it's hot. January isn't supposed to be hot. This may be a breather level, but Kayaba is still determined to torment us somehow. And speaking of torment, just where are those—*

“All done, Kirito!”

Kirito looked up at Philia's call to see her and Rain crossing the beach from the inn. Blood immediately rushed to his head—though not nearly as much as he might've expected, considering the two were wearing matching bikinis, the blonde in blue and the redhead in black. Either he was still used to suppressing his hormones from his utter lack of a social life before *SAO,* or he really was starting to get inured to it all.

Though the way Philia promptly struck a pose did challenge his aplomb. “So, Kirito? How do we look?” She threw an arm around Rain's shoulders, dragging her into it too. “Will we do?”

*Do for what?* Not really wanting an answer to the question, he didn't ask it; nor did he make what even he was savvy enough to realize would've been the mistake of suggesting one-piece swimsuits would've been better for his sanity. Clearing his throat, he got out, “You, uh, you both look good.” Forcing his eyes not to stray, he added to himself, *Maybe a little too good. I'm liable to get called a*
“Hehe, thanks.” Where Philia just grinned, Rain's smile was accompanied by a blush; one which, to Kirito's confusion, seemed to intensify when she looked him over in return.

“We picked out matching ones,” Rain said after a moment, looking away. “Philia said it'd look better that way. We offered to get Kizmel something, too, but she said she already had it taken care of.”

“Oh, that's right.” Snapping his fingers, Kirito glanced around, puzzled. “Where is Kizmel, anyway? Shouldn't she be ready by… now…?”

Philia and Rain stepped aside, and his voice died in his throat. Apparently he wasn't quite as used to this kind of thing as he thought, because the sight of Kizmel walking over to join them in the same purple bikini Asuna had lent her a year before completely derailed his thoughts. Her “slips” aside, even with her shield stowed on her back and saber slung on her left hip it was much more skin than he was used to seeing from her. If the other two girls had been distracting, Kizmel was on a completely different level.

He was staring, and he knew it, but he was finding looking away from dusky curves nearly impossible. Especially when the elf girl lifted one eyebrow, smiled, and rested one hand on the hilt of her sword, as if striking a pose of her own.

How long he was petrified, Kirito never knew. He was only broken out of his trance when he heard Rain sigh and muse, “Well, I guess we're not competing with that, are we?”

Face flaming, Kirito shook his head quickly. “Uh! You, uh, look nice, Kizmel!” he blurted—remembering only after that unlike Philia, his partner hadn't actually asked for his opinion.

Apparently it was the right thing to say anyway, from Kizmel's deepening smile. “Thank you, my friend,” she said. “Asuna gave me the swimsuit as a 'Christmas present'—though I admit I did not expect to use it so soon.” She looked him up and down in turn, her gaze slow and deliberate. “You're looking very well yourself, Kirito.”

At that point, Kirito decided reality was clearly on a lunch break. While it was true that if he'd been wielding a sword in his real body for the past year, he undoubtedly would've built up considerable muscle by now, the real body that had been scanned in the NerveGear calibration had hardly been athletic. Not completely out of shape—his grandfather had tolerated his departure from the dojo, but that tolerance had had its limits—but hardly anything worth a second glance.

With a haste that had absolutely nothing to do with a pretty girl catching him checking her out—and checking him out in return—Kirito loudly cleared his throat. “Well, if we're all ready, then we should be looking into that quest—”

“Not so fast, Kirito,” Philia interrupted. “We still need to do one more thing, remember?” She held up a bottle. “The swimsuits'll keep us from Heat damage, but there's still that Sunburn DoT.”

“Urk! “Um—well—”

“I'll take care of Rain,” she said, rolling right over his protests. “She can get me, too. Kizmel?”

One of those Argo-like smiles was playing at Kizmel's lips again. “If you'd care to assist me, Kirito? As you may recall, I do have some trouble reaching my back…”

“Urk!”
There was a slight reprieve, kind of, after that, as Kirito's help wasn't needed right away. Or rather, it would've been a reprieve had they split up to apply the special Sunblock item. Instead, he ended up with the daunting task of trying to apply as much of it as he could to himself, while three not-unattractive girls did the same, apparently blithely unconcerned by the fact that he was watching. Rain was the only one who even seemed embarrassed, and it apparently wasn't enough for her to call him on it.

Asuna—or even Sugu—would've kicked me just for looking. I can kind of understand Kizmel, I know the Dark Elves don't worry so much about that, but the other two... This can't be normal!

Well. Kirito did manage a few moments of genuinely focusing on something else: checking the entire area with his Search skill to make absolutely certain Argo was nowhere to see it. Bad enough that the Rat obviously knew this would be happening; if she obtained any kind of record of it, there was no way he'd ever live it down.

It wasn't long before he ran out of distractions, though, as he'd confirmed Argo's absence and had covered every centimeter he could reach with Sunblock. Right around then, the girls likewise finished the first stage, and Rain dropped to the sand to let Philia get her back.

Not that Kirito had much of a chance to notice that. His vision was abruptly blocked by Kizmel kneeling in front of him. “Kirito?”

Swallowing hard, he nodded. “Right...” It's only her back, he reminded himself, squeezing some Sunblock into his hand. I've washed that for her a couple of times already. This is nothing I haven't done before. Heck, she's wearing more than she usually does when something like this comes up...

It was only when his hands made contact with the backs of her shoulders that Kirito remembered those times in the bath had always involved a brush, never direct skin contact. Her soft intake of breath further drove home the point; it was with an effort that he didn't pull back in a panic.

After a long, nervous pause, he began to move. I can do this, he told himself, carefully rubbing the cream into dusky skin. I used to do this for Sugu when we were kids, right? This isn't any different.

Yeah, sure, another corner of his mind snarked. Kizmel is totally just like Sugu... Not.

As far as the rest of the universe was concerned, it probably took less than two minutes to apply Kizmel's Sunblock, even when she stretched out on the sand and silently indicated she'd left the backs of her legs to him as well. To Kirito, it seemed to take hours, especially with the elf girl occasionally humming in apparent satisfaction. Not unpleasant hours, he admitted to himself, but not entirely comfortable, either.

When he'd finished, Kizmel sighed in a way he couldn't quite interpret, and turned to face him with a small smile. “Thank you, Kirito-kun,” she murmured, too low for the other girls to hear. “...Your turn.”

Gulping, Kirito turned his back. Unlike him, she showed no hesitation in placing her hands on his shoulders. Unlike her, he reflexively tensed at the contact, muscles stiffening under her warm touch. Her increasing physical affection since Christmas had left him uncertain exactly where they stood; the peculiar conditions of the new floor only deepened it.

As she worked the protective cream into his back, though, he gradually felt himself unwinding; almost like she was massaging knots out of his muscles as much as applying a status buff. It wasn't like anything he'd done with a girl before, but... he couldn't say it was bad, either.
Just different. I don't know what's going on, but... maybe it's not so bad? I know Klein would kill to be where I am now. Maybe... maybe I should just go with the flow, for now.

Since he had gotten everywhere he could reach himself beforehand, there was less for Kizmel to do, though he did get the odd sense she was taking longer than necessary. Soon enough, she was finished, and the strange feeling of isolation from the rest of the world vanished as she pulled back from him. “I believe that's everything, Kirito,” she said, standing. “We should be protected from this floor's heat, at least for the time being.”

“Eight hours for this type,” Philia put in. “By the time it wears off, it'll be close enough to sunset we won't need it.”

The lingering sense of time being out of joint was chased out of Kirito's head by the reminder that they were not, in fact, alone. Whipping around to look, he found the two girls sitting on the beach, apparently long since finished with their own preparations, watching them. Exactly what they thought of the whole thing, he couldn't quite tell, but Philia's smirk was enough to set his face on fire again.

“There are higher-quality Sunblocks?” Kizmel asked curiously, apparently completely unperturbed. “Do they last longer? That might be worth the expense, if we're to get an earlier start tomorrow.”

“Argo says you have to make them yourself,” Rain said, shaking her head. “According to the craft recipe, the ingredients are rare drops from dungeons on this floor, too.” With a quiet cough, she glanced away. “Of course, she also said it'd take all the fun out of it, so—”

“So instead of worrying about that, how about we get to that quest,” Kirito interrupted hastily. “We've wasted the whole morning anyway, so we'd better get moving. Ah, Philia, where's the starting location? Is it on this island, or are we going to need to get to the Shipyard first?”

To his relief, the blonde's expression changed from mischievous to excited in an eyeblink, the promise of treasure chasing away her disturbing amusement. “According to the old guy we got the quest from, there's a cave on the southeast corner of the island. The first clues to 'finding the legacy of the Treaty' are supposed to be there.”

Re-equipping the scabbard he'd removed for the application of the Sunblock, he turned to face the southeast. “Then let's get going. No sense wasting any more daylight!”

It was, of course, the party leader's job to take point, even in theoretically safe surroundings. Kirito's quick steps toward the southeast were entirely due to a desire to get as much done in one day as possible, and had absolutely nothing to do with the laughter he heard behind him.

The cave indicated by the quest proved to be at the opposite end of Ousetta Island from the place Kizmel and her partner had spent the night. Given the size of the island, not a terribly long walk, though obviously long enough to make Kirito uncomfortable: while more than a few Swordmasters had set out to investigate the Shipyard, there were still a number on Ousetta's beaches.

Only a small proportion of them female, of course, given the Swordmasters' relative lack of “Action Girls”—to use Argo's term—but knowing Kirito, there was an excellent chance of those that were there somehow becoming relevant to him. Which, on the one hand, Kizmel felt had its merits, as none of them wanted to dwell too much on the recent losses.

On the other, she thought, following a pace behind her partner as he strode quickly along the beach, I'd rather his attention not wander too far, under the circumstances. Not that I expect him to risk it much, given his odd shyness—which is a problem of its own, of course.
Mentally putting aside that question for a time when she had a chance to privately consult Argo, Kizmel cleared her throat. Pausing long enough to ensure she’d gotten Kirito’s attention, she turned to look at their companions. “I meant to ask, Philia: what brought this quest to your attention in the first place?”

“Eh? Oh, Rain and I were just checking pretty much everybody with a quest marker,” the treasure hunter replied with a casual shrug. “The usual stuff for a new floor. Nothing very interesting here at first, except for the one leading to the Shipyard, but then when we were doing a little scouting for a mob-hunting quest we spotted this old guy in a hut back in the woods south of here.”

“Really old,” Rain said, nodding. “Like, going-senile old. I’m not sure he really registered we were Swordmasters when we talked to him. He just rambled about how it was ‘time’, and how the ‘bearers of the legacy of the Treaty’ should go to that cave. There, we’d find a clue to ‘Hyrus’ lost arts’.”

“That does sound like what we’re looking for.” Kirito didn’t sound entirely comfortable, though Kizmel wasn’t sure if that was because of the implications of the quest, or the general conditions of the floor. “I’m surprised you haven’t already been there, though.”

“That’s the thing, though: the quest log said we were supposed to go with the ‘bearers of the legacy’ if we wanted to open the door.” Philia brushed a hand through her hair, bouncing energetically as she walked; the motion prompted Kirito to whip back to face front again, face red, though the blonde didn’t seem to notice. “That’s why we were already talking about getting you guys in on this.”

That was fair enough, Kizmel supposed. If there were any among the Swordmasters who could likely be considered such “bearers”, it was the two of them—which only made things more suspicious.

Either this is the hand of Fate itself at work, she thought pensively, as they rounded a corner of the beach that took them away from the more populated areas, or Kayaba is meddling somehow. …I need to ask Kirito just how powerful that sorcerer really is. I should have done so long ago.

“…I don’t believe this,” a voice ahead of them muttered, breaking into Kizmel’s reverie. “What the hell does that even mean? A ‘weapon to banish evil’? ‘Legacy of the Treaty’? Damn, but I hate obscure quest hints!”

The southeast corner of the island was nearly deserted, but not completely. A pair of Swordmasters—one short and obviously out of shape, the other tall but unhealthily thin—were storming away from the mouth of a cave a few meters back from the beach.

They both looked quite angry, but—somewhat to Kizmel’s relief, given recent events—their expressions eased when they saw Kirito’s party approach. “Hey, guys,” the taller called out. “Are you trying the ‘Lost Treasure of Hyrus’ quest, too?”

“Yeah, we are,” Kirito confirmed warily. “This is where it starts, right?”

“That’s what the map says, anyway,” the shorter Swordmaster said sourly, pointing a thumb over his shoulder. “Right over there. Don’t get your hopes up, though, there’s a door right inside that wants some kind of weird key. Where or what the key is, we can’t figure out.”

Kizmel exchanged a quick look with Kirito. “We’ll take our chances,” she said. “We may be able to work something out.” Indeed, from the complaints they’d overheard, she had a suspicion already.

“Good luck,” the taller Swordmaster said, shaking his head. “If you do figure it out, you’ll probably
make a fortune just selling it to the Rat... We're gonna just go on to the Shipyard quest. See you around.”

“Well,” Rain said when they'd gone, “at least we know we're in the right place.” She shot the elf a curious look. “You've got an idea, Kizmel?”

“I might,” she allowed. “Let us go and see if it has merit.”

The cave, fortunately, proved to be large enough to easily allow the four of them to walk more or less abreast; more fortunate still, it was lit by ancient torches at regular intervals, sustained by one of the more practical charms of the ancients. Both were a relief, Kizmel having been concerned at the prospect of having to navigate a cramped tunnel in the dark.

The two Swordmasters who had abandoned the quest turned out to be correct: just a few meters into the cave, a large stone door blocked the way. Firmly set into the cave walls, its only feature was a curious slot where a keyhole might have been.

“Huh,” Kirito said, peering close. “Let's see... Yeah, that's definitely a weird lock. I don't see any clues at all, though; unless—”

“You need to use Search,” Philia said excitedly, leaning over his shoulder, eyes glowing green. “Um... It says, 'To open the way to the first key to Hyrus' Treasure, bring forth the legacy of the Treaty: the weapon to banish evil'.”

Kizmel nodded. “As I thought.” When the others turned toward her, she explained, ‘Doesn't that 'keyhole' resemble the pedestal from the Reliquary, Kirito?’

“...You're right, it does.” With a few quick movements, Kirito replaced the Valiant Edge with the Baneblade's scabbard, and drew the sword. Aligning it carefully with the slot in the door, he slid the blade in.

When the Baneblade was sheathed in stone almost to the hilt, there was an audible click, and the cave began to rumble. As soon as he'd pulled it free, the door shifted, groaned, and ponderously swung open; beyond, a brightly lit chamber beckoned.

“Now, this looks promising,” Philia said, brushing past Kirito to slip into the new room. “That's what I call a treasure room! Like a pirate's vault.”

It did certainly resemble some of the hoards Kizmel had plundered with her partner in the past. Lit by more torches, amplified by mirrors, the chamber contained a number of chests, as well as a number of scattered coins; on one wall, there seemed to be a map of the Fifty-First Floor itself, with several odd markings on it.

Not quite what I was expecting from something relating to the ancients. But then, this may simply be the style of whichever of the Nine Kingdoms was tropical; I believe our dealings have always been with remnants of the inland nations.

“There's a sword over here,” Kirito said, crossing to a desk just beneath the map. “Let me see the stats... One-handed, called 'Sea Dragon's Sword', good attack power... Not much better than Valiant Edge, but it'll tide me over for a bit. Anybody mind if I claim this as my share?”

Philia waved vaguely in his direction, already digging around in a chest. “If it's not a Swordbreaker-style, I don't care anyway. 'Sides, there's lots more interesting stuff in here...”

Kizmel was inclined to agree, as she began her own inspection of the treasure. In any case, the true
reward they sought of this cave was likely only one step. If the search for Hyrus' Forge was anything like the Reliquary quest, she knew it would not be so simple.

“…Hey, guys? There's something written on the wall here. But I can't read the script; it's not Japanese, that's for sure. It's not English, either…”

A tingle running down her spine, Kizmel quickly crossed to Rain's side. “That's ancient writing,” she said, after a moment's inspection. “Let me see… Hm. Much of it is too worn to make out, but I believe I can still read some of it. Though it is… strange.”

Kirito looked up from equipping his new sword. “Strange how, Kizmel?” he asked, voice wary.

“I'm just not certain I understand what it speaks of. Although…” She frowned, tracing faded letters with one finger. “It almost seems to be a prophecy of some kind. It refers to a spell placed on the people carried into the sky in the Great Separation, one to… dull their minds…”

“Dull their minds?” Rain repeated, frowning. “What's that supposed to mean?”

The tingle in Kizmel's spine turned to a cold chill. “I'm… not certain,” she said, not entirely truthfully. “But it seems to have been meant to keep the people from trying to conquer the evil that infests Aincrad. The spell would dull their wits, and their blades, leaving the peoples of the Steel Castle isolated from one another. Why that is, either is not mentioned here, or is part of the illegible section, but it seems to have been deliberately cast to force the people of Aincrad to eventually call for help.”

“Us,” the redhead said softly. “But… why? Well, I mean, I know why Kayaba would want things that way, but I don't get the connection here.”

Neither do I. But if I'm understanding this correctly, other things are beginning to make a frightening kind of sense. “It does not seem to say,” Kizmel repeated. “It does, however, go on to say that the spell was imperfect, and that eventually some few strong-minded people would regain their wit by their own strength of will. And that these few natives of Aincrad would be as crucial to the Steel Castle's fate as the warriors summoned from another world…”

The strange lack of will and wit that I've noticed ever more in recent months. Was it truly a change in them—or in me? And the distinction Kirito and a few of the other Swordmasters have made between me and 'normal NPCs'… Is it that I am somehow special, and others born of this world are —

“Don't read too much into that.”

Kizmel jerked, startled out of her thoughts by her partner's sharp words. “Kirito?” she said, turning to face him.

His expression was taut, an indecipherable shadow in his deep black eyes. “Don't let it get to you,” he said firmly. “I… know something about the 'magic' involved here—enough to know that you shouldn't take that at face value.”

“…What do you know, Kirito?” she asked warily.

“Enough that something isn't adding up here.” He bit his lip, frowning deeply. “Kayaba's 'sorcery' has limits, Kizmel. If I'm understanding any of what you just read off right, either that's a red herring, or else…” Kirito hesitated for a long moment, then shook his head firmly. “No. Before we draw any conclusions from that, we need more information, Kizmel.”
...I suppose worrying about that will do us no good here, anyway. “All right,” she conceded. “But I believe we need to talk, soon—”

“Um, guys? I hate to interrupt, but we may have a problem here.”

Kizmel's attention snapped back to Philia. By all appearances, the girl had completely ignored the discussion Rain's discovery had provoked, and had spent the whole time scouring the rest of the treasure room. Now she waved a hand at one chest in particular—one which stood empty, save for a single piece of paper.

“Somebody got to this first,” the treasure hunter said, nodding at the paper. “Ever see a ransom note for a key before...?”

"Those who would uphold ancient Treaty and seek the Forge of Hyrus, be wary of the task that lies before you. We hoped to keep the treasures of our shattered Alliance safe; but to our sorrow we were betrayed. In the chaos of the Great Separation, the Order was sundered by traitors within, who sought to take those treasures for themselves. Many have been guarded. Others have not.

"The first Key to Hyrus Fortress has been taken. We leave this warning where the Key was meant to rest: by the time our heirs find it, the human pirates who wrested it may long be dead, yet their ally, our betrayer, will for ages persist. The Sea-Lord, Medrizzel, rules the waters of this floor of the Steel Castle.

"Do not face him unwary. Seek the great ship of the Dread Pirate Robair. Medrizzel's sworn companion has joined them; among his possessions you may find an advantage against the Dragon. Fortune willing, the Key will still reside aboard, as well...”

So said the note Philia had discovered, which Rain found to be all kinds of ominous. Though to be fair, she was finding a lot of things ominous just then; and not only the writing she herself had found on the cave wall. The words in that treasure trove had only served to depress the mood, and remind her of things the day's hi-jinks had distracted her from.

For the moment, their impromptu party had returned the beach, and was heading back to Ousetta's village to find more information about the nearby shipyard. Whatever happened next, they were obviously going to need transport—unless they wanted to swim for several kilometers, which didn't strike any of them as a good idea.

Trailing behind the others, deep in thought, Rain heard Philia speaking up. “So... I'm guessing this 'Medrizzel' is probably the Field Boss for this floor, huh?”

"Sounds like it,” Kirito agreed. He had his new sword in his hand as he walked, giving the blade a closer look. “Another dragon, huh? I don't think I've seen anything to do with the old Order since, what, the Thirty-Fifth Floor?”

“The Dracolich, Zarada,” Kizmel agreed, shuddering. “I only hope Medrizzel's longevity is natural, not necromantic.”

“Ugh!” Philia said, making a face. “That was my first Field Boss. I never thought a boss could stink like that. How could anything want to stay around that long, if it meant being a rotting corpse? If I were Zarada, I'd have been rooting for us. Well, I was anyway of course, but... You know what I mean.”

Zarada. Rain knew the name from the files she'd bought from Argo. The zombified dragon had gone down without taking down a single clearer. The same, she knew, couldn't be said of the Floor Boss,
which had taken two players with it.

“So you guys know something about this 'Order', huh? I kinda remember something about that from the briefing before Zarada, but I never heard anything else about it… Wait, no, I think I actually did find another reference when I was doing some treasure hunting on the Fortieth Floor…”

“We first ran into quests relating to it back on the Twenty-Sixth.” A rueful chuckle. “It was a pain, I can tell you. Kizmel and I had to go through more of those Fire Goats than most of the clearers did, and the quest items we had to use made the soot they blew themselves into even worse…”

Exploding goats. I remember Argo talking about that, too. She thought it was funny. I guess it was, too, but still, laughing about it right now…

We're still alive. That's good enough reason to have a little fun, right?

“As the note from the cave said, the Order was destroyed by betrayal around the time of the Great Separation, and as far as I know only some of the treasonous dragons survive to this day. Their legacy is still valuable, however: a sword that once belonged to them was my weapon in the early days of my renewed partnership with Kirito.”

“Good armor, too. The Dragonhide Coat I got from Zarada lasted me about five and a half floors. It was even still decent backup for a couple floors after that, which came in handy when—actually, never mind about that.”

“Oh…?”

“Just make sure you always have a spare set of armor, Philia. Take our word for it: there are some things in this castle that can destroy even quite fresh armor surprisingly quickly.” There was a cough; Rain noticed absently that Kizmel, of all people, was faintly blushing. “Fortunately they're not usually as effective against the flesh beneath.”

“Okay…”

Kirito quickly changed the subject after that, launching into a rambling description of a dungeon on the Forty-Fourth Floor whose walls had consisted almost entirely of mirrors. The effects, apparently, had varied from surreal to terrifying, and made navigating the place a pain. Though to hear him tell it, it had also been hilarious in places, especially when Lind wandered into it unaware.

Finally, as they closed in on the village again, Rain stopped in her tracks. “Guys?” she called. “Is this… really okay?”

Philia stopped short, turning to favor her with a puzzled look. “Eh? What's wrong, Rain?”

The redhead nervously shifted her weight, uncomfortably aware of her swimsuit when Kirito also turned to look. “Well, it's just… We just fought a major boss yesterday, the worst Aincrad's thrown at us. I mean, yeah, we survived it, and I'm probably not going to be really scared of anything again for a while, but… eight of us weren't so lucky.”

Hafner, Wolfgang, Beowulf… Those were just the names she knew. Somehow it made it worse for Rain that she didn't even know who the other fallen players were.

“Eight players died just yesterday,” she continued, looking down at the sand. “And here we are, having fun on the beach. Is that… normal?”

Philia bit her lip, looking unsure. Kizmel, by contrast, had a sad, knowing look in her eyes. While
Kirito… Kirito looked more serious than she'd yet seen him outside of the battle with Vemacitrin. There were shadows in his eyes, deep ones; shadows like those Rain had started seeing in the mirror.

“I hate to say it, Rain,” he began, sheathing his new sword, “but… yeah, it kind of is. As horrible as it is, this is something you start to get used to, after awhile. None of you were there for the Twenty-Fifth Floor Boss—between the Army and the reinforcements, about thirty people died—but every clearer has lost at least one person they knew by now. Some of us have lost more than that. And as unfair as it is, you get used to empty seats in the boss meetings, and you do what you can to keep your mind off during the day.”

“If you do not, the losses will eventually destroy you,” Kizmel added soberly. “I would suspect your sleep last night was not peaceful, Rain?”

Rain winced, looking away. One of the reasons she’d been up so early to run quests with Philia was because she’d spent the night watching Vemacitrin's rampage all over again. Sometimes it had just been the real events, bad as they were; some of her nightmares had featured more deaths.

More than once, hers.

“That, Rain, is why we're enjoying our time on the beach as well as we can,” the elf said softly. “Our nightmares are our penance. In our waking lives, we must move forward, or we will never cleanse this castle—nor send the Swordmasters home.”

Not for the first time, Rain found herself wondering just how close to “human” Kizmel really was. Speaking of the dead, her eyes had the same look as Kirito’s; speaking of the living players, and their goal, she had a wistful air unlike anything Rain had ever seen from an NPC.

Heh. I wish I could talk to Nanairo about this. She's supposed to be studying this kind of stuff, isn't she…?

The thought brought a pang to Rain's heart, and a film to her eyes. It also straightened her spine, though, and pushed back some of the darkness that had begun to fester in her mind. Thinking about Nanairo brought back an old pain, but at the same time reminded her of why she’d pushed herself so hard, to be where she was.

“…If we don't keep pushing forward, we'll never see our families again, will we?” she said at length. “Even if it feels wrong not to think about the dead all the time—”

“If that's all we think about, we'll be joining them all too soon,” Kirito finished, nodding somberly. “Trust me, I've… seen what happens to people who think about it too hard.”

“You can't live without hope,” Philia said softly. Her eyes, too, were sad. Rain wondered why; the information she’d brought from Argo hadn't mentioned anything horrible specific to the treasure hunter.

She also said the really personal stuff would cost more Cor than I had just then, she reminded herself. And Argo doesn't know anything about outside the game, either.

Taking a deep breath, Rain straightened her shoulders. “Okay, then. Let's ask around about the Shipyard, and get going! This floor won't clear itself!”

Kirito smiled. “That's the spirit. C'mon, Argo's guide said something about needing a letter of introduction from Village Chief Jambalaya.” He frowned suddenly. “She also said something about never trusting any Village Chief associated with Cajun food, whatever that means…”
The walk to the village resumed with a lighthearted discussion of what the Rat could possibly have meant. As they went, though, Rain noticed Kizmel seemed unusually preoccupied, and wondered what could be bothering the elf girl.

"'Weed out the sharks', he says," Philia complained, awkwardly kicking at the water to get in position to vent with a nice Vertical. "'They're hurting the fishermen supporting the shipwrights', he says." When she finally did get both positioning and posture just right, she ripped her Swordbreaker through a Baneshark, just behind its head. "I wish the old geezer had thought about how hard it is to fight like this!"

"Hard" may actually have been an understatement, as far as she was concerned. Water in general didn't work the way it did IRL, and that was before swinging a sword against man-eating giant fish came into it. It took a lot of trial and error to even trigger Sword Skills; if she hadn't learned the trick of VR swimming already, she was pretty sure she wouldn't have managed at all.

As it was, another Baneshark snuck up on her while she was finishing the first, and she hissed as its teeth grazed her leg. Not a very serious hit, but still one she was pretty sure she wouldn't have taken on land.

Rain's blade licked out a moment later to gut the shark, at least giving Philia that much satisfaction. Also, perversely, the satisfaction of seeing she wasn't the only one having trouble adjusting. The redhead's attack wasn't even a Sword Skill, just a clumsy thrust backed by the sword's high stats.

_I gotta ask her where she got that thing. I need a new Swordbreaker soon, anyway._

"It's a tricky skill to learn," Kirito called out a few meters farther out to sea. He'd somehow pulled off a perfect Sonic Leap to propel himself through the water, his sword's trajectory ending in a Baneshark's gills. "You do get used to it, though, when you've had enough practice—Kizmel, Switch!"

He kicked off from the shark, letting his partner dart in like a dolphin to impale it from the other side with a Reaver. It writhed in place, then shattered to pieces—leaving Kizmel's blade free to tear through the water and swat another shark across the nose.

"We appear to have set off a feeding frenzy, my friends!" she called, pushing away to let Kirito through again. "There are more coming!"

Kirito only laughed. "That just makes it easier for us to kill enough for the quest!"

_Aanndd of course those two are doing just fine, Philia thought sourly, whirling in a Serration Wave to buy herself a little breathing room. But they would, wouldn't they? Whatever else Kizmel is, she's AI, and Kirito's, well, Kirito. Of course he knows how to fight in water._

There was some debate about who the single strongest clearer was, though it was mostly a contest between Heathcliff, the Flash, and the Black Swordsman. What just about any player who knew anything agreed on was that if anyone rivaled the Rat for knowledge about out-of-the-way areas and strange gameplay gimmicks, it was Kirito. The mere fact of Kizmel being the only Dark Elf on the frontline killed pretty much every argument on that point.

_But he's gonna have competition soon, Philia vowed to herself, ripping a Horizontal across a Baneshark's eyes. If I don't get anything else from this questline, I'm going to learn every trick I can. A real treasure hunter can find anything and fight anywhere!_

Maybe she'd even find her way into the Elf War quest itself. Kirito had been hinting all day that there
was a lot more to Aincrad's in-game backstory than most players knew, and the quest they were on right then was proof the plot Kizmel was from hadn't quite ended with the defeat of the Fallen Elves.

*Yeah. That sounds like something to hunt for. Treasure's easy. Finding the secrets of Aincrad itself? That'll keep me from thinking too much about... everything... for awhile.*

Several more minutes of awkward swim-fighting, during which they'd gained maybe another hundred meters toward the offshore framework of Torvan's Shipyard, and Kirito's voice rose about the sounds of combat again. “Almost there, guys! A few more sharks, and we can make a break for the docks!”

“Finally! That last one almost bit my foot right off!” Displaying a level of coordination Philia hadn't yet managed in the water, Rain carved the three up-down-up slashes that were the alternate variant of Sharp Nail into a Baneshark's flank. “Stupid fish!”

“Better than cephalopods,” Kirito said with a laugh. “Be glad we haven't seen any Ignition Squids around here!”

Philia wasn't the only one who sent a glare his way at that crack. Rain didn't seem to know better, but Kizmel's look should've set the boy on fire despite the water. “Kirito. Do not tempt Fate that way.” Grimly, the elf girl lopped another Baneshark's head off, and pushed off toward the Shipyard again. “Come! The sooner we have a boat, the less likely we are to meet such foul creatures!”

There were already a fair number of Swordmasters at Torvan's Shipyard, Kizmel saw. As her own party climbed out of the water onto the floating docks, she could make out at least a score milling about. Guild affiliation was more difficult to determine than usual, with the attire of the day, but she thought she recognized several of the Knights of Blood and Divine Dragons.

At the far end of the long line of docked boats, she definitely saw Asuna, conversing with someone she guessed to be Torvan. Finalizing arrangements for a boat, she suspected; doubtless her old friend had been about much earlier than she and her partner this time.

For now, it was her own party that concerned Kizmel. Turning back to the water, she helped first Rain, then Philia onto the docks; once Kirito had joined them, she spared the time to shake off water. Not that she really needed to, the afternoon air still more than warm enough to dry her in time, but practicality wasn't the purpose here.

Kirito's momentary preoccupation, enjoyable in itself while giving her a free moment to enjoy the view, was exactly the result she was hoping for.

A discreet cough from Philia reminded Kizmel that there were, this day, other observers; though the treasure hunter looked more amused than anything else. “Looks like there's a line, guys. I think this is going to take awhile—and that's if there's no quest just to be able to buy a boat in the first place.”

“There will be,” Rain said, shaking water out of her hair. “There always is. Remember the gondolas from the Fourth Floor?”

“I know I do,” Kirito sighed. “There's already boats here, so hopefully it won't be as bad as that way. Still, we might have to spend more Cor than I'd like. I don't know if any of you have ever been sailing, but for more than a day trip those small ones won't be enough for all of us.”

That piqued Kizmel's interest. Even now, her partner seldom spoke of his life in his own world. “You've experience with boats, Kirito?” She did not, besides the tiny riverboats in places like the Fourth Floor. Her people had little tradition for seafaring, not even before the Great Separation.
“Not really. Just a vacation my family took… must be six years ago now.” He shrugged, a wistful look in his eyes. “I don't know much about how they work, but I can tell you one of those six-meter boats won't be big enough for four of us. Twelve meters should be a good compromise between size and, well, being able to handle it at all.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Philia asked, practically bouncing on her feet. “Let's get in line and ask that Torvan guy for his prices!”

Kirito winced—at the crowd, Kizmel suspected, though she thought he might also still have been feeling self-conscious—but led the way to join the line of Swordmasters waiting to speak with the Dockmaster. If they wished to be sailing before dark, they would need to begin as soon as possible.

Kizmel found herself lagging behind the others, though. Something about Torvan's mannerisms, even seen from this distance, was bringing to mind the inscription they'd found back in the treasure cave. *A spell to dull the minds of those taken into the sky,* she remembered. *One that only the truly strong-minded might be break, and those who did would be part of determining Aincrad's fate…*

*That would explain so much of what I've begun to realize. Yet, Kirito is right: I should not assume all is as it appears. If there is one thing I do know of the Sorcerer Kayaba, it's that he is a liar. If he had any influence over the writing of those words, they could well have been intended to confuse.***

*Even so…*

“Why are you with them?”

The Dark Elf almost toppled back into the water, startled by the voice behind her. Turning quickly, Kizmel found a girl she didn't recognize standing behind her: much shorter than her, with black hair and eyes a bright, icy blue. The girl wore a one-piece swimsuit in the Swordmaster style, and bore on one hip a rapier of a kind Kizmel recognized from shops catering to the summoned heroes.

Above the girl's head, when Kizmel focused her vision, hovered a green cursor—and below it, the label *(NPC).*

A chill creeping up her spine at the contradiction, she could only stare at the girl. “…Excuse me?” she asked warily.

“Why are you with them?” the girl asked again, voice flat, face expressionless. “Why do you help the Swordmasters? Their victory will be the end.”

“The end of what?”

“This world.” The girl said it as tonelessly as everything else, belying the weight of her words. “If the Swordmasters conquer this Castle, and escape, everything will end. Why do you help them?”

*The end of… the world?* Staring at the strange “NPC”, Kizmel saw in her mind's eye the Twilight Citadel of the Fallen Elves, and remembered the last time she'd been faced with the notion of Aincrad's destruction. When the Fallen Elf King had revealed the means to drop the Steel Castle from the sky.

A grand battle had followed, from which only Kizmel and her Swordmaster companions had returned alive. That day, Swordmasters had fought to save her people, and Aincrad itself. “I don't understand,” she said slowly. “When the Swordmasters’ mission is complete, this Castle will be cleansed of darkness. How could that mean—”

“Oi, Kizmel! You okay back there?”
Kizmel looked back over her shoulder, realizing with a start that she'd fallen well behind her friends. They were already nearly halfway across the pier, while she had barely moved from the edge. “Sorry! I'll be right with you!” She turned back to the girl—

There was no one there. The young girl with Swordmaster arms and clothing but the cursor of an Aincrad native had disappeared, as if she were never there at all.

*What... just happened? Who...? Was that all just a trick of my mind, a waking dream...?* It hardly seemed possible that she could have simply imagined such a thing, yet the girl's contradictory appearance and abrupt disappearance seemed more like a mirage than truth.

*No. She was here. But what she said... It hardly seems possible...*

Shaking herself, Kizmel turned to hurry after her friends. As Kirito had said of the inscription in the treasure cave, there were many things in Aincrad that could not be taken at face value. She would discuss the encounter with him when there was time, but for now, she had more important things to attend to than musing on vague prophecies of doom.

Such as getting a certain gallant swordsman to accept acknowledging a girl's charms would *not* always get him hurt in return. It had been amusing for a time, but now Kizmel was beginning to grow frustrated...

**Chapter End Notes**

It's based on a light novel series. Of course there had to be a Beach Episode in there somewhere. Though this one is not exactly the kind of pointless fan service/filler that is typical of the medium. There is a method to my madness. (Or is that a madness to my method?)

Canon divergence note: it was only as I was writing this chapter that I became aware SAO's in-game music is played by NPC musicians, not a constant BGM like in most games. In the end I chose to leave it as it is, my version being more useful for Duet's plot.

I admit to being curious if anyone recognizes the Shout Out that "Chief Jambalaya" represents. So far no reader has mentioned it; admittedly it's a bit obscure.
“There's always a catch,” Kirito grumbled. “After the gondola quest back on the Fourth Floor, I really should've known better, but no, I figured this was going to be easy…” After a short pause to check how much progress he’d made, he shook his head and went back to scrubbing wood. “Like having to fight mobs in the water just to get here wasn't bad enough.”

“Look on the bright side, Kirito,” Philia called from the bow, where she was mopping. “It's a lot cheaper this way—and it doesn't involve fighting any bears to get mats, right?”

“Argo's guide's pretty clear on the Magnatherium not being a bear,” came Rain's voice from above. “But yeah, Philia's right. Everything we need for this quest is right here, no giant not-bears or lumberjacks required.”

A splash heralded Kizmel's reappearance. “Perhaps so. Forests, however, I know quite well. I'm rather less familiar with boats. I had never heard of barnacles, and honestly, I wish I still hadn't. Were I not a Swordmaster myself now, I'm certain I would be quite exhausted by now—and I do still need to breathe occasionally.”

Torvan's Shipyard, as it turned out, had more than enough boats of varying sizes for the clearing group, and they were even at a reasonable price. Kirito had feared his entire impromptu party would need to pool most of their surplus Cor to buy one, but Dockmaster Torvan had offered them quite the deal. With, of course, a catch.

“Boats I've got aplenty,” the salty Dockmaster had said, puffing away at a pipe. “With how dangerous the seas've been since Medrizzel returned, I haven't sold one in far too long. So I'll give ye quite a nice price, gent and ladies. O'course,” he'd added with a wave of his pipe, “they have been docked for a good long time, Be a bit of a job cleanin'‘em up and makin’‘em seaworthy again.

“Make sure yer sails are rigged right and proper, and yer keel scoured o' barnacles, at least. Lots o' things in that sea you don't want catching you. An' be damn sure yer anchor's in good shape, or ye'll not be getting much sleep.”

The twelve-meter, two-cabin sailboat had cost them a solid hundred-thousand Cor, not too bad a price spread between four players. She also was filthy from stem to stern, mast to keel. Before they could even think of chasing after the hints left in the treasure room, they needed to set her to rights. With, of course, a catch.

So, like the players who'd arrived at the Shipyard ahead of them, they'd divided the task and gotten to work. Kirito was scouring the hull above the waterline, Philia was cleaning the deck, and Rain was rigging up the new sails they'd bought from a sailmaker at the far end of the shipyard, replacing the tattered shreds the boat had come with. Kizmel had volunteered for the job of clearing barnacles and other obstructions from the keel.

The elf girl seemed to be regretting it now, as she tread water on the surface while she got her breath back. “I suppose,” she said now, reclining to float on her back, “I should be grateful it isn't worse.
The metal covering seems to be difficult for these barnacles to grasp.”

“That's what copper sheathing is for, I think,” Kirito said, trying to focus as much as he could on scrubbing grime off the hull. Any direction he looked just then was dangerous to his peace of mind, but for whatever reason looking at his partner was the worst—though he was beginning to suspect Rain of deliberately showing off, up on the rigging. “This isn't really my area, but I'm pretty sure the copper is to keep the bottom from fouling.”

“Then I don't care to imagine how long these boats have been idle. There's more than a fair share of seaweed stuck to the hull, as well.” Kizmel sighed. “Well, no help for it. A couple of hours' delay in our quest is a small price.” She took a deep breath then, and dove back beneath the water.

She's probably right. I still wouldn't want to do this for real, though. If this were my real body, I'd have some nasty blisters by now. On the bright side, as Philia had put it, the grime on the upper hull was coming away easily enough. The problem was simply how much hull there was, on a twelve-meter boat.

“That's it for the sails, I think!” Rain announced, lightly dropping down to the deck. She made her way over the wheel, next to the hatch leading down belowdecks, and tapped it to bring up the status window. “Hm… yep, we're good to go on that! And it looks like Kizmel's already cleared the rudder, too.” She looked at it a few moments longer, then dismissed it with a wave. “We just need to finish the cleaning, and we'll be ready to launch. Kirito, how about I get to work on the port side?”

“That'd be a big help, thanks,” Kirito said gratefully.

“What about the deck-swabbing?” Philia said plaintively, gesturing with her mop. “It's not like I don't have plenty left up here, y'know!”

“You've only got the one surface,” he pointed out with exaggerated patience. “Between the two sides, there's a lot of hull to cover.”

“Fair enough.” A few moments went by with nothing but the sound of scrub brushes and the steady swish of a mop. Then Philia paused again. “Hey, at least it'll be all of us when it's time to get the inside cleaned out!”

Kirito nodded in absentminded agreement, and kept moving his scrub brush farther forward. After a few seconds, though, he froze in place. If the outside is this bad, what's it look like in there? …I've got a bad feeling about this. No, no, the hatch has been kept shut, and the boat's obviously watertight. It shouldn't be too bad inside... right?

Between the late start that morning, the detour to the Fiftieth Floor that led to Philia and Rain joining the party to begin with, and the questing on Ousetta Island, it had been past one in the afternoon before they even reached Torvan's Shipyard. By the time their new boat was clean above and below the water—and the musty but not too noxious interior aired out—it was closer to four. A good chunk of a day gone with little actual accomplishment—but, finally, they were ready to cast off from the Shipyard.

Kirito found himself elected as helmsman, on the basis of being the only member of the party who'd ever been on a real sailboat. He thought about pointing out he'd only been a passenger, when he was not quite ten years old, but seeing as protesting anything girls decided seemed not to end well for him, he kept his mouth shut and turned his attention to figuring out how sailboats worked in SAO.

Thankfully, there was a manual.
“Okay,” he said after a few minutes, during which Philia and Rain lounged on the deck ahead of him, while Kizmel leaned against the rail not more than a meter away from him. “This looks pretty simple. The mast and rudder both work with the wheel. Somebody else needs to handle the sails, and the anchor when we're ready to take a break, but otherwise that's it.”

“I've got that part,” Philia said with a cheerful wave. “Sounds like it'll be more fun than swabbing the deck, anyway.”

“Then I suppose Rain and I are passengers,” Kizmel mused, crossing her arms in a way that Kirito found momentarily distracting. “Unless we're attacked, of course. Which we doubtless will be, eventually.” She lifted an eyebrow in his direction. “Anything else of note before we set out?”

“Just that we won't need to find a dock before we call it a night.” Kirito tapped the ethereal menu. “According to this, when the anchor's dropped the boat counts as a kind of portable Safe Zone. Considering how much of this floor is open water…”

The others nodded. One thing that had become quickly evident was why the previous floor's Boss Room had had a lower than normal ceiling, and the staircase leading up had been so long: to accommodate the unusually deep water of the Fifty-First Floor. That depth made Kirito more than a little uneasy. He'd never encountered an underwater quest before.

He was about to dismiss the boat menu and take the wheel when something else caught his eye. “Oh… It looks like we're also supposed to name the boat. I guess I should've figured; the Fourth Floor's gondolas had the same thing.”

“A name, huh?” Rain tapped her chin thoughtfully. “I dunno… I'm not so good with names. Not original ones, anyway. You guys got any ideas?”

“Give me a day, and I might,” Philia said, raising her hands in a shrug. “I'm not picky. How about you, Kizmel?”

Kizmel smiled, looking just a little sad. “Mm… Tilnel's name was already honored in such a way. I can think of no other of significance to me. Kirito?”

A demurring comment was on Kirito's mind as well, and he almost said it. Just as he opened his mouth, though, he paused, struck by sudden inspiration. “Asuna and I picked Tilnel's name back then, for Kizmel's sake. Since then, there was…”

After a long pause, while he debated whether to actually voice his thought, he cleared his throat. “This is… kinda personal. But… how does 'Black Cat’ sound, guys?”

His partner's eyes widened, and then she nodded in somber understanding. “I can think of no better name,” she said softly. “Philia, Rain?”

“Black Cat?” The treasure hunter's head tilted quizzically. “That sounds kinda familiar, actually. Didn't I hear about something with a name like that a few months back? Something about a… a guild…”

She trailed off, just as Rain nodded in realization. “I heard about it, too,” she said quietly. “Argo had quite a bit to say about it when I was buying info about clearers.” Giving the two senior clearers a sympathetic smile, the redhead nodded again. “Fine with me.”

“Yeah,” Philia agreed. “I think it's a good name.”

With all agreed, Kirito silently tapped the name into the blank field in the boat's menu, and clicked
confirm. Just faintly, he thought he could hear the sound of the letters being etched into the boat’s hull.

*I couldn't save you guys. Keita and Sachi lived, but even they didn’t come out of it like before. But I can at least make sure you aren't forgotten. Even if that's all I can do.*

Kirito let himself wade in that dark memory a few moments, then drew a deep breath and deliberately pushed it away again. Tetsuo, Ducker, and Sasamaru deserved to be remembered, but brooding wouldn't help them at this point. “Okay, then,” he said. “Rain, can you get us untied?”

“I'm on it,” the redhead said cheerfully, turning to slip the line free from the dock.

“Philia, if you'll set the sails…”

“Aye-aye, Cap’n!” Throwing a jaunty salute, Philia flipped up onto the main deck and made for the mast. “Sails coming up!”

*Cap'n? …Whatever.* He gripped the wheel in both hands and waited as sails unfurled, caught the wind, and stretched taut. As soon as the sailboat began to edge away from the dock, he gave the wheel an experimental turn to one side, then the other. He couldn't see the rudder, of course, but from the movement of the mast and the twitches of the bow, everything was in order.

“Time to get moving,” he said, giving the wheel a more confident spin to turn them away from the Shipyard. “Let's find that 'great ship of the Dread Pirate Robair’!”

Born of a people who favored stone fortresses and hidden cities, veteran of a long conflict with a people of the forests, Kizmel had little experience with bodies of water of any notable size. Indeed, outside of the rivers and small lakes of the Fourth Floor, she had never really been afloat at all, and there only for very short trips.

Aincrad’s Fifty-First Floor was thus quite the experience for her. Ten kilometers of sea from wall to Steel Castle wall, Kirito had remarked it was small compared to the vast waters of his home world, but to the elf it was huge. Even with the occasional attacks by Flying Barracuda, the new quest was one she was enjoying immensely.

Her partner guided *Black Cat* with rapidly-increasing skill, Philia kept a weather eye on the sails, and Rain and Kizmel herself kept to the flanks to guard against monster attacks from either side. Cutting through the mild waves, their destination was a place some two kilometers northeast of Torvan’s Shipyard; so far, the journey had been more pleasant than not—though there was reason to believe it wouldn't stay that way.

“If ye're set on finding the legacy of Robair, which I do not advise,” Torvan had told them after sealing the deal for the boat, “yer best bet is probably the Graveyard nor'east of here, 'bout a league. Ships've found their final rest there since before the Steel Castle flew, an' the last o' the old pirates were no different.” He'd taken a puff of his pipe then, and raised a finger in warning. “Do not venture past the edges by yer lonesomes, if ye value yer lives. Medrizzel lurks there now, and he'll send you to the bottom fer sure.”

From her position at the starboard rail, Kizmel could see that they were far from the only Swordmasters heading for the Graveyard. Within clear view were at least a dozen other boats, from small six-meter craft to a huge twenty-meter that bore the mark of the Divine Dragons. Even so, the old Dockmaster's warning was well-taken, if her suspicions were right.

*Medrizzel is almost certainly what we would call a Field Boss. Even with so many Swordmasters*
Suicide didn’t rate highly in Kizmel’s estimation just then. Curious records in a cave and an ominous message from a strange “NPC” aside, her interest in the Fifty-First Floor was rest and recovery, not desperate battle. Clearing was, for once, far from the forefront of her mind.

Though what is, I may need a plan for, as well. Perhaps a more blunt approach is the order of the day for that quest; subtle certainly doesn’t seem to be working well enough. How was it Argo put it, in that layered way of hers? Something like a “frontal assault”…?

Her idle planning of her own private battle seemed to go oddly well with the surroundings, even as the air around Black Cat began to turn misty. At length, though, her thoughts were interrupted by a shout from the mast. “I think I see something ahead, guys!” Philia called out. “Hard to say with this fog, but those sure look like shipwrecks to me!”

Pausing only to pith an airborne fish, Kizmel turned toward the bow to look. As the treasure hunter had said, shapes were beginning to emerge from the fog, and they did seem to resemble the hulls of ships. Canted at strange angles, they certainly weren’t other Swordmaster boats.

“I think you’re right, Philia.” Kirito eased the wheel to port, turning their course to a shallower approach. “Take in some sail, and see if you can get an idea of which wreck we should be looking at. I’d rather not have to check them all, if we can avoid it.”

“Aye, Cap'n!” Under Philia’s touch, Black Cat’s sails furled, leaving just enough cloth to keep them edging toward the Graveyard at a cautious pace. She left the mast then, making her way to the bow with Search glowing in her eyes.

Good idea, Kizmel thought, looking over the shapes that were coming into full view now. If we have to search them all, it will cost us precious daylight—and something about this place leaves me loath to linger long. Something tells me Medrizzel is not the only evil that lurks here.

There was something undeniably eerie about the shattered and half-sunken hulls they approached. Perhaps, she thought, it was that they still remained afloat despite the depths of the floor’s seas; perhaps it was the fog that surrounded the Graveyard, deep enough to obscure yet not so deep as to block sight of the islands dotting that sea.

Perhaps it was the knowledge that even Medrizzel remained out of sight, leaving the question of what else might be able to hide there.

At length, Philia turned to the rest of the party and lifted her hands, palm-up. “I'm seeing three that look to have decent treasure right on the fringes, and five more a bit deeper in. Can't narrow it down any more than that, sorry.”

“It's better than nothing.” With the treasure hunter's guidance, Kirito brought Black Cat in close to the nearest wreck. When they were within a meter or so, he had Philia take in the last sail, then drop anchor.

As soon as the chain connecting it to the boat snapped taut, the anchor having hit bottom, a notice appeared in Kizmel's vision declaring [Safe Area]. She felt herself relax just a bit at the sight; while she'd had no reason to doubt the revelation that the boats were charmed in such a way, certain aspects of the way the world worked for the Swordmasters were not yet second-nature for her, even after three months of being one herself. The direct confirmation that Black Cat would be a safe haven for them was a welcome one.
Once they were secure, the four of them moved to the rail to take a closer look. The wreck they'd chosen as their first target was mostly above water, but listing heavily to port; clearly at least some flooding had occurred. Just from a glance, footing appeared treacherous.

Philia reached out to carefully touch the bow of the battered ship. It might have just been Kizmel's imagination, but it seemed almost as if the wreck swayed just from the blonde's motion; from her frown, it wasn't lost on the treasure hunter, either. Slowly, gently, she leaned forward, putting some weight behind the contact.

The first motion might have been imagined; this one wasn't. It was slight, but the wreck noticeably yielded to Philia's pressure.

"Well… that doesn't look very safe." Kirito frowned at it. "I'm no expert, but I don't think it'd be a good idea for all of us to go over. Well, not that I'd be comfortable leaving our boat completely unattended either, but this is a bit worse than I expected. And if there's mobs aboard…"

"Then I'll go alone." Rain flashed a grin at the looks her unexpected declaration drew. "C'mon, guys, don't look at me like that! Think about it. It's too risky for all of us, and really, it'd be too cramped to have us all fighting aboard, if it came to it. I wouldn't bet on more than two of us without risking the wreck going all the way under, and honestly, it'd be easier to sneak around with just one."

"Then I would think I'd be the logical choice," Kizmel said, tapping the shoulder where her cloak would normally be clasped. "With the Cloak of Illusion—"

"Which would be risking the Heat DoT," the redhead pointed out patiently. "And it might get caught on broken bits of hull or something. I don't need any extra gear to sneak around some average mobs."

Kirito eyed her in a way that made Kizmel briefly but intensely irritated, before his words made it clear what he was actually thinking. "You'd need a pretty high Hiding skill to slip by mobs this high up, even if this is a breather level," he said. "Most clearers tend to focus more on Searching, anyway, and mine's—"

"My Hiding is up over seven hundred," Rain interrupted, and smiled at the expressions the statement provoked. "Not everybody plays the same way, Kirito. You'd be surprised what a good ambush can do, especially when you're a solo."

A flash of a snowy field crossed Kizmel's mind's eye, and she nodded in sudden understanding. She had, in fact, known one Swordmaster who used stealth to great advantage, even if in a different way from what Rain was suggesting.

Though I do wonder how she trained her skill so high in the year the Swordmasters have been here. Even Kirito hasn't gotten more than his most direct combat skills so high. Not that she intended to pry. One thing she'd learned very well about the Swordmasters was that they kept their skills jealously hidden for a variety of good reasons, some of them more personal than others.

"…Well," Kirito said, recovering from his surprise. "I guess I can't argue with that… Be careful, though, okay? If you see anything you can't handle—"

"Run away, and use a teleport crystal if I have to. I know, Kirito." Rain rolled her eyes, though her smile remained. "I may be new to clearing, but I've been soloing close to the frontlines for quite a while now." She planted a foot on the railing. "I'll be back soon, guys."

With a quick wave, she vaulted up and over, landing lightly on the wreck's swaying deck.
For possibly the first time since Kayaba's terrifying announcement, Rain really felt like she was playing a game again. The swaying deck of a shipwreck shrouded in fog, creepy as it was, looked right out of a more ordinary game, one without the penalty of real death.

Not that she was intending to take chances. The deck was slippery under Rain's boots as she headed aft, and the fog was deep enough she couldn't quite see the boat's stern. She had no idea what might've been lurking there, so she walked slowly, sword in hand, counting on her Hiding to keep any mobs from finding her before she found them.

_Slow and quiet, that's the way. Of course, that won't do me much good if there's something here that can smell me, but I don't think that's too likely._

Rain had relied on Hiding enough in her time as a solo to have an idea of what mobs it did and didn’t work against. A lot of beast-type enemies ignored it completely; humanoids weren't usually so good. Astrals—which seemed the most likely enemy type for a not-quite-sunk shipwreck—were more of a mixed bag. Some of them seemed to have a “sixth sense”, others didn’t.

Skulking through the fog toward a structure just barely visible at the stern, Rain was betting on human-like Astrals. If she was careful, she could walk right past those without them being the wiser. The ghosts of sailors were liable to be limited to the senses they had in life, if her experience with Spectral Knights back on the Twentieth Floor was any indication.

_Just a quick stealth mission_, she thought, nearing the ship's sterncastle. _No big deal… even if it is really spooky here. I wish it weren't so foggy._ Glancing furtively one way, then the other, and finally back the way she came, she cautiously started up the steps to the sterncastle's upper deck.

_Kind of wish I knew exactly what I was looking for, too. A treasure map, maybe? A compass that points to what you want most? Was some kind of hint really so much to ask?_

A quick check of the deck revealed exactly nothing of any apparent use. The only things Rain found at all were a couple of cutlasses left to rust on the deck, a ship's wheel with pieces missing, and one rotting tricorne hat. Well, also one hole in the deck, leading down inside.

With nothing of any interest up on deck—not that she'd really expected otherwise—Rain knew the next step was to go below. That hole, though, wasn't going to be her entry of choice. She couldn't see very far down it, so she had no idea if there were any mobs right below.

Or holes leading even farther down. Or sharp objects. Environment hazards in a place like this could be nasty.

Instead, like any sensible solo, Rain retreated down to the main deck, found the ordinary hatch leading into the sterncastle, and very slowly and carefully pulled it open. _Okay, ghosts. If you're here, sorry to rain on your parade, I'm just passing through…_

It was almost disappointing to find no mobs, ghostly or otherwise, waiting for her inside. Just a table with a few scattered papers, the remains of a chair, and a hatch leading farther down into the ship.

It took her a moment to realize why her hair was standing on end; she could see. There were lit lanterns in the room, lending just enough light to show her that table and chair. _Either regular concessions to gameplay, or else… there's someone else in here._

_Or something._

Suddenly feeling like she was being watched, Rain made a very quick check of the papers. As she'd unfortunately expected, though, none of them seemed important to the quest; just supply records, as
far as she could tell. Whatever it was that made the ship register to Philia's Search, it was clearly
deep in.

_Yay, me. Why did I volunteer for this again?_

Taking a deep breath, Rain went for the other hatch, opened it, and eased down the steep steps to the
deck below. The corridor she found herself in then was also gently lit, adding to the chill that had
taken up residence in her spine. So far she hadn't seen _anything_ moving yet, but if anything that just
made it worse.

Whatever damage had wrecked the ship in the first place was more evident down there than it had
been up top. The deck was buckled in some places, and there were holes in the bulkheads. On the
one hand, that looked to make her search a little easier. On the other, it made her nervous about what
might be lower down. The ship wasn't _that_ big; the waterline had to have been just below.

_This isn't an instanced map_, Rain reminded herself, heading back forward across the tilted, battered
deck. _It's not just going to sink on me. So long as I don't fall through any holes in the keel or
something, I should be—_

Nearing the first hatch along the corridor, she glanced into one of the holes in the bulkhead and
immediately had to clap a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream. A blue figure stood in the
compartment beyond, shimmering and translucent—and with truly evil timing, it was turning to look
back through the hole at her.

Rain froze, standing perfectly still, suddenly thankful her avatar didn't actually need to breathe. That
utter immobility, combined with the relatively dim lighting of the ship's interior, had her Hiding
percentage at a solid eighty. The ghost's direct stare lowered it a couple points, but if she was
lucky…

The ghostly sailor might or might not have heard her approach. If he had, he apparently couldn't
quite see her, and after a long moment he turned away again, returning to whatever business it was a
ghost had in a wrecked ship.

Letting out a very slow, _very_ quiet sigh, Rain stepped past the hole, and very deliberately passed on
opening the hatch. It was entirely possible that whatever she was looking for was in that
compartment; maybe even likely, given the ghost's presence. She _still_ wasn't going to chance it
unless she absolutely had to.

The next compartment she came to had no convenient hole to give her a peek. It also, thankfully, had
no ghost when she nervously opened its hatch. It was a cabin that looked like it had been lived in at
one time, but there was no one living or dead in it now.

_No quest item, either_, she thought glumly after a quick search. _Knew it wouldn't be this easy._

Back to the corridor, then.

The next compartment also had no damage to the bulkheads, but its hatch was open—luckily for
Rain, who otherwise would've opened it to find herself face to face with another ghost, who _would_
have noticed her. With a barely stifled _eep_, she scurried past.

Two more compartments were empty of ghost and loot alike, leaving her with just a narrow space
just under the bow. _This better be it_, she thought, easing open the hatch. _Or else I need to check…
whatever the heck the space under this is called. Or I will have to risk the—_

Startled, ghostly eyes met her own, and Rain stumbled back, scream held back only by shock as she
raised her sword—

“Wait!” the shimmering figure hissed. “I mean you no harm!”

She almost dropped her sword in surprise. But the ghost raised both hands, showing he carried no weapons; on closer inspection, she realized he was much younger than the ghosts she’d seen before. Just a boy, younger than her or her friends, if she was any judge.

Slowly, Rain lowered her sword, and the ghostly boy smiled. “Come,” he whispered. “If you're among the living, I can guess why you're here. Believe me, you don't want to get the attention of the sailors. We've all been dead eons, and they still don't understand…”

Nervously, she followed the boy into the tiny cabin. “You're not with them?” she asked, when the hatch closed behind them. She hoped it was the right question; most NPCs, she knew well, didn't have nearly Kizmel's responsiveness.

“I was,” he said bitterly, sitting roughly on a tiny bunk. “Well, I was just the cabin boy, but sure, I was one of the Dread Pirate's men. Back when the 'Dread Pirate' thing was just a legend to get merchants to give up without a fight.” He shook his head. “Then the ships got taken up into the sky with the sea, and 'Admiral' Robair got that key. Things went right down from then on.”

“Hyrus' Forge?” Rain prodded carefully.

“Aye, that's the place. Or so the sailors said.” The ghost of the cabin boy snorted, rapping a hand on the bunk. “Not that it mattered a damn, but when Medrizzel and his bastard rider joined up, Robair got dragon sickness right quick, and the rest of the group got it right along with him. 'Course if Robair had had a brain, he'd have known just a key wouldn't open those locks. Not sure what he did when he finally figured it out; haven't seen Kobayashi since, and when Robair took off with Vidal, Medrizzel went mad and killed us all.”

She winced. Of course, this was only flavor text, but the story was being told by what looked like a twelve-year-old, and if his words and actions were more obviously scripted than anything out of Kizmel, they were scripted well. After a year of getting used to Aincrad's constructed world, Rain could feel the boy's bitterness at his early, pointless death.

It's just part of the game, she reminded herself. Remember why you're here. “So, you don't know where he took the key?”

“Didn't say that. Said Robair vanished—but I've got an idea where.” The boy smiled; a wistful look, Rain thought, with just a hint of a vindictive edge. “There's a place on the northern edge of this tiny sea that the fleet used to hide, called Haze Point. Fog like this damned graveyard, only worse. Takes a special compass to find your way once you're in—and it so happens I nicked my cap'n's, when Medrizzel started killing us.”

The ghost reached under the bunk, withdrew a compass dangling from a string, and held it out to her. Hesitantly, she took it, flinching only slightly at the chill when her fingers brushed his. “You're sure about this?” she asked, despite knowing he couldn't really care.

“Robair got us all killed, M'lady. Bastard's long dead himself, I'm sure, but late revenge is better than none.” He leaned back on the bunk, smiling that wistful smile. “'Sides, when you've finished the business on Kobayashi, maybe you'll be able to do something about Medrizzel. Kill that damned sea serpent, and the rest of us might just be able to move on to the sea beyond, and finally leave this bloody wreck behind…”
Black Cat was just big enough for Kirito to pace, if he was careful not to go too far to either side. Pace he did, to the apparent amusement of Philia and under the oddly interested gaze of Kizmel, as he waited for Rain's return. Intellectually, he knew that she wasn't likely to be in too much danger, given the difficulty so far known of the Fifty-First Floor; “so far known”, though, didn't include the Ship Graveyard.

*It doesn't include one of us going solo, either. If she found something over there that could see through her Hiding, none of us are close enough to help.*

“You are going to wear a hole in the deck soon, my friend,” Kizmel remarked, as Kirito neared Black Cat's stern again. “Relax. We all know Rain is quite able to handle herself in a fight, and barring an anti-crystal trap she can run from anything she can't fight.”

True enough. Anyone who'd survived the battle with Vemacitrin was more or less confirmed to be one of the top players in Aincrad—and Kirito had seen Rain contribute more than her share of DPS toward the end. *And anyone with a Hiding skill as high as hers knows how to sneak around. I still can't help worrying…*  

At the very stern of Black Cat, just before he could turn and start pacing back toward the bow again, Kizmel caught his shoulder. “Honestly, Kirito, calm down,” she said, favoring him with a look of fond exasperation. “There is caution, and there's paranoia. So far we still haven't seen anything to contradict the idea that this is a 'breather level', as you and Argo put it.”

“So far,” he pointed out, trying not to let his eyes stray too low now that she was standing so close to him. “We've thought everything was just fine a few times before when it really, really wasn't.”

“Under conditions wherein we were suspicious, but allowed logic to overrule our instincts.” She rolled her eyes; a very human gesture, though not that surprising anymore. “Going by the premise that this Castle was created as a 'game', our experiences in general and this floor so far specifically suggest this is no more hazardous than it appears.”

Logic, instinct, and experience. Rationally, Kirito could find no flaw in her assertion. Memories of how badly things had gone wrong when he'd been complacent in the past, though, weren't put to rest by a mere overwhelming argument.

Kizmel seemed to see that in his eyes, and she let out a sigh. Her lips curled in a small smile, though, eyes narrowing in a way that made him vaguely nervous. “Rain will surely be all right, Kirito. In the meantime, if this place is indeed meant as a respite for Swordmasters after the difficult battle to reach this floor, perhaps you should focus on what is before you, rather than worrying unnecessarily.”

Maybe it was unintentional, the way she shifted on her feet. Maybe it was just the natural motion of the boat, even anchored. Or maybe, with the way she'd been behaving in recent weeks, it really was entirely deliberate. Regardless, even as she spoke that last sentence, Kizmel's weight shifted, instantly drawing his attention to the sway of her chest.

Intentional or not, she clearly noticed the direction of his gaze, and that Argo-like smile widened just a hair.

Kirito told himself afterward he was just getting back at her for the teasing—or that he was just trying to be contrary, not being in the mood to be calmed down. With everything involved, he was absolutely not prepared to admit there was anything deep to his next action at all.

Hesitating only long enough to be sure Philia's attention had turned to the shipwreck, he abruptly leaned forward and lightly bit at one of the elf girl's long, pointed ears.
He was expecting a yelp, a glare, very possibly even a slap; any of those would've been preferable to things continuing the way they were. In hindsight, though, it was incredibly stupid of him to think it would have quite that effect. Whatever he'd expected, it wasn't what he got.

When Kirito's teeth closed on the tip of her ear, Kizmel gasped, jerked, and stumbled forward a step—as close as they already were, more than enough for her to end up leaning against him, pressing her chest against his in ways that did anything but take his mind off her teasing.

He froze in place, arms stiff at his sides, utterly lacking in any idea of what to do next. Kizmel had teased him many times in the year they'd known each other, and he'd hardly had any idea how to handle that; only now, too late, did it occur to him that trying to turn the tables on her might be even farther outside his ability to cope.

Kirito did think, belatedly, to take hold of her arms to make sure she didn't fall to the deck—or overboard—but if anything that just made his mind freeze up more completely.

After long, awkward moments, not helped by the feel of the elf's breath—and other things—on his body, Kizmel pushed herself unsteadily upright. “…Kirito-kun,” she murmured, looking down and away as a flush became visible even on her dusky skin. “I do not know what it might mean among humans, but I should perhaps warn you that particular act is a rather more… intimate one, among my people.”

…Ulp. Swallowing hard, it was Kirito's turn to look away. “Um. S-sorry about that,” he got out.

“You needn't apologize, Kirito-kun.” She lifted her head enough to look at him sidelong, through half-lidded eyes. “Just be prepared for the… consequences… if you should choose to do it again.”

“Consequences. Got it.” He nodded hastily, turning his own head away now. “Do it again, and I get hurt.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw a small smile—one he'd not quite seen from her before, though he thought he'd seen similar one night not so long before—curl Kizmel's lips. “Mm… no,” she whispered, almost too low to hear. “I don't believe pain is quite what you should be 'afraid' of, Kirito-kun…”

…Urk!

Kirito was saved from having to confront the implications of that statement by a sudden shout. “Rain's aggroed something!”

He snapped his head around to look at Philia. The treasure hunter had moved from the mast to the bow, and her earlier amusement was gone, her eyes fixed on something up and to her left. For a second, he didn't understand—then, realizing, he turned his own gaze to the HP bars in his HUD.

Three of them were still full. The fourth had taken a hit, some three percent of it ground away. As he watched, another tiny slice vanished.

He whipped around toward the wreck again. “We've got to help her—!”

“Whoops!”

That shout was his only warning before Rain came sailing over the wreck's rail, landing in a tumble on Black Cat's deck. With an “Oof!” she rolled across and came to an abrupt halt against the port rail.
Kizmel was by her side in an instant. “Rain! Are you all right? We saw that you were taking injury; we were just about to go over and help—”

Pushing herself to a sitting position against the railing, Rain waved off the concern. “I’m okay, really,” she said, smiling sheepishly. “Getting the key item from the cabin boy’s ghost just aggroed the other ghosts is all, and I was a little slow dodging a couple of them. It wasn’t a big deal.”

Kirito let out a slow breath, the spike of adrenaline already beginning to reluctantly drain away. “You scared us there. I knew at least one more of us should’ve gone over. If you’d been a little slower…” He glanced over at the wreck, and shivered at the sight of a few translucent blue figures standing on the deck, glaring at his party.

Good thing an anchored boat counts as a Safe Zone. …Good thing Asuna isn't over here, either. But then, the KoB's gotta be doing something with the Graveyard, too… Bet she's doing some delegating right now.

Rain saw where he was looking and turned to stick her tongue out at the thwarted ghosts. “Honestly, Kirito, it would've been worse if it hadn't just been me. I had to sneak past them on the way in; if I'd had company, they would've aggroed earlier. As it is, the corridor was so narrow we'd have tripped over each other trying to get out when they did turn hostile.”

“She has a point, Kirito,” Kizmel said, helping Rain back to her feet. “Certainly we've seen our share of tight spaces where, as your people might say, three is a crowd.”

“Been there,” Philia agreed fervently. “There was this one place back on the Thirtieth… But enough about that. What'd you say about a key item, Rain?”

Kirito had almost missed that, rattled as he was. Now, though, Rain had his full attention as she materialized an object from her inventory. “A special compass,” she said, holding it up by its string. “According to the cabin boy, the Dread Pirate Robair's flagship is probably in a dense fog way at the northern edge of the floor. Once inside, this is supposed to lead us to the buoy the pirates anchored at.”

Dense fog... probably an instance map, then. Which means it could be trickier than this place. He kept that thought to himself, though. Instances were one concept he never had figured out how to explain to Kizmel, so he tried to avoid bringing them up in her presence at all. So far that had worked out well enough; the conditions possible in such maps were exactly how she believed her entire world worked, anyway.

“Well, at least we know where we're going next,” he said aloud, taking the compass when Rain offered it to him. “The northern edge, huh… Probably take about two hours to get there, maybe three if the mobs slow us down too much.” He glanced at his time display, noting that it had been about an hour since they entered the Ship Graveyard. “We should get there around eight or nine, I think.”

“Hang on a sec,” Philia said, raising a hand to stop him when he moved back to the wheel. “There were three wrecks on the edge of the Graveyard that looked important when we got here, right? I know we already got the item we needed, but what's on the other two?”

“Treasure, from what the cabin boy told me,” Rain said, glancing back at the shipwreck; the ghosts had apparently realized they weren't going to catch her, and were just now vanishing back into the fog. “Robair took the best stuff with him to Haze Point, but there should be some goodies here.”

Philia instantly perked up at that, and shot a look at Kirito that reminded him of a puppy begging for treats.
That, he was somewhat able to resist. Rain's mischievous smile was a bit trickier, reminding him somewhat of Argo in one of her milder trolling moods. Kizmel turning to face him directly, casually crossing her arms beneath her chest, lifting one eyebrow, and adding her own mysterious smile to the mix was something else entirely. "We're not exactly in a hurry for once, Kirito," she said. "And we could certainly use the funds, after what we spent on the boat…"

Kirito turned partly away, hoping his blush wasn't as obvious as he suspected. *If we do take the time, it'll definitely be dark by the time we find that ship. Of course, we've all probably got good enough Searching to see… and there might actually be some things there that don't even show up during the day. And it's not like we need to get back to town before we turn in for once…*

*Not to mention it'll get my mind off what happened earlier…*

"Okay," he said finally. "I guess we can detour and check things out. Just those two ships, though," he added, trying to turn a stern look on the girls. "With a Field Boss around, I don't want to risk being around here too late."

"Awesome!" Philia pumped a fist in the air, and dashed back to the mast. "Ready to set sail when you give the word, Cap'n!"

Shaking his head, Kirito returned to the wheel. *You'd think I'd be used to this kind of thing by now. Asuna wasn't so different when we were going through the Elf War quest together. These girls, though... And why the heck does everybody always stick me with the leadership spot? "Cap'n", of all the...*

Taking the wheel in hand, noticing as he did that Kizmel had moved to stand by his right shoulder, he nodded at Philia. "Quarter-sail," he said. "Let's get to the next wreck—before the DDA does."

At that last comment, it wasn't just Philia who called out, "Aye, Cap'n!"

Treasure hunting purely for fun, Kizmel found, actually had a certain charm to it. Scavenging shipwrecks for ordinary spoils rather than the keys to progressing in their mission was one of the most relaxing things she'd ever experienced; a welcome diversion, after the previous day's battle.

Though of course, the treasure Kizmel was most interested in would hardly be found in a pirate's hold—even if the search gave her no few opportunities to pursue her true target.

*Perhaps fortunate Asuna isn't with us now, though,* she mused, when they finally left the Graveyard behind and set sail for the north. *She always did have difficulty facing the spirits of the dead. Not that she had had no qualms herself, crossing blades with long-fallen pirates. The elf girl could only hope that their second death had freed them to move on.*

Now that the wrecks within reach had been plundered, and even Philia's appetite for treasure sated for the time being, their course was set for Haze Point, where their real objective lay.

Night had fallen by the time they were more than a couple of leagues northward, and before long they were out of sight of other Swordmaster boats. Others, Kizmel surmised, were either settling in for the night, or not ready to venture so far out. As usual, she and her partner were moving at their own pace, apart from the clearing group as a whole.

She didn't really mind. There was, she'd decided long before, something comfortable about their solitary path. Sailing the Fifty-First Floor's sea by themselves—or almost; and she found she didn't begrudge Rain and Philia's company—only emphasized that, somehow.
By eight in the evening, *Black Cat* had crossed the center of the floor-wide sea, skirting the eastern coast of what their maps named Onzenna Island. The Banesharks and Flying Barracuda that infested the waters close to the floor's entrance had given way to wilder, stranger creatures; Kizmel had her first encounter with the bizarre foe known as the Black-Tailed Sharkgull a bit northwest of Onzenna.

Despite its remains falling right by Kirito's feet, its sharp teeth nearly catching him before it shattered, her partner's only comment was, “Any chance that left something edible?”

Strips of meat had, in fact, appeared in Kizmel's inventory in the wake of the beast's demise. She wasn't sure she was willing to admit as much. As much as she enjoyed sampling human cuisine, she didn't share Kirito's apparent willingness to eat anything that could be cooked over a fire.

At one point in the journey, as Kirito and Philia focused their attention on navigating some unexpected shoals and Rain kept mob watch at the bow, Kizmel took the chance to surreptitiously open her menu. Typing as quickly as she could—months on, she still found Mystic Scribing new and strange—she wrote, [*Argo. Have you learned anything about this floor that might be useful for more… personal matters?*]

She appended a suitable amount of Cor, of course. Argo might have been willing to accept a “favor” instead, given the question, but giving the Rat *that* kind of material was not something even she was sanguine about.

A reply came soon enough. [*Try Onzenna Island, Kii-chan. I think you'll find the… facilities… there just right for what ya got in mind.*] Moments later, a follow-up appeared. [*Oh, and have fun, Kii-chan!*]

*Oh, I intend to, Argo—but I have no intention of telling you how much…*

It was close to ten when Kizmel noticed fog starting to close in around *Black Cat*. It was more abrupt than what they'd encountered on the fringes of the Ship Graveyard, and grew deeper much more quickly. “I think we're on the right track, guys!” Rain called from where she crouched at the bow. “The cabin boy said it comes up kinda suddenly!”

“Looks like it,” Kirito agreed, tightening his hold on the wheel. “I hope there aren't any rocks or shoals in here… Philia, cut us back to half-sail—and is that compass telling you anything yet?”

Cloth rolled up on *Black Cat*'s mast under Philia's command, leaving the treasure hunter free to check the arcane device. “Yep,” she said after a moment. “Still kinda vague, but that's not north it's pointing. Um… bring us starboard a couple degrees.”

“Got it.” Turning the wheel just a fraction, Kirito swung his gaze across their course, taking in the deepening mist. “Keep a close eye out, everybody. I don't want to find out the hard way that there's something to run into around here.”

Kizmel agreed wholeheartedly. While this floor's denizens weren't nearly as threatening as those of the floor below, she still didn't care for the idea of swimming clear back to the nearest land. Especially since the fog had finally closed in on them completely, leaving only the pirates' compass to guide their way.

It was another fifteen minutes, she estimated, with Philia calling out occasional course corrections, when it appeared. Looming out of the fog, the hull of a ship far larger than *Black Cat*, a great wall of wood clearly meant for seas larger than any contained by Aincrad.

Kirito saw it at the same time she did, and quickly spun the wheel to bring *Black Cat*'s bow in a hard
turn to starboard. “Take in the sails, Philia!” he called out. “Rain, drop anchor! I think we're here.”

Here, his inexperience with boats did show through, as *Black Cat* bumped gently against the larger ship's hull before he got her fully under control. Even so, it was only a light blow, and the anchor drew the sailboat to a firm halt right where they needed.

“*Kobayashi*,” Kizmel sounded out carefully, reading the letters on the larger ship's flank that Kirito had once identified to her as “Roman”. There was also an odd circle marking next to the name, in a styling different enough she wasn't sure if it was supposed to be part of the name, or some symbol of the pirates. “That was the name the cabin boy's ghost mentioned, wasn't it?”

“That's the one,” Rain said softly, standing from her crouch to look up at the ship. “Wow… That note in the cave wasn't kidding when it said 'great ship’.”

“I'll say.” Kirito stepped away from the wheel, trying to get a better look. “That's gotta be… what, thirty meters long? She sure wasn't built for where she is now. *Kobayashi* would be overkill for the biggest boats Torvan makes. Not to mention…”

When he trailed off, Kizmel turned a puzzled look in his direction, then followed his gaze up *Kobayashi*'s hull. Her partner seemed to be staring at a long row of strange openings in the ship's side, from which gaped the mouths of what looked for all the world like very narrow barrels.

After a long moment of trying in vain to reconcile them with anything she knew, she gaze up and raised a questioning eyebrow. “Do you have any idea what those are, Kirito?”

“…Yeah,” he said quietly, breaking his stare to look at her. “It doesn't really matter here, but I'm pretty sure those are cannons. They use black powder to fire iron balls at high speed—not something we need to worry about here. If arrows don't work in Aincrad, I can't imagine cannons would, either.”

From his tone, Kizmel suspected that was fortunate. She didn't know what a “cannon” was, but she remembered a reference he'd once made to black powder bombs. Her imagination was more than up to supposing what such a weapon would do to a person, even one with the strength of a Swordmaster.

“Forget the cannons, Kirito. We're looking for a key, remember? And first we need to find a way up to the deck—and that, I think we've got.”

They both turned to look at Philia, who—typical of the treasure hunter—had spent the time they were mulling things over examining *Kobayashi*. Now the blonde had a hand on the lowest rung of a ladder, set directly in the hull and leading clear up to the deck.

“Right,” Kirito said, scratching his head sheepishly. “It's getting late, so let's get to work. Hm… I hate to say it, but with the size of this thing, we'd probably better split up. There shouldn't be anything aboard two of us can't handle.”

“One with Searching, one with Hiding?” Rain suggested, moving to join Philia by the ladder. “That way if there's ghosts, one of us can find the treasure, the other can slip through and get it. It's late enough that Kizmel's cloak shouldn't have too much of a Heat penalty, either.”

“Agreed. In that case, the teams should be—”

“I'll go with Philia,” Kizmel broke in on impulse.

They both looked at her in surprise. “I don't mind,” Philia said, tilting her head. “But I kinda thought
you'd rather go with Kirito, Kizmel.”

The elf girl smiled, a look she wasn't surprised to see Kirito flinch from. “I find myself needing—how would Argo put it? Ah, of course—'girl talk'. If that's all right with everyone.”

Kirito had faced down many a boss fight with little concern. Outside of the quarter-mark bosses, it had probably been about twenty floors since he'd been personally very afraid during one; his excessive level-grinding, if nothing else, had given him a relatively comfortable safety margin. Not to mention his partnership with a certain elf.

Said partner saying the words “girl talk”? That was more than enough to get him to instantly agree to Kizmel's team suggestion. That she invoked Argo's name at the same time only underscored it.

Especially after his attempt at turning the tables earlier had backfired so spectacularly.

Not that Rain wasn't distracting in her own way, as the two of them descended into Kobayashi's interior through a hatch near the bow. She seemed more self-conscious about her brief swimwear than Kizmel ever did, but she wasn't being anywhere near as shy about it as he might've preferred, nor as matter-of-fact as Philia had been since her initial teasing.

Still safer, he told himself, walking cautiously down a corridor on the first level below the deck, sword in hand. After what happened at the Yule Festival, there is no way being around girl talk could possibly end well for me. Not with… everything.

“Say, Kirito?” Rain asked softly. “That fog… this is an instanced map, right?”

Kirito glanced toward her, and told himself when he quickly looked away again that he needed to keep an eye out for mobs. After all, if there were hostile ghosts on the shipwreck, there were bound to be more on Robair's own flagship. It had nothing whatsoever to do with her having to walk close to him because of the cramped interior.

“Pretty sure,” he said, when he'd given the corridor ahead of them a very careful look. “The Graveyard, you can see far enough out that it's pretty obviously part of the regular floor map. The distance between the fog edge and the ship here, I'd be surprised if this wasn't a separate map.”

“Which means just about anything could happen here,” she said, sounding as if she was confirming it to herself as much as him. Just after speaking, she paused by one hatch, and motioned for him to stand on the other side of it.

He complied, settling into a ready stance as Rain slowly reached for the latch. “Probably just to allow for different quests to take place here,” he murmured. “Most people won't be doing the Hyrus quest, after all… I've never been in an instance that did anything really crazy.”

She might've nodded at that, but he kind of missed it when, as soon as the hatch opened a crack, a ghostly hand slammed it all the way open, almost flattening him against the bulkhead. The shimmering blue figure followed up with a neck-level Reaver, forcing Kirito to hastily parry.

Rain promptly ripped into the Pirate Ghost with a Sharp Nail's inverted triangle to the back, staggering him. That bought both of them time to pull back and get a tiny bit of breathing space—maybe the only thing that kept them from taking brutal damage when two more Ghosts rushed out of the compartment.

Kirito quickly found himself very glad once again that the Fifty-First Floor was clearly intended as a breather. It took a couple of Sword Skills each, and in the close quarters of the ship he and Rain both
took several hits along the way, but in just a couple of minutes the Pirate Ghosts were all shattering to pieces with dying cries of rage.

So much for stealth, he thought a moment later. Alerted by the noise, more Ghosts rushed out of the other compartments along the corridor, and suddenly he and his temporary partner were very busy.

“So even in the Elf War,” Rain called out in the middle of driving her sword into a ghost's face, “separate instances never meant much?”

“Nope,” Kirito confirmed, taking a minor hit to his left arm in exchange for an opening to slash his own current opponent with a Horizontal Arc to the neck. “Mind you, there were a lot of maps like that toward the end—I think because of Cardinal having to compensate for what Asuna and I did to the regular progression by saving Kizmel—but it was never anything but unique variations to keep us from bumping into other players at the same time.”

There was another pause in the conversation as they finished off their respective foes, and gained a few meters more down the corridor. Kirito was half-tempted to bring out the Baneblade and see if it had any bonuses against undead pirates—two evil qualities for the price of one—but there wasn't time. He was soon fending off another cutlass heading for his stomach, with no chance to open his menu even for a moment.

Good thing Asuna isn't here, he thought, bashing the Pirate Ghost away with the unsettling effect of it falling halfway through a bulkhead. Of course, she might've gone berserk and killed them all by now, but… I'd better send her a message to warn her.

Later, he amended to himself, taking the ghost's head off with an Uppercut. As soon as we're out of this dungeon.

“Speaking of the Elf War,” Rain went on, her tone becoming increasingly casual as they fought their way through more dead pirates, “since we're alone… Is Kizmel real? I mean, like us? I mean, I know what Argo's info said, but… how can an NPC…?”

“She's real,” Kirito said firmly, channeling out a spike of irrational irritation into a Suigetsu kick to another ghost's chin. It was a reasonable question, after all. “I can't tell you how it's possible—I know everything publicly revealed about SAO's code, and nothing in there was anything this groundbreaking—but she's definitely a Turing-class AI. I've known her for over a year now, and she's never fallen back on any kind of scripted 'default' dialogue, no matter how much slang or out-of-context terms players use.”

Kibaou had confused her more than once, of course—but Kibaou could be hard for players to understand. That Kansai dialect of his was pretty thick sometimes.

“So I'm not imagining things, then.” Even in the middle of combat, he could see Rain shake her head. “Wow. Kinda wish I could get her opinion… Um. If Kizmel really is a person… Can I ask you something, Kirito?”

“Well,” he grunted, taking shattering another ghost with a Snake Bite across the chest, “you've already asked me several things, but sure, go ahead.”

The redhead started to reply, then cut herself off with an annoyed grunt; she'd been crossing blades with a Pirate Ghost Bosun when she last spoke, and just as she finished him off with the traced figure-four of a Savage Fulcrum a second Bosun lunged through the first's shattering corpse.

Kirito had never been so rude as to ask Rain's level, but he was starting to wonder about it. After the
power-leveling he and Kizmel had done after meeting PoH, he was well above the “safety margin” for this floor; these ghosts were only remotely a threat to him because of numbers—and from how quickly Rain was taking the Bosuns apart, she wasn't in much danger, either.

*Her Hiding may be through the roof, but she's no ninja-build. She's good with that sword.*

Before he'd realized it, they were out of targets, with a clear path to the stairs leading down to the next deck. A quick glance at his map showed Philia and Kizmel in a similar position on the opposite side of the ship; judging from their HP bars, they'd also run into a little trouble, but apparently less than he and Rain had.

“All right,” Rain said now, leading the way down the stairs, “about Kizmel… You, um, do know she's flirting with you, right?”

The blunt question almost made Kirito trip and fall the rest of the way to the deck below. Catching himself with his free hand on the rail and his sword stuck through the gap between supports, he blurted out, “W-what?!”

Reaching the bottom with a lot more grace, she turned to give him an exasperated look over her shoulder. “Kirito, you've been watching her closely enough to be sure she's a Turing-class AI. You've made a name for yourself starting from the first boss by manipulating everybody else into thinking you're a mutual enemy without *quite* getting anybody to try to kill you.”

That made him blink. As far as he knew, only one person who didn't know him really well had ever figured that out. It wasn't the sort of thing he'd have expected even Argo to sell, either. She was one of the people he'd protected with the villain act, after all.

“So please,” Rain went on, “tell me you're not a stereotypical otaku who can't even read a girl when she's being *that* obvious. Because honestly, I'd have to call you either an idiot or a liar.”

Urk.

Well. It was true he'd noticed a change since Christmas—kind of hard not to, considering the stunt Argo had pulled with Mistletoe—and even if he hadn't been sure what it was, his partner's behavior since the Vemacitrin battle had kind of given him a few hints…

*No, Kirito told himself. Lie to others all you want. Get in the habit of lying to yourself in this world, and it'll kill you. You know perfectly well what Rain's talking about. Even if she's not human—no, especially because she isn't. The Dark Elves might be casually pragmatic about showing skin, but there's nothing casual about what Kizmel's been doing lately.*

“…Yeah,” he said finally, looking away in a probably vain attempt to hide his blush. “Yeah, I've… noticed something like that, Rain.”

The redhead's smile was one of a cat having caught a canary, leaving him to wonder uneasily if she'd made some kind of bet with Argo. “Good. I'd hate to be alone in a dungeon on the frontline with somebody *that* dumb.” She sobered. “So you know. And I've seen the way you look at her, even when Philia and I are right there too. It doesn't take women's intuition to tell you like what you see.”

Oddly, Kirito thought she looked just a bit wistful at that. She turned to face front again before he could decide for sure, though, and started a cautious prowl toward aft. He hurried to follow, on the lookout for any unexpected encounters with the undead.

“I know it's not really any of my business,” Rain continued after a brief pause. “But if you know Kizmel's interested, and you think she's hot stuff… why do you keep acting like a stereotypical otaku?”
He was very tempted to point out she'd said it herself: it was none of her business. That would've been an easy out, protecting him from having to go any deeper into a conversation he was already hideously uncomfortable with. But—

*But who else can I talk to about it? I never see Asuna anymore, Klein's just... no. And Argo?* Kirito shuddered. *Let's not even go there.*

“There's more to something like that than just looks,” he pointed out, trying to salvage at least something resembling dignity before he got to the real point. Rain's over-the-shoulder eye-roll told him pretty clearly what she thought of the effort. “But even if I were interested... Rain. Kizmel's real, but she's still an AI.”

He still didn't know that much about Rain yet, but he knew she was smart. As he expected, the exasperation faded from her expression, replaced with a very serious look. “She's part of SAO, you mean,” she said softly. “When the game's cleared...”

“We don't know exactly what will happen then, but yeah. No matter what does happen, we leave and go back to the real world—and she doesn't come with.” Not something Kirito liked to think about very much, but it was true. “We can put our minds in machines, but taking minds from machines...”

There was a long pause after that. Partly because he was gathering his thoughts, and partly because of checking the compartments along the new corridor for treasure—not to mention dealing with several more Pirate Ghost Bosuns, along with a Pirate Ghost Cannoneer wielding a small cannon like a heavy club.

They'd fought most of the way to the large hatch at the stern when Kirito brought himself to speak again. “There's more to it than that, though,” he said, voice barely above a whisper. “We know all that—and Kizmel *doesn't*. She doesn't know this world is going to end, and she has no idea what she really is. And after months of trying, I still can't think of a way to tell her that.”

Rain winced at that, and nodded slowly. She opened her mouth as if to say something, closed it, and frowned in obvious thought. She started to open it again—but if she actually had thought of something to say, Kirito never found out. It was at that moment that the stern hatch suddenly slammed open on its own, and a shimmering blue figure stomped out.

A tall man, dressed in armor that Kirito found vaguely familiar. In his hand was a saber of a style he found more than familiar: though not identical, it was plainly of similar make to Kizmel's old Corrupted Sword of the Order.

“*Hat*” the man said, brandishing his saber with a flourish. “*Intruders aboard Robair's precious flagship? And—that ring, boy.***” His eyes narrowed, a thin smile playing at his lips. “*Eons it's been, and finally someone shows up hewing to old alliances? If you've made a pact with the elves, boy, I can guess what you're here for.***”

Rain gulped audibly. “Um, Kirito... is this guy...?”

“Pretty sure.” Above the ghost's head was a lifebar with the name *[Vidal The Treasonous Dragon Rider]*, and Kirito had never been so grateful to see a traitor to a dead order show up in his life. It saved him from having to answer Rain’s *real* question—or face it himself—at least for now. “That's right,” he said to the ghost, lifting his sword in a ready stance. “The key you stole. We've come to take it back.”

“*Have you, now?***” Vidal's smile turned cruel. “*Well, now. I'd almost let you have it after all these...*
endless years. No use to me now, is it? But... if I were the kind to just hand it over, I'd not still be trapped here, would I? No, I'm afraid I've no interest in helping anyone bring that damned Order back, after all the trouble I went to."

"Then we'll just have to take it by force, won't we?" Rain said, brandishing her own blade.

"Ha! You've courage, girl—or a lack of wits. Well, they do say fortune favors the brave and foolish alike." Vidal lifted his saber in mocking salute. "Know this, young fools: even if you get what you're looking for from Hyrus' mouldering old fortress, you'll have to best my old friend Medrizzel if you hope to climb above this sea. And if you want the Key to the Zaro Cave Palace, well, I've only half. The 'Dread Pirate' has the other." The cruel smile turned to a grin. "You'd best hurry, by the way."

A time limit? Kirito thought, suddenly alarmed. "What do you mean?" he demanded harshly.

"Oh, I expect you'll find out. Robair's not the type to let others have what's his, even in death. He made ready long before we ever died to make sure he kept his treasures—and the whole ship knows you're here. I'd give it... oh, perhaps ten minutes before we're all in pieces with Kobayashi."

Pieces. And— "Kobayashi," Kirito whispered, turning a horrified look at Rain. Now, too late, he remembered where he'd heard that name long ago. Or part of it, anyway—

"A circle at the end of the name on the hull," she said slowly, eyes widening. "Maru."

"It's a trap!"

"Aye, so it is!" Vidal laughed. "Come, young fools—show me if you've the strength and wit to survive it!"

"So that's it." Kizmel shook her head, a bemused smile playing at her lips. "Up to now, I had been assuming it was simply that we were from different worlds, especially with what I've been told of how Swordmasters view Aincrad. Given how well he's taken to living here in recent months, though, I was beginning to wonder."

"Well, I can't say for sure," Philia said with a shrug, peering ahead to Search the darkness around them. "I dunno if even the Rat knows much about him IRL—back in our world, I mean. And, well, you know I only really met him last week. But from what I've seen, I'm pretty sure that's how it is."

The two of them had started their exploration of Kobayashi from the stern, and as far as Philia could tell had ended up on the opposite flank of the ship from Kirito and Rain when they went belowdecks. A dozen or so battles with Pirate Ghosts later, and they were down in what Philia thought was the cargo hold, where all the best treasure was sure to be.

So far, she'd seen a bunch of crates and chests, but nothing that looked especially valuable. She was sure she'd find something if she kept looking, though; no way would this quest have just key items in it.

Along the way, Philia cheerfully indulged Kizmel in “girl talk”, more so when she heard what the NPC—if she could really be called that—really wanted advice on.

Talking about boy trouble was probably the most normal thing Philia had done since getting caught up in Kayaba's trap. It made her more than a little homesick—but in a good way, she thought.

Sorry, Rain, she mused to her absent friend. Think you might be out of luck on this one.

“So absurdly simple,” Kizmel murmured, sniffing at the cargo hold's musty air. “In short, no matter
the race, men are idiots?”

Philia broke into a genuine grin at that. “Yep!” she agreed heartily. “That’s about right. Trust me, even if Kirito does have a clue—and let’s be honest, he’s not the dumbest guy ever—he’s still going to be clueless about how to handle it.”

“Then I suppose I’ll simply have to take matters into my own hands. Now that I understand the problem…” The elf girl trailed off, sniffing again. “Philia? Do you smell sulfur?”

“Sulfur?” The treasure hunter blinked. Pausing mid-step—she’d just spotted a chest that glowed a promising silver to her Searching—she took a deep breath of the air herself. She promptly started coughing at the harsh smell, and wondered how she’d missed it before. “What the…? Why is there…?”

Suddenly feeling just a bit anxious, Philia resumed her walk to the chest. As she went, she took a closer look at the seemingly unimportant crates around it, noticing uneasily that some of them were open. When she got to her target, she opened it slowly and carefully, in case something in it was going to leap out and try to bite her.

She’d never been so relieved to see a chestful of jewels and gold coins in her life. Nothing in there but a small fortune, enough to hopefully fund upgrading her increasingly-outdated Swordbreaker.

That out of the way, though, Philia turned her attention fully to the bigger crates. Gripping the edge of one of the open ones, she pushed herself up to look. “Iron balls?” she said, frowning as an icy sensation crept up her back. “Wait. Those are…”

“Saltpeter,” Kizmel said suddenly. “Sulfur, saltpeter, and something I don't quite recognize. Philia?”

Philia swallowed, pushed back from the crate, and hurried back to her erstwhile partner. “Black powder,” she said. “This isn't just the cargo hold, this is a— I think it's called a magazine. Cannons might not work right in Aincrad, but things still burn.”

She didn't need to explain further. With another of those un-NPC-like moments of understanding even she was beginning to take for granted, Kizmel nodded and turned to face the still-dark expanse ahead of them. “Which explains why this part of the ship has no candles. We'd best hurry, then, and return to the others as soon as we have what we came here for.”

“Yep. Hurrying sounds like a plan.”

For once, Philia was actually frustrated by the need to check every chest they came across. Few actually contained any loot, compared to the crates of cannonballs and other ship resources, and most of them had nothing more than vendor trash, but they needed to know.

_I hope Kirito and Rain are having better luck. You'd think the cargo hold would be where they'd keep this kind of thing… Oh. But if the key is so important, then the head honcho himself might want to have it someplace safer, which probably wouldn't be— eep. Careful, guys, you might be walking into a trap up there!_

_Though I'm starting to think this whole ship is…_

They’d almost made it clear to the far end of the hold, having found nothing more than trash, some potions, and a couple of chests of genuine valuables, when a sound other than their own footsteps and hushed voices rang out. A kind of _shing_—a sound no player in _Sword Art Online_ was likely to mistake.
The sound of a sword being drawn was followed by a low chuckle. “At long last... Plunderers come to steal what's mine, eh? Ye've kept me waitin' far too long. Don't you know, the Dread Pirate Robair can't go out like any ol' corsair?”

Light flared, almost blinding: blue light, from a ghostly figure who radiated enough to make up for the lack of lanterns. Tall, wearing fancy clothes straight out of a pirate movie, topped off with an ornate tricorne hat, long coat, and heavy cutlass.

Above his head, an HP bar with a red cursor, and the name [The Dread Pirate Robair].

“Aye, this is what I've been waitin' for,” Robair said, stomping away from the gilded chest he'd been guarding. “Let me guess: ye're after the key that bastard Vidal took from his old mates, right?”

“And if we are?” Kizmel's voice was steady as she drew her saber, a fact Philia was grateful for just then. “I don't suppose you would be willing to hand it over without a fight?”

Robair laughed. “Oh, I admire yer guts, Lady of the Elves. More than many of yer kind I've known. But I think you know the answer to that. Even if I did, Vidal's not as friendly as I—and the Dread Pirate Robair will not end his time in this world with pretty words.” He grinned, and reached into his coat with his free hand. “Nay, if you want my treasures, lassies, ye'll have to take it with your own hands—and right quick, too.”

The way the night was going, Philia wasn’t even surprised when Robair pulled out a match, struck it against his sword, and casually tossed it at one of the barrels of gunpowder. The barrel caught fire immediately—and while it didn't go right up in a blast, she knew it was only a matter of time.

“Kizmel—”

“Yes. I see.” Kizmel's eyes narrowed, and she pointed the tip of her saber at Robair's throat. “Very well, 'Dread Pirate'. If it's a spectacular end you seek, we will be happy to oblige.”

“You said separate instances never had anything crazy happen in them!” Rain gasped out, not even slowing in her mad dash as she knocked a Pirate Ghost's sword aside with her own, taking his arm with it. Finishing it off was the furthest thing from her mind. Making it back to the other end of the corridor was the only thing that mattered.

“They didn't!” Kirito protested, slowing very slightly to kick a hatch back in the face of the ghost opening it. “How was I supposed to know this one would be different?!”

She wanted to snap back at him, she really did. She was absolutely sure the right comeback would come to her eventually—probably at about three in the morning, when the moment was long past. In the meantime, all she could muster was an inarticulate growl.

Not like there was time to think just then, anyway. Not when the corridor behind them was on fire, and the flames were racing to catch up.

*He just had to throw his sword at that lantern when we killed him,* Rain thought, swinging her slender sword through the neck of a ghost unlucky enough to poke his head out of another open hatch. *His HP was zero, and he still managed to do that before he shattered.*

*I hate scripted deathblows!*

“At least we got Vidal's half of the key, right?” Kirito said halfheartedly. He almost crashed into her as they reached the stairs leading up; catching himself at the last moment, he swung himself halfway
up them in her wake. “Mission accomplished!”

“Yeah, sure, if Philia and Kizmel got the other—and if we don’t burn to death first!” They were only one deck below the top now, and Rain piled on more speed toward the bow. “Are they—?!”

Somehow, he managed to bring up his menu on the run, and after a second's look he nodded. “Looks like they're on their way back up, too—look out!”

The corridor ahead of them was on fire, too—something Rain realized belated she should've expected. Fire didn't need stairs, after all. Now a support beam was falling free ahead of them, narrowing the corridor even further; worse, a pair of Pirate Ghosts were just emerging from a compartment a bit beyond the choke point, swords drawn.

Growling incoherently, she thrust her blade forward as she approached, letting the System Assist speed her up just a little more. The Vorpal Strike itself caught one of the ghosts square in the chest, knocking him flying back; Rain flung herself into the opening, landing in a skidding slide that took her under the fallen beam and past the other pirate.

Kirito, the show-off, got through the same gap with the strangest Sonic Leap she'd ever seen, somehow managing a long jump bare centimeters above the deck. His flight ended with his sword buried in the stomach of the remaining ghost; without slowing, he turned the landing into a roll, came back to his feet, and kept right on going just behind her.

Rain was just starting to see a Heat DoT on her HUD, along with a gradual chipping at her HP bar, when they emerged onto the outer deck. “We're out!” she shouted unnecessarily. “Let's find the others, and—”

“Kirito, Rain!” Charging toward them from the stern, Kizmel in tow, Philia waved frantically. “We gotta get off this ship!”

“I know!” Kirito yelled back. “All this fire—”

“She's gonna blow! Robair set the magazine on fire!”

Blow? Magazine?!! It took Rain a second to process that. When she did, her face went as pale as the ghosts they'd been fighting, and she put on an extra burst of speed toward where they'd left their boat.

“We have Robair's half of the key,” Kizmel said hurriedly, as the two pairs reunited by the rail. “We have what we came for.”

“We have Robair's half of the key,” Kizmel said hurriedly, as the two pairs reunited by the rail. “We have what we came for.”

“Then let's go!” Leading the way, Kirito vaulted over the railing, not even bothering with the ladder they'd used to board. Rain followed him without hesitation; the damage she took from the fall was nothing next to what she'd take if she was still on Kobayashi when she exploded.

Philia was next, almost hitting the mast on her way down to Black Cat. Kizmel was last by under a second—landing directly on Kirito, resulting in a yelp from the swordsman and a tangle of limbs around the boat’s wheel.

Rain glanced at the result, took a second to reflect Kirito would probably be having interesting dreams that night, and hurried to the bow to raise the anchor. Portable Safe Zone or not, she didn't want to take the risk of staying next to an exploding ship.

From the sound of billowing cloth, Philia had the same idea, and by the time the two of them had gotten their jobs done, Kirito had managed to untangle himself and get to his feet. “Full sail!” he
panted, spinning the wheel hard to starboard. “We're getting out of here!”

The wind, or at least the random number generator, was with them. *Black Cat* started to pile on speed right away, taking them away from the burning *Kobayashi* and back into the deep fog. A meter, then five. Ten, then twenty; twenty-five, and they were more than twice the length of their own boat away.

They were almost completely into the fog again when *Kobayashi* erupted with startling suddenness. The ear-splitting *boom* brought with it a concussion that knocked them all off their feet again; Rain, for one, ended up flat on her back, with a great view of flaming chunks of wood spiraling into the air.

She saw most of the debris' trip back down to water level, too. Whether or not it actually impacted or shattered into polygons before it could, she wasn't sure; she couldn't see from her angle, and the system was doing a very good job of simulating temporary deafness from the explosion. All she could hear was the ringing in her ears, and the way the world seemed to be spinning kept her from even trying to get up.

When Rain's artificial dizziness and hearing loss subsided, she slowly pushed herself to a sitting position. *Black Cat* was deep in the fog now, wind in her sails still driving her along the last course Kirito had managed to set her to. Off to port, Philia was tangled in the low railing, legs dangling over the side; from the look on her face, she'd been as disoriented as Rain. In the stern, where their “captain” and his partner had been clinging to the wheel…

Well. Rain was torn between a mild pang, and gleeful laughter. Kirito, on the other hand, looked like his face was about to go off as spectacularly as *Kobayashi*, pressed as it was against Kizmel's chest.

Kizmel herself looked utterly unperturbed. At least, unperturbed by the compromising position. Wearily, she lifted her head, craned her neck to look back at the debris field that was once a pirate ship; then she sank back down again. Resting a careless arm across Kirito's back, she sighed and said, “As Klein would probably say, Argo had best give us a hazard pay bonus for this information.”

“Heat debuffs, swimsuit armor, ghost pirates, ghost pirate treasure, and an exploding ship,” Philia counted off on her fingers. “All of that, just since this morning. I think that may be more weird and crazy on this one floor than I've seen the whole time I've been in Aincrad.”

“Don't forget there's still Medrizzel, too,” Rain pointed out. “A sea dragon fight in a graveyard of ships is sure to be crazy, too.”

“Compared to some things we dealt with today, I think a field boss might be kind of relaxing, actually,” Kirito remarked. “But… it has been pretty fun, hasn't it?”

“It has,” Kizmel agreed softly. “Very much so, actually.”

The four of them were stretched out on *Black Cat*'s deck, the boat anchored near the floor's northern edge, about a kilometer west of Haze Point. Night had fallen completely by the time they'd gotten out of the fog, and all had agreed after *Kobayashi*'s spectacular demise it was time to call it a day. Not quite ready to turn in, though, they were taking advantage of the boat's anchored Safe Zone status to relax in the cooling night air.

Reflecting on the day's events, Kizmel was surprised to realize it really had been more fun than anything else. Teasing her partner, hunting for treasure, battling the spirits of pirates who were no real match for them… Even the escape from *Kobayashi* had been exhilarating more than it had been frightening.
Under the light of what few stars could be seen past the edge of the floor above, she mused to herself that the day had been quite a success, overall. She even had an idea of how to proceed toward her own private objective, now that she had an idea of what the real problem was.

*Not something Asuna would approve of, I suspect*, Kizmel thought, favoring her partner with a surreptitious glance. *But I've tried things the human way long enough, I believe—and as the human saying goes, all is fair in pursuits such as this.*

“Just about the most fun I've had in over a year, I'll admit it,” Philia said, resting her head on her hands. “Lots of treasure all around, and sailing turned out to be pretty cool. Especially this whole ‘Safe Zone out in the middle of nowhere’ thing. Kinda cozy, being out here all by ourselves, y'know?”

“Better than sleeping in a regular Safe Zone in a dungeon, that's for sure.” Kirito told her. “Kizmel, Asuna, and I had to do that once. In a jungle. With lots of giant mosquitoes buzzing around just outside. Not a fun night.” A small smile lit his face. “Yeah… this is kind of nice.”

“No argument here.” Rain propped herself on one elbow, sipping at a drink she'd pulled from her inventory. “Speaking of the boat, though… I was wondering. Earlier today, Kizmel, you mentioned a ‘Tilnel’. Can I ask what that means?”

The smile vanished from Kirito's face. “Rain,” he began, “that's kind of—”

“It's all right, Kirito,” Kizmel said, placing a calming hand on his arm. “I don't mind.” Turning on her side to look at the redhead, she continued softly, “Tilnel was my sister, Rain. She… was killed in battle with the Forest Elves, barely a month before I met Kirito.”

Strange, how it didn't hurt as much as it once had to mention her fallen twin. Perhaps, she thought, meeting Tilnel's shade in the Trial of Wisdom had given her some closure. *Or perhaps it is because I am no longer alone. Now, more than ever.*

Rain's eyes widened, then squinted shut for a moment. “Sorry,” she said, looking away. “I… Well, I've never had family die on me like that, but… I kind of know how you feel. Not being able to see somebody close to you.”

“Me, too.” Kirito's gaze was fixed on the floor above, a faraway look in his eyes. “I try not to think about it too much, but I can't help worrying about how my sister is doing, especially after… well. Some things I should've done better.”

That got him sharp looks from all three girls, not least of them Kizmel. Pushing herself to a sitting position, she found herself staring at him in surprise. Swordmaster etiquette generally dictated silence on matters of the world they came from, and her partner had held to it even more than most.

*Over a year now I've known him, and this may be the first time I've heard him mention family at all. As close as we have become, he never said... “You have a sister, Kirito?”*

“Um. Yeah?” Seeming to realize he was being watched from all sides, Kirito flushed. “I never told you? Er, I guess that's kind of obvious now, actually… Um.” Resolutely, he fixed his gaze on the floor above again, coughed lightly, and gave a slight shrug. “Technically, she's my cousin, but I don’t think she knows that. My parents died when I was less than a year old, so the two of us were brought up as siblings.”

Several emotions flashed through the elf girl. A flair of surprise; a spark, quickly suppressed, of envy. Sadness for her friend, at the separation he was forced to endure—and perhaps most of all,
warmth at having learned more about his life, in the world she had never seen. “She must be very worried about you.”

“I don’t know.” The admission was quiet, pained; just a little guilty, Kizmel thought. “Truth is, we haven’t been close in a long time, and it’s my fault.” Kirito hesitated, in a way that reminded her of when he was trying to explain aspects of the Swordmasters’ worldview to her. “Long story short, we had a very strict grandfather, who insisted on passing on the family’s kendo style to us. I wasn’t really into it, though, and dropped out when I was about ten. He… didn’t take it well.”

Something about his tone made Kizmel suspect he was glossing over something with that statement, something she suspected would’ve made her quite angry. Before she could press, though, he quickly continued with his story.

“My sister got him to calm down by promising to be good enough at it for the both of us. She did, too: she got pretty far at the national level before our grandfather died, making even him happy.” Kirito sighed, closing his eyes. “By then, I’d run away into computers—the mechanism of our ‘sorcery’—and, well, my sister and I haven’t spoken much since. So… I have no idea how she’s taking any of this.”

Now Kizmel was definitely starting to grasp some of her friend's issues—especially how sympathetic he’d always seemed about Tilnel's loss, even in the days he’d not truly believed she was real. She was sure something was still eluding her, something he was still holding back, but she felt she was finally beginning to understand him, personally.

Something I will be quite sure to discuss with him when we reach Onzenna. Certainly he'll be in no condition to dissemble then. For once, she was grateful for Argo’s habits. The Rat’s information, paired with Philia's advice, had allowed her to plan what she expected to be a very effective move. When the time was right.

“Just 'cause you haven't talked much doesn't mean she doesn't miss you,” Rain said suddenly, her soft voice breaking the silence. Giving a sheepish smile when attention turned to her, she ran a hand through her hair and continued, “I haven't been able to see my sister at all in a long time, and I miss her a lot.”

It was Philia’s turn to blurt out, “You’ve got a sister, Rain?”

“I don’t know if she even knows it, but yeah.” The redhead smiled sadly, turning her own gaze toward the blocked-off sky. “She’s a genius. Literally, I mean. Long story short—” she turned that smile on Kirito, a bit of genuine humor creeping in “—my parents disagreed about how to handle that. So… my sister lives with my dad on the other side of an ocean now, and I haven’t seen either of them in years.”

An ocean… Kizmel was reminded again that the world the Swordmasters came from was a far vaster one than the Steel Castle she’d known all her life. One not hemmed in by walls, separated by well-guarded pillars, suspended in an endless sky.

More, though, she was struck by a sudden sense of camaraderie, a connection with these Swordmasters that she’d never realized she had. For all that their ways, the place they came from, was different, there were still things she had in common with them.

Rain stood, looking out to the few visible stars. “I think about my sister every day,” she said softly, reaching out a hand as if to grasp those distant stars. “I read everything I can find about her. After all these years, I haven't given up hope that I'll see her again. So…” She looked over her shoulder, still wearing that sad smile. “Kirito, don't give up on your sister just yet. I'm sure she's waiting for you to
come home so she can show you how good she's gotten with a shinai while you've been gone.”

For a long moment, Kirito only looked at her silently, a conflicted look in his night-black eyes. Again, Kizmel had the sense that he was holding something back; but just as the silence started to grow uncomfortable, he smiled faintly. “Maybe you're right,” he whispered. “She always did like to show off, after all…”

“Course she does,” Rain said firmly. “What kind of sis doesn't like to brag to their big brother?”

Kizmel found a bittersweet smile coming to her own lips at that. She and Tilnel had been twins, scarcely minutes between their births, but there'd been no small competition between them, as well. Tilnel had always been quick to show off a new medicine she'd learned to make; in turn, Kizmel had never missed a chance to demonstrate mastery of a new Sword Skill.

All the more so when she married that idiot, she mused. I certainly couldn't let a mangy Wolf Handler outdo a Pagoda Knight, now could I?

The sound of a clearing throat brought Kizmel's attention back to the here and now, as Philia raised a hand. “So… can I add a cheerful story to the tales of sisters, guys?”

“You have a sister, Philia?” three voices chorused—smiling all around, none of them really surprised, now.

She sat up, scratching her head with a sheepish smile of her own. “Well… yeah, actually. Guess that's something we all have in common, huh? We're the party of the long-suffering older siblings.”

The treasure hunter turned her gaze to the sea, looking out at the distant islands. “Actually, I guess it doesn't start out very cheerful, but it turned out okay. My sister… When we were younger, she was frail, and couldn't go outside much at all, or even play inside very well.”

“She was sick?” Kirito asked quietly. There was an odd tone to his voice, one Kizmel couldn't quite place.

“Yeah,” Philia said, nodding. “Since she was really little. So, y'know, I'd tell her stories about the 'adventures' I had, going to school and everything. Made up a few, when nothing was really going on. Little things to keep her going.” She smiled brightly, at odds with the apparent seriousness of her story. “Of course, a couple of years ago, the doctors finally figured out what was wrong with her, and she was able to go school and see things for herself.”

“Let me guess,” Kizmel said dryly, a matching smile creeping up on her. “She discovered you'd grossly exaggerated the 'wonder' of learning?” She didn't know much about human education, but she certainly recalled her own experiences. If this was one of those things humans and Dark Elves had in common, she could guess Philia's sister's reaction.

“I don't think she's ever forgiven me for the 'terrible lies' I told her about how 'great' my old math teacher was,” Philia said with a laugh. “But y'know,” she continued, smile turning sober but no less warm, “that's kind of what I'm fighting for. I want to go home, and tell my sister about all the things I've seen in this world, and all the people I've met.

“And I'm sure she's still waiting for me. 'Cause she never had any hope she'd get better, but she did. She knows not to give up 'til the end—and I'm not gonna give up on getting home to her.”

Close to midnight, after chatting about all manner of things from the day's events to stories of their respective adventures on lower floors, the gathering on Black Cat's deck finally broke up. First Philia, then Rain went below to the tiny cabin the two of them shared, intent on making up for the
early start they'd both gotten that day.

Kirito elected to remain on deck a while longer, clearly lost in his own thoughts. Kizmel, too, stayed; as much as she enjoyed the company of their new friends, she treasured the times she had her partner all to herself, much as in the days they'd spent with the Black Cats. This particular night, something about the setting—stretched out on the deck of a boat at sea in the night, just the two of them—appealed to her greatly.

When she was sure the others were not coming back to the deck, Kizmel carefully shifted so that she lay closer to Kirito. She didn't think he would attempt a repeat of his teasing earlier in the day, but if he did, she did not especially care to have witnesses to her carrying out her “consequences”.

Almost to her disappointment, he did no such thing, even when she came to a rest such that there was hardly any distance at all between their shoulders. Neither, though, did he flinch or try to move away. That, she decided, she would count as a victory.

Kizmel didn't know what he was thinking, looking out at the stars beyond the Steel Castle. Perhaps he was only planning the next day's adventures, now that they possessed both halves of the stolen Key to the Zaro Cave Palace. More likely, Kirito thought of his sister, after all the talk of siblings that night.

Or perhaps he simply enjoys the view, as I do. Often it is the simple things that matter most, in times such as these.

“Kirito-kun,” she said at length, turning her head to look at her partner. “Can you see the stars, in your world?”

“Eh?” Kirito twitched, seeming surprised at the sudden break of the companionable silence they'd fallen into; his shoulder bumped into hers for a bare moment, before he recovered himself. “Oh… Yeah, we can. Well, depending on where you are, anyway. In a big city like where I live, there are so many lights that the stars are mostly washed out. It's been a long time since I could really do much stargazing, considering how little I get out.”

“Mm.” There was something sad about that, if unsurprising. Still, it brought a small smile to Kizmel's face, finding another tiny connection between them. “…This is the most I have ever seen of the night sky myself, and with my duties rarely this. I will not tell you how old I am, Kirito-kun,” at this she turned a teasing smile on him, “but I will say I'm far too young to have known the stars before Aincrad's steel blocked the sky. I have only ever known this tiny sliver.”

“That's too bad.” He glanced at her, an unreadable look in his eyes, before quickly turning his gaze back to the sky. “Where I come from… If you're far enough from a city, the only light you've got is from the moon and stars, from horizon to horizon. On the ocean, before new techniques were developed—even today, a lot of the time—sailors navigated by them.”

Kirito lifted an arm off the deck then, pointing at the stars as if to draw lines between them.

“I don't know how it is in this world,” he went on quietly, “but my people find pictures in the patterns of stars. To find our way, and to find something recognizable in a part of the world we hardly knew. Even now, we link the stars with legends from the past.”

“So too did mine,” Kizmel told him. “We so seldom see any stars that they are things only of ancient tomes, but we, too, marked the constellations of our world. In years past, when the war with the Forest Elves weighed heavily, I read of them when my duties allowed.”
Ancient knowledge had been her only solace sometimes, in those days. When Tilnel had been busy elsewhere, legends of old had been Kizmel's distractions, among fellow knights she somehow never quite connected with.

At length, she slid a bit farther over, and rested her head against her companion's shoulder. “Kirito-kun,” she murmured. “When we reach the Ruby Palace atop the Steel Castle, before we begin our last battle there, I want to show you the constellations my people have drawn in this world's stars, and tell you the stories behind them.” She hesitated. “And… if some miracle allows it, someday I would have you show me your world's patterns in the sky, and tell me the tales behind them.”

For a long moment, Kirito's shoulder was tense, and his breath caught. Then, very slowly, he slid his arm under her shoulders, and let out a long sigh. “…Some miracle, huh? …I'd like that, Kizmel.”

Chapter End Notes

Obligatory Shout Out commentary: "the Dread Pirate Robair", in addition to the obvious Princess Pride reference, was supposed to also reference Jules Verne. Unfortunately I misremembered the spelling of "Robur", so... Oops.

Argo's speech patterns give my word processor's spell checker fits. Torvan and the ghosts were not much better. (Though not as bad as XaXa. Gah, that guy's annoying to write dialogue for.)

Philia's sister is not, as far as I know, canon. But with so little info on her background in canon at all, at the fact that the other three members of the party do have canon sisters, it seemed fitting enough.

Next up is what I originally expected to be the final chapter of this arc. It wasn't, but it is still very important. Sometimes, hot springs events can be about character development as much as fan service.
Chapter XV: Serenade of Water III

January 15th, 2024

“Can’t believe it took us this long to get to the end of this place,” Philia muttered, fingers nimbly working at the lock with a narrow pick. “Two days to clear a cave dungeon on an island? On a breather level? That’s just crazy, especially with four of us.”

“We had to find it, first,” Kirito reminded her, watching her actions with some interest. Or maybe her body, considering that even here they were all in swimsuits. Though Rain admitted to herself that wasn't especially likely; while she was sure that the so-called “Beater” was anything but disinterested in girls, his interest seemed to be pretty specific.”Just knowing the name wasn't much to go on.”

“Remember also the time we lost learning of the Sun and Moon Doors,” Kizmel said. She was leaning against one of the rough-hewn cavern walls, arms folded under her breasts in a position that just so happened to put her in Kirito's peripheral vision. “They were an unprecedented complication in themselves.”

“Kinda hard to be quick about it when we have to wait for the lighting to be just right,” Rain agreed, keeping careful watch back the way they had come. “Not to mention the regular locks—like this one.”

Two days after the Dread Pirate Robair's flagship *Kobayashi* spectacularly blew herself to pieces, their little treasure-hunting party was deep inside the Zaro Cave Palace, on the western edge of the Fifty-First Floor. Located on Zaro Island, it had taken them most of the previous day to even find it, and only had thanks to a tip from the KoB’s Vice-Commander Asuna.

The chance meeting had been an awkward one. Rain wasn't entirely sure why the Flash had seemed torn between irritation and hilarity at the sight of her former partner surrounded by girls in swimsuits, but she did know she didn't really want to be in that position again.

Asuna had given them the map data that led them to Zaro Island, though, so Rain wasn't going to complain too much. She *did* kind of feel like complaining at Kayaba for coming up with doors that could only be opened at certain times of day, though. Reaching the Cave Palace’s entrance in late afternoon only to learn they had to wait until the moon came up to actually get in hadn’t gone over very well for any of them.

Discovering a door leading to an open-air passage that needed dawn to open had just about done them all in.

At least the mobs hadn’t been too bad. The sound-hunting Cave Salamanders had carried a nasty perpetual Heat effect, but they'd been easy enough to kite with simple thrown rocks. Their nearly-deaf Sunbathing Newt cousins had fallen for Rain's hiding so thoroughly she almost felt guilty about it—though that guilt had been no match for how tasty their hides had been, barbequed on the beach for dinner that night.

*The regular locks would've been a pain if we'd had to go looking for keys, though. Good thing we've*
got a treasure hunter with us.

If there was anything besides pure swordsmanship that Rain prided herself on, it was her skill at Hiding. She'd pit her ability to sneak around against anybody in Aincrad—maybe even including the PKers Argo had warned her about. But if there was anyone in Aincrad even better than she was at getting into places she wasn't supposed to, it was Philia. The self-proclaimed treasure hunter was the first player Rain had actually met who not only had the Lock-picking skill, but had actually come very close to mastering it.

Kirito, she thought, was kind of spooked by that. Though when she overheard him muttering something about never letting Argo know about that, she couldn't really blame him. The last thing anyone in Aincrad wanted was the Rat with a partner in gathering blackmail material.

Now, three “special” doors and at least seventeen normal locks—not to mention a Giant Salanewt in the middle of the Cave Palace—later, they were at what the map suggested would be the final door. Behind it, they hoped to find the key leading to Hyrus' Forge itself, and hopefully a map showing where it actually was. They'd checked with both Asuna and Argo, and supposedly no quest had yet been found that gave the Forge's location.

“Okay,” Philia announced, fingers carefully making one last, precise nudge at the lock. “I think I've just… about… got it… There!”

With a click that sounded oddly loud in the confines of the cavern, the stone door swung open, leading the way into the Cave Palace's final chamber.

“At last,” Kizmel murmured, following Philia's lead into the new room. “I don't object to the attire enforced by the floor's conditions, but I find myself missing my boots right now. The sand in these caves clings all too well to my feet.”

Taking up the rear, Rain had to stifle a snicker at the way Kirito's gaze snapped briefly to elf girl's bare feet, before just as quickly returning to the view ahead. If it were anybody else, that really would be hilarious.

“Huh,” he said once they were all in, eyes quickly sweeping over the chamber's contents. “Kind of reminds me of the place we found the note about Robair in.”

“No creepy writing on the wall this time, though,” Philia said, making a beeline for one of the chests piled up in the room. “Just chests, and… I think that's a map on that wall, isn't it?”

“Sure looks like one,” Rain agreed, leaving the others to the treasure in favor of looking at said map herself. “Looks like it's a map of this floor, in fact; or at least, the sea that was turned into this floor. I recognize Ousetta Island, the Graveyard, Torvan's Shipyard… Some places we haven't seen, though.” She leaned in closer, frowning at the labels. “There's captions, but I can't read 'em. Kizmel?”

The Dark Elf was at her side in a moment. “Hm… Well, if this is to be believed, there's a hot spring on the island in the center of the floor, Onzenna.” Off to the side, Kirito audibly choked, prompting a quick smile from Kizmel. “Of course, there is no way to know if that's still accurate, after all this time. More importantly, Hyrus' Forge's location is marked.”

Kirito turned from where he'd been examining a tunic he'd found in a chest, one made of an odd, black, scaly material. “It is? Where?”

She frowned. “That's strange… It says right here.” Kizmel tapped a spot on the map just a bit to the
north of Zaro Island, which showed a drawing of what looked like some kind of stone fortress. “I certainly didn't see any other island so close by as we approached Zaro…”

*Oh, yay.* Rain could think of a couple of different possibilities, none of them good. It might've been invisible, showing up only under the right conditions or with the right items; or maybe when the Great Separation occurred, it had ended up in a different spot from what the map said. *Or the Forge is actually on a giant turtle, and it just moved itself. Oh, that's a fun idea.*

“I think I might have the answer to that one, guys,” Philia called out. “Look at these.” The girl was just emerging from a chest so big most of her torso had fit in it, and dangling from her hand was some kind of full-face mask. Goggle-like pieces covered the eyes, with some sort of grill to go over the nose and mouth.

Kizmel looked perplexed, but Kirito met Rain's eyes with understanding. “Is that what I think it is, Philia?”

“Pretty sure, Kirito. There's enough of them in that chest for a full party of six, and when I brought up the menu it said 'Diver's Mask'.” Philia grinned. “I don't think anybody's beating us to these treasures, guys. Time for some deep-sea diving!”

As late as it was, there was no question of going for what the old map called “Hyrus Fortress” that night. If it had been an ordinary dungeon, they might've considered it; none of them, though, were willing to risk diving for the sea floor in the dark. Fighting mobs in the water was hard enough when there was enough light to see them coming.

Instead, the team retreated to *Black Cat*, intending to rest up for an early start the next morning. At least, that was the plan until Kirito noticed something strange as they returned to Zaro's beach. “Hang on,” he said, raising a hand. “Do you guys see that?”

From the way the girls tensed, he assumed they had. It was faint from distance, but there was pretty distinctly a light showing through the porthole in *Black Cat'*s tiny lounge. Seeing as it had still been daylight when they last left…

“The anchor's down, though,” Philia whispered. “There shouldn't be any way somebody could've snuck aboard… right?”

“Not according to my understanding of human 'Safe Zone' charms, at any rate,” Kizmel agreed, hand drifting to the hilt of her saber. “Kirito?”

“No,” he said immediately. “Well, okay, just about anybody who isn't orange could probably have gotten on deck, but they shouldn't have been able to get into the cabins, so long as we left the hatch shut.” There was, Kirito supposed, the possibility of a glitch, but though he'd seen a few genuine system errors in the year he'd been in *SAO* the Safe Zones had always worked just fine.

*There's always a first time, though,* he thought, his hand twitching toward the sword slung over his back. *And something is definitely going on here…*

He shot a glance at Kizmel, who nodded sharply. “Let us see what's going on,” she said softly. “Carefully. Rain?”

“On it.” The redhead dropped into a crouch, edged toward the water, and soon disappeared into the waves, the sea and darkness both working with her Hiding to conceal her almost as well as the elf girl's cloak.
Kirito gave a mental nod of approval. That would be one ace in the hole, at least, if something really was about to go wrong. “Let’s go.”

With the greatest care they’d taken since leaving the Fiftieth Floor’s brutal dungeons behind, the remaining members of the group crept back to their boat, climbed aboard, and gathered around the hatch. As soundlessly as he could, Kirito drew the Sea Dragon’s Sword from his back, and nodded for Kizmel to spring the latch.

Saber in hand, she did exactly that, and quickly pulled open the hatch—

“Ah, there ya guys are! I was startin’ to wonder if you were planning to be out dungeon-crawling all night!”

Sword forgotten, Kirito stared at the girl seated at the small table inside, still wearing the same yellow tankini he’d last seen her in. Reclining in her seat with a fruity drink in hand and a lazy smile on her face, she gave a cheerful wave with her free hand. “…Argo,” he said slowly. “How did you…?”

“Quick freebie, Kii-bou,” the Rat said, gesturing for them to come in. “People on yer Friends List can walk right in on one of these boats. Well, ’cept for the sleeping cabins, anyway. Now c’mon, get in here and tell Argo-nee-chan how your day went!”

A couple of minutes later, all of them were gathered in the cramped lounge, and—Rain making an irritable comment about Argo being lucky drying was quick in Aincrad aside—the foreboding feeling that had been creeping up on Kirito had vanished. Mostly, anyway. Dealing with Argo was always cause to be a little nervous, regardless of her exact business.

“How did you even get here, Argo?” Kizmel asked when they were all settled. She was another source of anxiety for him, the close confines of Black Cat’s lounge forcing her to sit right up against him; but if she was bothered, it wasn’t obvious. “I didn’t see any other boats around, and I cannot imagine you swimming this far.”

After the Rat had already given them a “freebie” about the boat’s mechanics, Kirito expected her to grin and name a price. Instead, Argo just shrugged, took a sip of her drink, and said, “No big secret. Remember those floater-paddle shoes from Rovia? I hitched a ride with Aa-chan ’til we were close to Zaro, an’ water-walked the rest o’ the way.”

That figured. As Kirito remembered it, those shoes had a very low weight-limit—his mind quickly shied away from the teasing implications Argo had made about her equipment at the time—but on this floor no one was wearing heavy gear anyway. He was a little impressed, though, that she’d thought to use them again, so long after the Fourth Floor had been cleared.

“So… you just decided to drop by? I thought info brokers were supposed to be neutral, Argo,” Rain said, eyeing the other girl suspiciously. “I’d have expected you to call Kirito to a meeting in some cafe somewhere.”

_I wonder what's with her? It's not like Argo is a suspicious character or something. Er, the dangerous kind, anyway._

Argo grinned. “Eh, everybody knows I get lotsa my info from Kii-bou and Kii-chan, anyway. Nothin’ suspicious about that. Who’d suspect I’m really willing to bend the rules for my favorite Black Swordsman?” She waved her drink, heedless of how she almost spilled it on the lantern lighting the cabin. “An’ how. I got the latest floor-clearing update, with bonus rumors—an’ I’ll even give ya a discount in exchange for the story of what you’ve been up to the last couple days.”
At least that much was typical Rat behavior, Kirito thought with hidden relief. Any time she started putting on the “big sister” act, he got even more nervous than usual.

Taking turns, they recounted their respective adventures since beginning the Hyrus' Forge quest. Argo nodded here and there, grinned disturbingly once or twice when one or another of them glossed over a few details—Kirito, for one, had no intention of speaking of the conversation he and Rain had had aboard Kobayashi—and lifted her eyebrows at the description of Kobayashi's final moments.

“At least we finally finished that Cave Palace,” Philia said at length, rounding out the tale. “In all my treasure hunting, I've never found a dungeon where the time of day matters that much—and I hope I never do again!”

“Heh, I bet. Well, that's one I'll be sure to mention in the next Argo Guide.” The Rat rolled her eyes. “I think we'd all be better off if the DDA didn't have something else to freak out about, y'know?”

Kirito nodded glumly over his fruit cocktail. With how the battle against Vemacitrin had gone, he wanted as little to do with the Divine Dragons as he could for awhile. And if Argo can charge them through the nose while keeping them calmer, well, I'm not about to complain.

“Speaking of those guides,” he said, bringing up his menu, “what do you have for us, Argo?”

She took the small pouch he handed over, grinned, and swung her feet up on the table. “First off, the big news: Aa-chan's plannin' on hittin' Medrizzel day after tomorrow. Plan is for the raid group to meet up just off Torvan's Shipyard mid-afternoon, an' sail to the Graveyard from there.”

“Already?” Philia—who'd drawn back to avoid being hit by Argo's legs—leaned forward, propping her chin on her hands. “I thought the KoB was waiting for more info, or something? I remember Vice-Commander Asuna said something about that when we met her the other day.”

“An' they found it. In the belly of a whale, if ya can believe it.” Argo gestured toward the porthole. “One of their guys, Havok, had a hunch and did a little free-diving this morning. 'Bout five meters down, he got swallowed by a whale.” She chuckled. “Shoulda seen 'im when he came back up, all shakin' and shiverin'… Anyhow, before the whale puked him up again, he found a skeleton and a journal of some Knight of the Order who got swallowed ages ago. Had some tips about Medrizzel, so Aa-chan's gettin' ready to go for it.”

Kirito nodded slowly. The day after tomorrow, huh? “So,” he said slowly, “if we want to be involved, we'd better wrap this up in the next day or so. Especially since we'll need to make a side trip to Algade to actually use the Forge.”

“Sounds about right, Kii-bou,” she agreed. “Which brings me to the next bit of info: Havok didn't know what it meant, but he did see the top of a fortress down there, when the whale let 'im go. I'm betting that's the 'Hyrus Fortress' you're after.” With a few deft motions, she brought up her menu and materialized the map data. “X marks the spot, Kii-bou.”

“Thanks, Argo.” Gratefully, he added the new information to his own map, quickly sharing it with the rest of his party. Knowing the exact spot would save a lot of trouble, considering how tricky the swim was likely to be as it was.

“A deep dive,” Kizmel remarked, peering at her own map. “Hopefully the masks we found will work as well as they claim… Was there anything else of significance, Argo?”

“One or two things, yeah.” Argo grinned again—the sly grin, the one that always made Kirito want
to crawl into a hole and pull it in after him. “Fer one thing, somebody finally made landfall on Onzenna and confirmed what the locals at Ousetta said. When you're all done with Hyrus, there's a nice hot spring you can unwind in. Really fancy, got sections for men, women, and mixed.”

Kirito choked—and when the gazes of four girls fixated as one on him, he couldn't bring himself to even look at the table anymore. Philia just looked amused, but Argo's eyes promised blackmail, Rain was strangely blushing, and Kizmel had a speculative gleam he wasn't at all sure he liked.

After a few moments of silence and the sensation of being examined, Argo finally chuckled. “Ah, you're too easy, Kii-bou! It's almost not any fun anymore! …Almost.” She coughed. “Moving on… Well, this ain't much more than a rumor, but there's something another info broker was tellin' me that I think you guys oughtta know.”

That brought Kirito's gaze back around. The Rat didn't usually give out rumors. She'd buy them, sure, but she'd only pass them on if she verified them personally. “What kind of rumor, Argo?”

She shrugged, looking unusually serious. “Well, you know I sell to other brokers, right? If somebody's buying, I'm selling. I sold a complete Elf War chronicle to this guy awhile back, and he mentioned to me the other day that somebody else was getting very interested in it. He wouldn't tell me who, but it sounds like somebody's tryin' to get an in with the Elves.”

Kirito felt a chill go down his spine at that. In theory, that shouldn't have meant much; while his and Asuna's version of the quest seemed remain unique, he knew perfectly well the ordinary questline was still available. Even so…

_I don't know what the ordinary questline is beyond the Ninth Floor. In the beta, that's where it ended, but with all the other changes in the retail version, who knows if that's still true. For that matter, I don't actually know how the Forest Elf side goes past the Third Floor…_

The warm body still pressed against his side was oddly still. He wondered how Kizmel was taking the news; still in the dark about the very concept of repeatable quests—that in truth, the war she thought over was still raging in an endless cycle—he had the sudden fear his partner would now ask the questions he'd been dreading for months.

When she finally spoke, though, Kizmel said only, “Did your contact say exactly what his buyer was trying to do?”

“'Fraid not, Kii-chan.” Pausing to polish off her drink, Argo set the glass down with a thunk and shrugged. “Don't think he knew, actually. Just that somebody was buying up the info and doing something with it.”

“Hm.”

He'd known the elf for a long time now, but he couldn't quite interpret her quiet hum this time. A quick glance at her face showed Kirito only that she was looking down into her drink, apparently lost in thought. What that thought was, he couldn't begin to guess.

“Well, it's not like it could be anything major, right?” Rain said into the silence, idly brushing her hair away from her face. “I've bought all that info, too, and I can't imagine anything anyone else could be doing that would have anything to do with us.”

At that, Kirito exchanged a quick look with Argo. Contrary to her image, there were a handful of things even the Rat would never sell, and a couple of details of the finale of the Elf War questline were among them. _It's still only a theory, and there's a good chance nobody would even find out_
without Kizmel being involved, but still. If the likes of PoH or Morte ever learned what we did at the Twilight Citadel…

He shivered. That possibility *probably* wouldn't be on the table even for the PKers, going too far even for them, but it still made him nervous. He, Asuna, and Kizmel had sworn secrecy over the Fallen Elves' true plan for a reason; Argo only knew because they'd been desperate to get an outside opinion, and the Rat had agreed with them on all particulars.

*Look on the bright side, Kirito told himself. There's basically no chance they've got “another” Kizmel with them, at least. If I'm right—*

An arm suddenly reaching across his back to lay a comforting hand on his shoulder startled him out of his reverie. “Regardless of who may be seeking contact with my people, or why,” Kizmel said, casually leaning further into Kirito's side, “we can at least be assured that if their intentions are ill, we're already several steps ahead of them. I do thank you for the forewarning, Argo, but I believe we've little to fear right now.”

“Hey, treasure is serious business, Kizmel!” Philia protested, thumping a fist on the table. “I can't call myself a treasure hunter if I let some latecomers beat me to the good stuff!”

“Then I'll keep ya updated, Phi-chan,” Argo told her with a lazy grin, leaning back in her seat. “‘Long as you've got the Cor for it, o' course, Argo-nee-chan's got ya covered!”

“That has so *many* ominous possibilities,” Kizmel murmured.

*I'll say!* Despite his outward groan, though, Kirito was grateful for the byplay. It broke the building gloom, helping him to keep in mind strange rumors didn't have to mean something serious was really going on. For all they knew, it was nothing more than some oddball players pursuing some personal goal of their own, like the Fuuma Ninja had when the First Floor had been cleared.

Although if pushed, he'd admit the soft warmth pressing into his side was at least as much a distraction. Good or bad, he was not prepared to say.

Rain cleared her throat. “If we're going to keep ahead of the game, then we'd better get an early start on that fortress tomorrow,” she said pointedly. “So how about we all get some sleep?”

“Excellent idea, Rain-chan!” Argo dropped her feet to the deck and waved a hand. “So how 'bout you guys go do that and leave a girl some room to stretch? I don't want a back ache in the morning!”

“You're spending the night, Argo?” Kirito asked, knowing even as he did that he wouldn't like the answer.

“What, are ya really gonna toss a poor girl out in the cold sea in the middle of the night, Kii-bou?” Argo pouted. “You're so cold, treating your Nee-chan like that!”

“…Forget I said anything.” Shaking his head, he carefully disentangled himself from Kizmel and stood. “I'll see you girls in the morning, then.”

“Oi, Kii-bou!” Argo called after him, as he and his partner headed back to the two-person cabin they shared. “If the two of ya decide to share, lemme know so I can take the spare bunk, will ya?”

“Shut up, Argo,” Kirito muttered—hopefully quietly enough not to be heard by the Rat. Though Kizmel certainly caught it, from her soft chuckle. Assuming she wasn't reacting to Argo's suggestion, anyway.
It better not be that. If those two start double-teaming me, I'm a dead man.

January 16th, 2024

The soft, peaceful notes of woodwind instruments that formed a Swordmaster's morning “alarm” stirred Kizmel from her dreams. Visions of a brutal battle in a dark fortress gave way to the ethereal numbers of her HUD’s time display; Kirito's frantic expression gazing down on her desperately-wounded form was replaced by him sleeping peacefully across in the bunk across from hers.

Ever since learning of the alarm's existence from Argo's guide, she'd made a habit of setting hers a few minutes before her partner's. Especially in recent months, during which they'd had frequent cause to work with others, this was the time she could most easily watch him in peace, as she occasionally had during their earliest cooperation.

Partly it was for the sake of admiring the view. Kirito's self-deprecation aside, she could see in his body the glimmerings of a handsome warrior. Were it not for the unchanging nature of Swordmaster “avatars”, it was clear his constant practice with a blade over the course of his time in Aincrad would've given him an enviable physique; as it was, he obviously hadn't let himself go as much as he'd implied from his younger days of training.

Not that I know how long ago those days were, Kizmel admitted to herself, propping herself up on one elbow to observe the rise and fall of his chest as he slept on, oblivious. He implies he's only a child, and yet…

And yet. The other reason she tried to watch over him in the morning, preferably alone, was for the chance to try and soothe his sleep when nightmares struck. Some of them, she could tell from his mutterings, were of events she herself had been present for; others, she wasn't so sure. Without knowing what kind of world he came from, she couldn't guess what traumas he might have suffered there.

Though sleep on this floor, at least, has been peaceful for us both. As terrible as Kayaba may be, I give him credit for leaving us this opportunity to recover from our battles. The gentle rocking of an anchored boat was, she'd found, as much a boon to relaxing as the relative lack of danger. Although the first night was certainly the most pleasant here.

Pity she wasn't likely to arrange that again. Though Kizmel had plans for addressing part of the problem, Black Cat's bunks were sadly too narrow for two—Argo's suggestions for “improving” them aside.

Her vigil came to an end all too soon, Kirito's eyes flickering open a few short minutes later. Yawning, he pushed himself up to lean against one bulkhead, legs dangling into the small gap between their bunks. “'Morning, Kizmel,” he said blearily, rubbing his eyes.

“Good morning, Kirito-kun.” Kizmel waited for his eyes to focus before swinging upright herself, privately relishing the way his gaze was instantly drawn to her figure. “Did you sleep well?”

He quickly snapped his eyes back up to hers, flushing. “Well enough.” Her partner grimaced then, some other thought chasing the embarrassment from his face. “Good thing, too. I think we'll need all the energy we can get today.”

She propped her chin on one hand and raised an eyebrow. “And why, besides Argo still being aboard, might that be, my friend? Are you expecting something like what happened on Kobayashi at Hyrus Fortress?”
“Ugh, I forgot all about Argo… That, too, but the thing is, the Fortress is underwater, right?” Kirito waited for her nod of understanding, and continued, “Remember what I said a few months back about dungeons associated with water?”

Any amusement Kizmel might’ve felt at his reaction was chased out by the memory of the Trial of the Wise. A convoluted place, that had been, with puzzles clearly designed to try the sanity of anyone seeking access to the Reliquary. On top of that, the true Trial that had awaited them at the top had in some ways been the worst of the three.

Worse, the place had been her introduction to the concept of cephalopods. She had yet to forgive the ancient Alliance for using such creatures to guard their secrets.

Sighing, Kizmel slipped off her bunk. “I see your point, Kirito-kun. In that case, let us have breakfast and be on our way. The sooner we deal with whatever perils Hyrus Fortress has for us, the better.”

Argo was, fortunately, already awake when they moved from their tiny cabin to the lounge. Sitting upright at the table, she was eating what appeared to be a fish on a stick, while her free hand occasionally made motions suggesting she was browsing through her menu.

“G’morning, guys,” she said, waving her snack at them. “Have a seat, an’ Argo-nee-chan will be right with ya!”

Exchanging a very human eye-roll with her partner at being invited to sit on their own boat, Kizmel nonetheless complied. Taking care to sit close up to Kirito—for the sake of leaving space for Philia and Rain, of course—she brought up her menu to conjure up her own breakfast. In no mood for anything elaborate before the ordeal she feared was before them, she contented herself with a handful of granola bars; simple but filling, as she’d found some months before.

“I appreciate the consideration, Argo,” she said, a few bites in, “but I don't think we actually need to consult with you before we begin our expedition today.”

“Eh, that’s what you think,” Argo said, utterly unperturbed. “The Rat sees-all, knows-all… or somethin’ to that effect!” She took a large bite of her fish, adding around it, “Anyway, yer guest star party members might have something to ask before ya go, yeah?”

“…’Guest star’…?” Kizmel murmured to Kirito.

“Gamer joke,” he muttered back. “I’ll tell you later.”

Ah, of course. More of the interesting variations in Swordmaster dialect. Argo had included a thorough lexicon of relevant “gamer” terms in the guide she'd sold Kizmel when the elf first became a Swordmaster herself, but it had mostly been concerned with the expressions used by the Mystic Scribing. Much of the slang Swordmasters used in everyday situations and battle had also been included, but—perhaps unsurprisingly—some oversights had been made.

Not that Kizmel minded too much. Learning a bit more every day was just part of the adventure of fitting into Swordmaster society.

“Who’s a guest star?” Blearily brushing red hair out of her face, Philia trailing a pace behind, Rain stepped into the lounge with a yawn—and cut off, registering the small gathering already there. “Oh. You're still here, huh?”

“Aw, Rain-chan, ya make a girl feel unwanted.” Argo tore off the last bite of her fish, swallowed, and grinned around the stick left behind. “Don't worry, girls, I'll be outta yer hair soon. Can't stick around in one place too long, y'know; got clients to meet.”
“Just so long as you don't sell somebody something that lets them beat us to Hyrus Fortress,” Philia grumbled, thumping gracelessly into a seat at the table. “The loot there must be fantastic, and I call dibs!”

“No promises, Phi-chan. I got a rep to live up to, so I can't play favorites.” The Rat leaned back, resting her head on linked hands. Propping her feet up on the table, her eyes fell half-closed in a way that reminded Kizmel of a cat with fresh prey. “Tell ya what, though: I'll give ya a head start. I'll wait until you're diving ta leave, how's that?”

Groaning, Kirito let his head sink onto the table. “Why do I get the feeling that's more for your benefit than ours, Argo…?”

No player in their right mind trusted Argo the Rat on anything they hadn't paid for. Philia, thus, was more than a little surprised when the info broker started her own preparations at the same time the treasure hunter team was getting ready to dive. After sailing north toward the supposed location of Hyrus Fortress, while the four of them were equipping blades, Argo conjured up her floater-paddles and moved to sit at the edge of Black Cat's deck.

I guess there's something to the rumors of the Rat having a soft spot for Kirito, Philia thought, checking to make sure her Swordbreaker was secure at her waist. Well, there's another perk of traveling with the Black Swordsman. Even if those DDA jerks don't think so.

“Are you going to be okay, Argo?” Kirito asked. He had one of the diving masks they'd gotten the previous night in one hand, but his attention was on the info broker. “We're pretty far from the nearest inhabited island, and you can't really fight on those things.”

Argo waved a dismissive hand. “Ahh, don't worry 'bout me, Kii-bou. I'm just gonna go far enough so it ain't obvious I came from here, and meet up with Kraken fer my first appointment o' the day.”

Philia saw Kizmel stiffen in the middle of taking her mask out of her inventory, and felt her own muscles tighten. Kraken was the massive thirty-meter sailboat serving as the Divine Dragons' flagship on the Fifty-First Floor's seas. Philia had only seen the boat from a distance so far, and was just as happy keeping it that way, given the way the DDA had been behaving lately.

“Be careful, my friend,” Kizmel said quietly, looking at the Rat with obvious concern. “They are… not in the best of moods, as you well know.”

“Don'tcha worry 'bout that, Kii-chan.” Argo's words were light, but for once her tone and expression were something resembling serious. “They may not be happy with 'Beaters' just now, but they won't do anything to little ol' me. They ain't crazy. I'm their best source o' info, and they know it. I can live with some death glares.”

“You're probably right.” Kirito still looked troubled, though; not that Philia blamed him. “Still. Watch your back, Argo. If anything goes wrong, send me a PM. If we're not in the dungeon, at least, we'll be right there.”

She might've imagined it, Philia thought, but there actually seemed to be some genuine warmth in Argo's smile at that. “You'll be the first ta know, Kii-bou,” she promised. “And… thanks.” She pushed off then, jumping off Black Cat's deck to land nimbly on the water's surface. “Anyway, I'm off! See ya guys later—maybe at Onzenna, sometime tonight!”

“Lyusula preserve us,” Kizmel muttered, watching her go.

“Tell me about it.” Rain's gaze was sharp as it lingered on Argo's figure, shrinking into the distance
with surprising speed. “What's with that girl, anyway?”

“If I ever figure it out, I'll let you know,” Kirito told her, shaking his head with a sigh. “I've know her since the First Floor, and I still don't understand her.”

Of course you don't. You really don't have a clue why people keep flocking around you, do you, Kirito? Let me guess: you pulled that “Beater” stunt after Illfang, and it never even entered your head even Argo might feel a debt?

Oh, well. If Kirito was going to be oblivious to the effect he had on the people he helped out, Philia wasn't going to pass up the fun of watching him be completely confused by people not hating him. Next to treasure hunting, it was probably the best part of their little party.

Well, that and knowing for sure there were people who had her back. She was actually going to miss that, when they finished the Hyrus' Forge quest.

Abruptly, Kirito shook himself and turned away from the direction of Argo's departure. “Well, we've got a dungeon to clear. If we can, I'd like to get it all done today, so everything is ready by the time the raid on Medrizzel starts.”

“Then let's be about it, my friend.” Kizmel settled her Diver's Mask over her face, paused to take a deep breath, and leapt off the deck in a perfect swan dive.

Kirito was only a second behind her, followed quickly by Rain. Philia, realizing she was on the verge of not being the first on the scene for treasure, hurriedly fixed her own mask in place and dove after them—only belatedly remembering they hadn't actually tested the masks yet.

Plunging into the Fifty-First Floor's unusually deep water, the treasure hunter was relieved to find the masks did exactly what they needed them to: instead of an icon indicating Drowning status showing up on her HUD, a symbol resembling gills popped up just under her HP bar. Despite being underwater, she could breathe just as if she were on dry land.

Kicking her feet to follow her teammates down, Philia also noticed the mask's goggles seemed to give clearer vision through the water; clear enough, actually, that she suspected they could've made the trip during the night without much trouble.

Not that I'd have wanted to try it, she thought, glancing uneasily to either side. Even on a breather floor, I wouldn't bet against nastier mobs coming out after dark.

Right now, though, she and her friends had a fairly clear shot down toward the bottom of the sea. Illuminated by the vision bonus from their masks and sunlight filtering down from above, there was nothing but blue water, the four descending swordsmen—and then, a few meters down, a small school of eels, lit up by their own flashes of static.

Spark Eels, those were. They'd encountered them during the search for Zaro, and weren't anything too dangerous. Assuming, of course, one took into account the attacks that gave them their name.

The four of them quickly split up to dodge the first blasts of electricity the eels sent their way. Kirito and Kizmel darted off in one direction, kiting about half the Spark Eels behind them; Philia and Rain drew off the others, and as soon as she had an opening the treasure hunter drove in with an awkward underwater Sonic Leap. Her target was just starting to charge up another shock when her Swordbreaker slashed into its neck; she took a mild charge that made her fingers numb even through the pain absorbers, but the affect on her HP wasn't worth worrying about.

The Spark Eel sputtered a couple of weak, powerless shocks into the water as its head drifted away
from its body, before both pieces shattered into slowly-drifting polygons.

Meanwhile, just a couple of meters to one side, Rain rolled nimbly away from a fully-charged blast, then rammed a Rage Spike right into the middle of a Spark Eel's head. Kicking back away, she twitched violently when the eel's retaliatory spark grazed her; in return, she swung forward again and gutted it with a well-aimed Snake Bite.

*I have got to figure out how she fights so well underwater,* Philia thought enviously, pushing herself awkwardly chop another eel to bits with a modified Horizontal Square. *Sword Skills just don’t work right when you can’t plant your feet—eep!*

One more Spark Eel had just charged up another spark blast, and its passage was close enough to Philia's head to make half her hair stand on end even underwater. Startled and irritated, she joined Rain in a double Vertical Arc, chopping the offending fish into a full eight separate pieces.

By the time they'd cleared out their half of the school, Kirito and Kizmel had taken out the rest and were headed back to rejoin them. Judging from their HP, the two of them hadn't had much more trouble, and with just a couple of quick glances to reassure themselves everyone was all right, they kicked off again toward the seafloor.

It wasn't long before a large shape came into clearer view ahead of them. What looked like the remnants of a sunken island, on which perched a squared-off fortress of dark stone, turrets adorning the corners and triangular sections sticking out from each side.

*That's not exactly Dark Elf style,* Philia thought uneasily, as they swam in closer to the fortress. *That castle they've got on the Fourth Floor's bright, not… this.*

It might've been the effect of having been underwater for who knew how many centuries. Somehow, though, she didn't think that was it. The stone looked like it had always been dark, not tarnished by time. It was still too smooth and clean for that. More, looking closer, something about the way the fortress was put together just didn't look to her like the same style as Yofel Castle.

From the quick look Kirito and Kizmel exchanged, it wasn't just her imagination.

Coming in close to the southern wall of the fortress, a large door set into that side's triangular projection came into view. Kirito quickly changed course to lead the party toward it, moving with strong but cautious strokes.

At last, they were close enough to touch down on the seafloor; as soon as they did, Kizmel stepped in close to the onyx door. Her expression was unreadable behind her mask, but Philia thought she could faintly hear the elf girl muttering something as she traced one hand over featureless stone.

*No, not featureless,* she realized, moving close enough to see for herself. *That's... more of the writing from the cave on Ousetta? No, not quite. It looks... different, somehow.*

After a long examination, Kizmel finally turned to Kirito, made a gesture Philia couldn't quite interpret, and led him to one side of the door. For a long moment, he only stared at the spot she indicated; then, slowly, he brought up his menu and made a few quick, abrupt motions. The Sea Dragon's Sword vanished from his back, replaced by the familiar tarnish of the Baneblade.

Drawing the enchanted weapon, he thrust it into stone—and with a water-muffled groan, the door swung ponderously open.

From the moment they stepped into the entrance foyer of Hyrus Fortress, Kirito was deeply uneasy.
The rest of his party seemed uncomfortable, too, as the door closed behind them, but his problem had nothing to do with the way the water around them drained away like an airlock. Kizmel, he was sure, felt the same.

*I've seen this styling before,* he thought, reaching up to pull off his diving mask when the water had drained completely. *It's been four months since the last time, but there's no mistaking it.*

The stone walls of the foyer weren’t quite as dark as the last building of its kind he and Kizmel had entered, but if anything that made the similarities to another such much clearer. The bas-relief artwork was unmistakable, in both style and detail. The imagery was grim, with an unmistakable undertone of a deep grudge, and a desire for power. *Just like…*

Kirito was pulled out of dark recollection by a hand landing on his shoulder. Turning his head, he found Kizmel looking back at him, understanding clear in her eyes. Minutely, she shook her head, and gently squeezed his shoulder. “This isn't like before, Kirito,” she murmured.

Taking a deep breath, he nodded slowly. “…You're right. Sorry.” *This time, we're on a floor we can be pretty sure is easier than usual, this isn't part of a do-or-die questline—and Philia and Rain aren't low-levels in over their heads.*

“Um, guys?” Rain asked, when the pause had stretched on too long. “Sorry, but am I missing something here? I don’t like the look of this place. It doesn't look anything like Yofel Castle, or the Reliquary.”

“That's because it's not Dark Elf, or ancient human,” Kirito told her, finally looking beyond the disturbing artwork. “It's not even Forest Elf.”

The Fortress' entrance was wide, but oddly-shaped, set as it was into one of the structure's angular projections. Walled in stone like a very dark granite, it was lit by torches of flame so deeply blue as to almost be a glowing black. At the opposite end from the outer door, set at a strange angle enforced by the outside wall's position, a smaller door of the same onyx as the first appeared to lead deeper inside.

Unnervingly, there was no trace of any enemy. Nothing was there to greet them, save the bas-reliefs on the walls.

“I've seen something like this a few times before, though,” Kirito said after a brief pause, starting off for that far door. “This is Fallen Elf work. No mistake.”

“Fallen Elf,” Philia repeated, her footsteps hesitant behind him. “Um. As in those heretic elves who tried to get the other two groups to kill each other? Those Fallen Elves?”

“Those Fallen Elves,” Kizmel affirmed. “This place is eerily similar to their Twilight Citadel.” She fell quiet for a second. “Although not quite the same. This door did not attempt to kill us on entry.”

Kirito shivered. He remembered *that* little trap too well. It had featured prominently in his nightmares about that raid for months after.

“Killing doors. That's really friendly.” There was a rasp of metal on leather, as Rain drew her sword. “Okay. Any idea why Hyrus' Forge would be in a Fallen Elf castle, if the guy was supposed to be part of the ancient Alliance?”

Coming up on the door leading into the fortress proper, Kirito pulled out the Sea Dragon's Sword, and heard Kizmel and Philia doing the same. “That's a good question,” he admitted. “Nothing in the questline so far has said anything about Fallen Elves, and trust me, they're kind of a big deal.”
Conversation paused while he reached for the door handle—normal, to his relief, unlike the one on the outer door—and nodded for Kizmel to stand off to one side. She sidestepped, placing herself in a position to catch anything that might come through, and lifted her kite shield to defend the other girls.

Gut tensing in nervous anticipation, Kirito yanked open the door.

Instantly, something bone-white flashed into view, smashed into Kizmel's shield, and rebounded with a screech. A second later, a similarly-bright shape barreled under the shield, where it was promptly skewered by the swords of three startled players. It howled, an eerily hollow sound, collapsed to the stone floor, and shattered to pieces.

Kizmel quickly thrust her saber down in an Oblique against the fallen first enemy, catching it right in the skull. Then the three of them were through the door, and very busy.

A wide chamber, with oddly bright walls. That was the first impression Kirito got, between dodging claws, teeth, talons, and beaks. There were also an awful lot of mobs in it, judging from the flashes of movement he caught. Some of them humanoid, he thought—but as he was having to pry a sudden grip of very fangy jaws off his shoulder, he didn't really get a very good look.

The toothy thing biting him went flying with a Senda punch to the nose, buying him time help Kizmel swat away something flying that was trying very hard to peck her head off. Their two blades together sent it hurtling to shatter against a wall; Rain leapt through the gap, planting a Sonic Leap into something else.

She finished it off by bodily hurling it in a Shoulder Throw to slam hard into the floor, exploding into shards with a high-pitched whimper.

Around the time Kirito was gaining some breathing room with a Serration Wave, he caught the very disturbing snapping of bones somewhere behind him. That, if he wasn't mistaken, was the sound of Philia's Swordbreaker breaking something besides swords.

The battle ended sooner than he expected it to, the room emptying of mobs with startling suddenness. Only when the last of them was spinning azure polygons did he realize that half the movement he'd seen coming in, and all of the “humanoid”, had been nothing more than reflections.

The long hall they found themselves in now was lined with dozens of mirrors. Some of them gave perfect reflections; others were warped in various ways, like funhouse mirrors. Put together, they gave an illusion of the room being even bigger than it was, and had very successfully given Kirito the impression they'd walked into a massive ambush.

They also reminded him once again just how good a programmer Kayaba Akihiko really was. Mirrors were, like water, something tricky to get just right in a Full-Dive environment.

“Well,” Rain said, slightly short of breath, when it was clear nothing more was coming. “That was fun. Anybody know what those things were? I didn't get a good look at their names in that mess.”

“Bone Wolves and Bone Falcons,” Kizmel said, slowly straightening from a combat stance. “Undead allies of the Dark and Forest Elves. Which leads me to suspect why Hyrus' Forge is in a Fallen Elf fortress.” She shot a glance at Kirito. “Are you thinking as I am, my friend?”

He nodded, the pieces coming together for him now, too. “The Alliance took this place away from the Fallen Elves, and used it to store the Forge more securely, if I had to guess. Animated skeletons like that were probably left over from traps or something when the Alliance attacked.”

Or made with Fallen Elf techniques after they took the place, if they were feeling more pragmatic
than principled that day. Brr... Let's not think about that.

“Just a guess, of course,” he added with a shrug. “But it’d certainly explain a lot. Though speaking of the unexplained…” He lifted an eyebrow in Rain’s direction. “You actually got the Martial Arts Extra Skill? Argo doesn’t usually sell people that info.”

I should know. After that hassle, I’m not surprised Argo was worried about revenge.

The redhead chuckled, scratching the back of her head sheepishly. “Ah... well, you know how it is, being a solo, Kirito. You pick up whatever you can to give yourself better odds, right?”

Kirito looked at her for a long moment, his introspection almost making him overlook her revealing swimsuit for once.

High-level Hiding, strong Sword Skills, and great footwork—and now Martial Arts, too? You’re not exactly an average solo, Rain.

“Well, I can’t argue with that,” he said aloud. “Anyway, we should probably get moving. Something about those mirrors tells me this place has worse than mobs to throw at us.”

“Tell me about it,” Philia muttered. Shaking her head, she started walking toward the door at the other end of the hall, muttering, “Some of those mirrors aren’t very flattering, as it is...”

At that moment, she walked by one mirror in particular that made Kirito stifle a snicker. Instead of distorting her figure, this one just changed her outfit: instead of a blue bikini, the mirror showed her dressed for exploring lost temples, complete with a fedora on her head and a whip coiled at her waist.

Catching a glimpse of it herself, Philia paused, staring at the “reflection”. “Eh? What the—”

Rain didn’t bother suppressing her own snicker at the sight. “Hey, I guess this one shows your true self! That’s totally you, isn’t it, Philia?”

“...But I’m a treasure hunter, not an archaeologist,” the blonde said, pouting. “I don’t want to put ancient relics in a museum, I want to take them home!” She stepped away from mirror, giving it a wary look. “You try it, Rain!”

Gamely, the redhead approached, still chuckling—only for her laughter to cut off when she saw her own altered image. For her, the mirror on the wall gave a frilly white outfit, complete with apron and headdress. “Er—”

Philia grinned. “Ha! So your ‘true self’ belongs in a maid cafe, Rain? Some long-hidden dream of yours you haven’t mentioned?”

Rain flushed and edged away. “Okay, so it’s just making fun of us,” she muttered. “What about you two? C’mon, we shouldn’t be the only ones!”

A small smile playing at her lips, Kizmel walked up. “I admit I’m curious—though you’ll have to explain the jokes for me, later... Hm?”

The first two had left Kirito laughing to himself. His partner’s illusory reflection, though, made him fall quiet, silently staring at the result.

For Philia and Rain, the mirror had shown them in obvious costume, the treasure hunter’s obvious cosplay making him wonder just how direct Kayaba’s involvement was. For the elf girl, the effect was simpler, but despite—or because of—that simplicity, it hit all the harder.

Kizmel’s violet swimsuit was, in the mirror, replaced by blue jeans and a purple tank top, both of
them tight enough to show off her figure almost as effectively as her bikini. More importantly, though, at least to Kirito…

“These are… human clothes, aren't they?” the elf murmured, looking over her own reflection with obvious interest. “From your world, that is, not the fashions of the humans of Aincrad.”

“…Yep,” Rain said quietly. “Sure are.” After a few moments of quiet observation, the redhead smiled. “Not bad, Kizmel. Looks good on you.”

“…Yeah, it does,” Kirito whispered, something tightening painfully in his chest. “Really good…”

Just as the hush was starting to feel oppressive, a flash of light broke the tension. “Got a picture!” Philia declared, holding up a crystal. “Can't forget this one, can we?”


Kirito rolled his eyes, but moved to take his partner's place readily enough. Inwardly, he was actually grateful for the distraction. Kizmel had looked really nice in the mirror—but at the same time, the sight of her in modern Earth street clothes had reminded him of the dilemma that weighed on him a little more every day.

I will find a way, he told himself, approaching the mirror. I can't… I can't just let it end like—

Dark thoughts were blown right out of his head when he finally saw his own reflection in the enchanted mirror. For a long, horrified moment, he could only stare. So could his party members, whose gazes he could feel, even if he couldn't see them.

“…You know, my friend,” Kizmel said slowly, a teasing note in her voice, “I think the hair is really the only difference to your body…”

That, along with Rain and Philia breaking into giggles, broke the spell. Wrenching his gaze away from the horrifying image in the mirror, Kirito, darted toward the door. Nothing in the fortress was going to frighten him worse than that!

“Okay, I admit the first mirror room was kind of funny,” Rain groused, tracing an inverted triangle via Sharp Nail into the back of a Walking Armor. “This one? Kind of losing the novelty!”

While Philia tangled the Armor's sword up with the ridges on the back of her own blade, a crash echoed from somewhere beyond them. “Working on it!” Kirito called. “I think we've almost got it—Kizmel, look out for that Deadhand!”

Belying the dark stone of the exterior and entrance room, so far most chambers in Hyrus Fortress had had a wide assortment of mirrors, each with their own gimmick—or none at all, which Rain thought was almost worse. The regular mirrors might not have done anything by themselves, but those rooms had had more mobs in them, and made fighting them that much more confusing.

The room they were in then was circular, with lights bouncing off the mirrors in strange patterns. Philia had quickly figured out they needed to change the patterns by breaking some of the mirrors; the problem was working out exactly which. On the bright side, there was a switch in the middle that reset them, as they'd had to do three times already.

On the not-so-bright side, the room had two animated suits of armor, which seemed to keep respawning until the puzzle was finished. That left two of the party on mirror-smashing duty, and the
other two guarding.

Topping things off were the Deadhands, one of which Kizmel was just then impaling through its giant palm. Huge, necrotic hands, which—going from experience with the series the quest was clearly ripping off—probably yanked anyone they grabbed clear back to the entrance to the Fortress.

*If they don't just drop us into some death trap, Rain thought grimly. This may be a breather level, and Kayaba might play “fair”, but let's not forget about the whole “exploding pirate ship” thing, right?*

The Walking Armor's sword abruptly snapped under Philia's continued assault, giving Rain the opportunity to slam a Suigetsu roundhouse kick into the back of its empty helmet. The Armor tumbled sideways, clumsily headbutting its own companion before it could regain its footing.

For a second, Rain had the urge to giggle, seeing both helmets fly off. The urge was stronger when she saw them flail around in response, as if trying to find their lost heads. Then—

*Crash!*

“Got it!” Kirito yelled triumphantly. “Kizmel, get that one over there, that should be the last—”

“Yes, I see it!” Kizmel was still tangling with the Deadhand with her saber, and the lamps reflecting off mirrors gave the whole room a bewildering psychedelic lightshow, but somehow she was able to turn from her target and fling her shield with surprising precision at the mirror Kirito indicated. With another loud crash, it shattered to pieces, leaving bare stone behind.

Light stabilized. The two Walking Armors stopped blindly trying to find their helmets, and dropped straight to the floor like puppets with cut strings. For a long, wonderful moment, the room was quiet, and still.

Which, of course, was when the largest mirror in the room blew inward in a hail of glass shards, broken apart by a tide of water rushing in.

Hurriedly opening her menu to retrieve her Diving Mask, Rain heard the others doing the same, along with high-pitched sounds of outrage. And above it all, in a tone of deep disgust, Kirito yelled, “I hate water dungeons!”

*The ancients did an excellent job of guarding their treasures*, Kizmel thought, slashing her saber across the nose of a Barracanha just before it could sink its many teeth into her arm. *The defenses they left behind have worked wonderfully to keep them out of the hands of evildoers.*

*I may never forgive them for it.*

While she dueled with the many-toothed fish, Philia and Rain swam by in half pursuit-of, half flight-from a Greater Ignition Squid. They busily hacked away at its tentacles, at the same time dodging away from those they couldn't quite hit and doing their best not to be burnt by the strange underwater flames it was occasionally sending their way.

At least that was the last of the Ignition Squids. Once she finished off the Barracanha, Kizmel could join the two of them in doing their very best to utterly obliterate the “mini-boss” that was this particular flooded chamber's main denizen.

*[Tyrant Squid Emperor]*, it was called. Half again the size of the Tyrant Squid King she and Kirito had fought in the Trial of the Wise three months before, it had a similarly greater number of tentacles
—and underwater, it was considerably more agile than its smaller brethren had been.

“Down to its third lifebar now!” she heard Kirito call out, his voice muffled and distorted by the water and the masks they all wore against it. He was near the ceiling of the chamber, slashing a Savage Fulcrum into one of the Squid Emperor's heavier tentacles. “Halfway there, guys!”

Kizmel drove a Reaver into the Barracanha's flank, finally emptying the carnivorous fish's lifebar. She turned away from it, thinking nothing of its thrashing death throws—only to yelp in undignified surprise when its teeth managed a spiteful bite on her shoulder, just before shattering to pieces.

Muttering imprecations under her breath, she paused only long enough to confirm the bite had done little to her HP before kicking off to join the chase above. With healing made difficult, to put it mildly, by the environment, the obvious strategy was to defeat the Squid Emperor as quickly as possible.

Halfway to the malevolent cephalopod's main body, one of its thicker “main” tentacles tried to swat Kizmel into a wall. With an adroit twist, she managed to skim past it and inflict a light slash; two smaller limbs lashed out at her in response, almost wrapping around her legs before she get away.

One of those tentacles suddenly fell limp and began to drift away in a spray of red light just before it could reach, sawed free by the back of Philia's Swordbreaker. The other flailed wildly, recoiling from a deep stab from Rain's blade—its uncontrolled thrashing catching Philia in the process.

The heat of sudden anger rushed through Kizmel's veins at the sight of her friend spinning toward the wall. “Kirito!” she shouted through the water, redoubling her pace. “Switch!”

Her partner was just finishing a three-hit attack of his own, leaving glowing slashes like claw-marks in the Squid Emperor's hide. Before she'd even finished the second word, he twisted mid-stroke, kicked off the mini-boss' bulbous head, and swam off to engage its tentacles.

Kizmel and Rain promptly filled the space he'd left, yelling twin battlecries as their blades sank deep into the Squid Emperor's skull. The redhead's sword tore a long gash out near the squid's maw; the Dark Elf's saber went higher, finally nicking one eye as it ripped free.

The resulting convulsions from the Squid Emperor set its tentacles flailing randomly, managing to catch all three of its active foes with hard blows. Adding insult to injury, Kirito's tumble sent him right into the recovering Philia, ending with both of them crashing hard into one stone wall.

“Where's a lawyer when you need one?!” Rain gasped out, bouncing back-first off one of the chamber's ubiquitous mirrors. “There's no way this is legal for a Thirteen-Rated game!”

Kizmel had no idea what the redhead was talking about, but as she ricocheted off the ceiling she could certainly concur with the sentiment. When first Argo had offhandedly described human legal matters to her, the elf had thought she would never wish the process on anyone. This, she decided irritably, assuredly warranted it.

“Enough!” she snapped, twisting to rest her feet solidly on stone. “My friends—let us finish this beast!”

Lunging back into combat with the tentacled abomination, Kizmel found an obscure satisfaction in hearing loud cries of agreement from her female companions. In many ways she remained an outsider among the Swordmasters, after all.

Against monstrosities such as this, it appeared she had all the allies she could ever wish for.
“Okay. I think this is the final room,” Philia said wearily, turning the large key they'd finally located in the lock. “Whew… And I thought the Zaro Cave Palace was bad. If I never see another water-based dungeon again…”

Kirito nodded in rueful agreement. Having set out for Hyrus Fortress mid-morning, it had taken them until late afternoon to finally make their way to the chamber at the very heart of the dungeon. Far too many mirror-based puzzles had been involved, one of which had left them completely turned around for almost an hour; almost worse had been that one entire half of the Fortress was inverted relative to the rest. Everywhere, mirrors lining walls had confused even the simplest actions.

Not to mention Kizmel and squids, he thought, carefully not looking at his partner. Not that he needed to, to be able to feel her ire. Ever since the encounter with the Tyrant Squid Emperor, Kizmel had been simmering hot enough he could almost sense it in the air. Let's not come back here again.

With luck, they wouldn't need to. The big key of distinctly ancient aesthetic released the seal with a loud click, and the ornate onyx door groaned open to reveal what the map suggested should be the final chamber. All that remained now was to see what final challenge Hyrus Fortress had for them.

Kirito didn't know what he expected, exactly. The last dungeon he'd been to relating to the Baneblade had, at its core, contained only the blade and an ancient treaty; the battle he and his partner had fought had been with other players, not a challenge given by the game.

What greeted the party here, he soon found, was a circular room lit by more dark blue torches, with a fountain in the center. It wasn't really that different from other rooms they'd passed through—save that the only mirrors present were six set in the far wall, rather than a number across the whole chamber.

It seemed oddly simple. Which, really, might've been why he wasn't even surprised when the door swung ponderously shut behind them.

“Well,” Kizmel remarked after a moment. “I suppose this must, indeed, be the end. In that case, where is our final challenge?”

“Good question,” Rain muttered, hand resting uneasily on the hilt of her sword. “Though I'm guessing it's got something to do with those mirrors…”

A giggle filled the air then. Kirito's hair instantly stood on end just from the sound.

Atop the fountain in the center of the chamber, a silhouette faded into view. He couldn't see much detail; just that the figure seemed to be female—very female, from the curves—was carrying a very large sword on her back, and if he squinted seemed to have a very bright shade of hair. Pink? Maybe purple? …No, that's not really important right now. Who or what…?

Sitting with legs crossed, the figure giggled again. “Well, hello there! Challengers at last? Come to claim Hyrus' Forge, to restore the Baneblade's shine? Welcome, welcome!”

Kirito exchanged a deeply uneasy glance with Kizmel. Previous challenges in ancient ruins had been administered by somber shades of people the two of them had known. This strangely cheery girl did not fit either category. “That's right,” he said, squaring his shoulders, trying not to make it too obvious that he wanted nothing more than to draw his sword. “You're here to challenge us, right?”

“Uh-huh!” the silhouette said. He got the vague impression of a grin. “Well, kinda. Actually, I'm just here to observe how you deal with it. Your real challenge will be… these!”

She snapped her fingers, and four of the mirrors flashed brightly. When the light faded, four figures
stepped out of them, shrouded in darkness. Even after stepping into the torchlight, their features remained obscure, monochromatic; it took Kirito a couple seconds to make out what they actually were.

One male, three female, none of them wearing proper armor. Between them, two ordinary one-handed swords, another with a ridged back, and a saber paired with a kite shield.

“Ulp,” he heard Philia say, as his gaze zeroed in on the figure standing right across from him. “Mirror-match, huh?”

“That's right!” the silhouetted girl said brightly. “After all, isn't our worst enemy always ourselves? Now… prove your worth to claim Hyrus' Forge!”

_Oh, hell, no_, Kirito thought, hand blurring up to grasp his sword—and his dark doppelgänger launched in a Sonic Leap to meet him.

Kizmel's first, inane thought as the battle was joined was simply, _At least it's not squids!_ If there was one foe she thought she could happily go a lifetime without ever encountering again, it was anything with tentacles. Finding that Hyrus Fortress' final challenge had nothing to do with them was initially a deep relief.

Then, mere moments into the battle with their own mirror images—their “Others”, as the names above their heads proclaimed them—a staccato of sounds not unlike cymbals clashing filled the room—one of them being from Kizmel's Oblique thrust bouncing off her copy's identical strike.

_What?_!

The moment the backlash released her, she jumped back, raising her shield to ward against the other-self. To her disquiet, it also retreated; though that did at least give her a chance to see what had happened with her friends. Making sure to keep the doppelgänger in the corner of her vision, she risked a glance to one side, then the other.

As she’d suspected, though she hadn’t seen exactly how the others had chosen to open the battle, they all were recovering from the rebound of two Sword Skills colliding.

Kirito was the first to try again, darting in close to his copy to unleash the beginning of a Snake Bite. He was as fast as ever—faster than any other Swordmaster Kizmel had ever known, save only Asuna—yet still, somehow, his Other matched him movement for movement, intercepting the Sea Dragon's Sword mid-swing with a loud crash.

“Mirror images,” he grunted out, working with the recoil to push himself farther back and away. “This is just like—”

“Yeah,” Rain agreed grimly, spinning her sword lightly in one hand. “Water Temple. Why'd it have to be like _that_ old dungeon?!”

“Because this whole world is crazy?” Philia suggested, watching her Other anxiously. “So, um… Ideas, guys?”

“Wait just a second,” Kirito suggested, eyes narrowing. “The challenges in these dungeons haven't always been straightforward. Maybe the answer isn't even to fight at all, but to just wait—look out!”

The warning was welcome, but unneeded. Kizmel's eyes had never completely left her Other, and when it suddenly darted forward to thrust its saber at her, she had her shield in the way in plenty of
time. There was a teeth-grating sound of steel shearing against steel, the Other's saber scraping across
the shield; then it was leaping back and away from Kizmel's leg as she attempted to sweep its legs.

An ordinary thrust, she realized. Not a Sword Skill. Why…?

Testing it, she lunged forward while the Other was still mid-leap. A simple but fast Reaver, quick
enough to get past an unready opponent's guard. Usually.

Against a Swordmaster, Kizmel would've been startled that her foe actually managed to initiate one
of its own while still airborne. Against these Others, she felt only grim resignation.

“Okay.” Kirito conceded, as the elf fell back into a defensive stance. “Looks like we're going to have
to do this the hard way. Sooner or later, they have to slip up, and—” He broke off, whipping up his
sword to counter an abrupt leap from his Other, before chasing it back with a simple Horizontal.
“And I think their gear isn't as good as ours,” he finished, pointing his blade toward his Other's
lifebar.

A quick glance told Kizmel what her partner meant. Even when Sword Skills canceled each other
out, both parties still received a tiny injury to their life-forces. All things being equal, that trade meant
it was better to dodge and strike directly whenever possible; against these Others, it seemed that the
foe took greater harm.

“That will be a long battle of attrition,” she warned.

“Then we'd better get started, right?” Rain spun her sword again, bearing a feral grin, and without
further warning launched in a Sonic Leap at her dark Other.

Kizmel hesitated for an eyeblink, surprised by the other girl's audacity. An eyeblink only—then she
was racing for her own doppelgänger. Skidding to a halt a meter away from it, she used her
momentum to begin a spin, unleashing a Treble Scythe on the Other.

As before, their blades collided in a flash of crimson light and crash of sound. This time, though, she
rode the backlash, whirling back and away—and right back in, driving a blazing Linear at her
double.

A sliver vanished from her HP with each blow, but twice that was taken from the Other. It was
driven back as much as she when their Skills clashed, and it seemed so long as she forced it match
her blow for blow, the Other could not or would not attempt a lesser strike to slip past her guard.

Kirito and Rain had taken up similar strategies to either side of her, Kizmel registered in the gap
between a Streak and the beginnings of a Parallel Sting. The two of them were blurs of singing steel,
the redhead scarcely slower than the Black Swordsman himself as they kept their copies in a
deadlock.

Here, Vertical Arcs rebounded into Gengetsu flip-kicks; there, Rage Spikes met in midair, the blades'
wielders bouncing back to touch against walls and leap forward again. Slants collided, their users
stumbling, rejoining into Vorpal Strikes that shook the room with their clash.

At the farthest edge of the chamber, Philia seemed to have taken a different tack, her Swordbreaker's
ridged back striking against her Other's blade with every strike. Having taken Kirito's words to heart,
the treasure hunter appeared to be trying to shatter her dark duplicate's lesser weapon.

An interesting tactic, Kizmel thought, though she was unsure how well it was likely to work. Then
again, she thought, leaping halfway across the room to meet her Other with a Fell Crescent, it's not
as if this is going very well for any of us—
It was then, as two sabers met two meters above the floor, that two Sea Dragon's Swords unleashed twin Serration Waves. A weak strike, meant to distract and gain distance more than injure.

A Skill that struck in a wide area, not directly against one opponent.

Buffeted by the fringe of Kirito's Serration Wave, Kizmel's Other's saber slid just a hair to one side, and her own blade came slashing down through the gap to carve a deep line down through the Other's shoulder.

Kizmel landed behind the Other, spun, and shouted, “Kirito! Switch!”

Her partner didn't ask questions. He only twisted away from his opponent and leapt for the Other Kizmel, sword alight with the glow presaging another Sword Skill. Crossing Kizmel's path while she turned her own attention elsewhere, Kirito's Sea Dragon's Sword blurred into a Vertical Square as soon as he was within reach—and this time, the Other made no effort to directly mirror him.

Facing off now against Kirito's doppelgänger, Kizmel stabbed at it four times in rapid succession, stunning the dark Other with Quadruple Pain. In the moment that bought her, she found herself hesitating for just a fraction of a breath: monochrome or not, it was a direct copy of her partner, her friend, and raising her blade against that face tightened something in her chest.

She quickly forced that away, though, holding close the intellectual certainty that this was nothing but a soulless mirror image. If she wanted to protect the real one, the fake needed to be put down.

At the other end of the room, while she traced a triangle in stabs against Kirito's Other, she caught glimpses of Rain and Philia similarly trading dueling partners. The redhead rolled away from her Other, coming up in a Suigetsu roundhouse kick to Philia's mirror-face; the blonde hopped sideways to catch the dark Rain's blade in the ridges of her Swordbreaker, and tugged, yanking it off-balance.

The war of attrition turned abruptly to a chaotic melee, Swordmasters trading foes in a mad scramble around the room that took them around, past, over, and sometimes under one another. Not that the change favored the living entirely; the shift in tactics allowed them to elude the Others' mirroring of their strikes, but at the same time—

Kizmel found the hard way that the Others were not completely unprepared when Kirito's unleashed a Snake Bite on her. The first blow struck her shield aside; the second would've taken her head, had she not recoiled from the blow.

Or if my “stats” were but a few levels lower, she thought ruefully, retaliating with a quick Diagonal Sting to stomach and chest. She could feel a faint numbness from her neck, one she had come to recognize would've been agonizing pain before she’d become a Swordmaster herself.

A year ago, that blow would have taken my life. But not today. Not any longer.

Rain flashed by, using the chamber's central fountain as a jumping-off point for a descending Meteor Palm against Other Philia. Her own double lashed out at the real Philia with a Savage Fulcrum, only to be countered before it could land the third blow by Kirito slashing Sharp Nail into its back.

Without needing to be called, Kizmel broke her Other's pursuit with a simple Reaver, forcing it to mimic her. Rain, reeling from her foe's latest Slant, turned her stumble into a whirling Serration Wave to keep Other Kirito busy a moment.

They'd all lost a tithe and more of their HP, Kizmel saw when she had a free moment in the chaos. More injury than any of them had taken in the quest so far, even aboard Kobayashi. Even so, even without time to pull back and heal, she knew they'd all faced much worse before. This battle…
This is the kind of battle a true warrior lives for, she thought, glimpsing a wild grin on Kirito's face as they again traded enemies without a word. A challenge, not a massacre—and with friends to count on to watch my back.

This is what I could never find among my own people.

As their mirror-images' life-forces dwindled, the party of Swordmasters grew bolder even as the Others' attacks grew faster and more desperate. Longer Sword Skills were traded for single-hit strikes—and finally, Rain was the first to abandon them entirely, in favor of blows driven only by her own strength and reflexes. Slower to finish than those attacks empowered by ancient charms, and weaker, yet faster to begin, and far less predictable.

“Philia, Switch!”

It was with these practiced, not charmed, strikes that Rain suddenly resumed her attack against her own Other, driving it back from Philia. Not by any means the smooth, memorized slashes of someone who had trained without benefit of Sword Skills for a lifetime, yet Kizmel was still impressed with the way the redhead's blade slipped past her Other's guard in a flash, sinking into its gut with admirable speed and power before ripping back out and away.

Left facing her own double again, Philia was quick to put her Swordbreaker's unique advantages to use. Amid lightning-quick thrusts and slashes, here she parried; there, she caught her doppelgänger's blade in the ridges of her own. The Other, quick as it was to mimic Sword Skills, seemed not to understand, and could only use the back of its blade to tear at flesh, not steel.

From the sudden, widened grin on Kirito's face, her partner took their companions' success as a challenge. And why not? I don't believe I'm ready to be upstaged, either!

In a whirl of steel, a too-brief moment of their backs in contact, elf and human Swordmasters switched places once again, coming face to face with themselves one more time. Unlike Rain, Kirito had been slowly training himself to fight without benefit of charms for more than just a single blow when a Sword Skill would be wasteful, and Kizmel had been his sparring partner in that pursuit.

Reflexes they had honed to battle against evils among the Swordmasters came into play now against mere “elite mobs”.

Kirito was a whirlwind of black steel at her back, reflexes seeming to outpace even his Other's. He hammered its blade aside with one brutal blow; the Sea Dragon's Sword whipped up and away again before it could recover, slashing deeply across the Other's chest. It swept a forehand blow at him in return, but he only accepted the dip in his HP from the glancing hit to his shoulder, and pressed the attack.

Kizmel took the simple, direct approach of smashing her shield into her Other's saber—and kept right on going, driving it right into the stone wall. Pinned for a precious moment by the impact, it let out an incoherent grunt when her saber darted past its shield, stabbing into the dark double's gut. Once, twice, three times, the elf mercilessly thrust.

Recovery of the Other meant a shield driving Kizmel back in turn, and in a blur of spinning blades she and Kirito instinctively spun again, changing up the flow of battle once more.

In the center of the chamber, Rain traded fisticuffs with her Other as much as bladework. The meaty thuds of flesh meeting flesh dueled with the clash of steel-on-steel. At the far end, ominous sounds of abused metal heralded Philia's duel, seeming to count the moments until one side or the other failed completely.
Blue had long since turned to yellow, and yellow was draining fast into red—

“Switch!”

A ridge-backed sword caught straight steel, twisted, and snapped. Half a blade tumbled away, and Swordbreaker continued on, burying into a dark throat. Black hair that might almost have mimicked red fell away to the cold stone floor.

Metal screamed against metal. A ridge-backed sword was flung back, still clutched in one dark hand but an eternal instant too far to return. A knife-edged hand plunged into monochrome flesh with a brilliant red glow, and a sword was dropped to bounce on stone with a piercing clang.

A loud “Kiai!” as a black sword blurred through the air, slipping past saber and shield both. A brief resistance, futile against the sword's keen edge; two hands fell away, cleanly severed at the wrist. A twist of living wrist, a blinding-quick slash; a head flew free to join the lost limbs.

Shield met sword and won. A saber sank deep between ribs, and she watched herself enact a twisted parody of her nightmares. A face like the one she cared so much for stared back at her, blank eyes dimming with death.

With a resounding crash, four bodies shattered. In time with them, so too did the mirrors on the walls fracture and break into tinkling shards.

After minutes of yells and clashing steel, and moments of shattering glass, silence filled the room.

Shuddering, Philia slowly pulled herself upright from the pose her last strike had left her in. With shaking hands, she slipped her battered Swordbreaker into the scabbard at her waist, and took several moments to just breathe.

Not the most difficult fight she'd ever been in. Fast and furious as it had been, it still had nothing on Vemacitrin for difficulty—at least physically. Mentally, it had taken quite a toll, fighting enemies that looked human. Worse, ones that looked like copies of her friends. And herself. Later, Philia was going to thank Rain for at least sparing her from having to kill “herself”. Dealing the final blow to the redhead's NPC clone had been bad enough. If these things hadn't been monochrome, if they'd been full-color copies... I don't know if I could've done it at all.

Looking over at her party members, the treasure hunter had a feeling she wasn't alone in that. Rain and Kirito both looked so inscrutable it was obvious they weren't happy, and Kizmel's eyes were noticeably shadowed. The general silence told its own tale.

That silence was abruptly broken by a giggle, drawing Philia's eyes back to the fountain at the center of the chamber. Forgotten during the fight, the silhouette of a girl still sat there, watching them.

“Great job!” she said, clapping. “That's the determination it takes to master the Baneblade—and to find the Steel Castle's deepest secrets. Maybe you guys are worthy to find the truth.”

Truth? Philia glanced at the others, wondering if they had any better idea what that meant than she did. Rain, from the look on her face, didn't; Kirito and Kizmel... Eh? What's with them?

“Well, you'll find out on your own, if you keep it up. For now—” The silhouette snapped her fingers, and with a grinding sound the fountain slid sideways. “You have conquered Hyrus Fortress, fair and square. Claim your reward, brave warriors—and maybe we'll meet again, someday!”

One more clap, an impression of a grin on a shadowed face, and the girl faded completely from
view.

Treasure. That I can deal with. Clapping her own hands, Philia was the first to move toward the stairs now revealed in the floor. “Okay, guys!” she said loudly. “Let's see what we've got here!”

The others followed eagerly enough, and soon they were dividing up the contents of the small treasure room. Philia quickly claimed a shiny new Swordbreaker to replace her own, nearly worn-out weapon, while Kizmel hefted an ornate kite shield that looked to have been part of a set with the Swordbreaker.

She wasn't quite sure what Rain picked out. The redhead picked up some kind of old book, looked it over, and declared it to be hers without explanation.

In any case, the main attraction was the torch burning in the center of the circle of treasure chests. A blue flame, like the torches that lit the fortress throughout, but more intense. “Is that…?”

“Hyrus' Forge,” Kirito confirmed, tapping it to bring up its status display. “Actually,” he amended with a rueful grin, “it's the 'Flames of Hyrus' Forge'. According to this, the torch will light any forge sturdy enough with the kind of fire Hyrus used to make swords.”

“Ah.” Kizmel chuckled. “We misunderstood our goal this whole time… I did wonder how even a Swordmaster's inventory would carry an entire forge.”

“So did I, really.” Kirito shrugged, tapped a few commands into his menu, and consigned the torch to his storage. “I guess we bring this to Lisbeth, then, and let her take it from there.”

“Agreed. But I would suggest we wait until tomorrow morning. I realize that's close to when the raid against Medrizel is to be launched,” Kizmel added, when he opened his mouth. “I think, though, that we could all use a rest.” She nodded at where her time display would've been in her vision. “In any case, Liz will have closed her shop by the time we could return to the Teleport Gate. In light of that, I would advise we retire to Onzenna for the evening, and unwind in the hot springs.”

“Seconded!” Philia said quickly, perking up at the idea.

“Sounds like a plan,” Rain chimed in, tucking away her book with a tired smile. “I don't know about you guys, but I'm beat. Water dungeons are a real pain.”

Kirito gulped, obviously uncomfortable with the idea. Which Philia had pretty much expected, after everything that had happened already on the Fifty-First Floor, not to mention her little chat with Kizmel on Kobayashi. “I don't suppose I get a say…?”

“Not a chance!”

“Haaah… I guess this isn't so bad, after all…”

Sinking deeper into the water of the hot spring, Kirito let out a contented sigh and looked up at the underside of the floor above, glittering with reflected light. He'd been naturally anxious when his teammates insisted on going to Onzenna's hot springs; all the more so when they'd arrived, well after dark, and found that many other clears had had the same idea. The kind of crowd conditions that obtained on the Fifty-First Floor were exactly what he'd been trying to avoid, after all.

Other than a few dirty looks from the DDA, though, no one had seemed to pay any attention to his party, and as the central island of the floor Onzenna wasn't exactly small. The open-air hot springs had more than enough partitions to find a couple of lonely spots to themselves, far away from the
main body of the clearing group.

Better yet, none of the girls had even suggested trying out the mixed bathing section. They'd gone straight for an unoccupied women's spring, leaving Kirito to a likewise-empty men's, alone with his thoughts for practically the first time since they'd arrived on the floor.

Of course, as good as Onzenna's springs were, they were no better than any other body of water in Aincrad at simulating the feel of liquid. Even still, it was far better than nothing.

Letting the hot spring water soak into tired muscles, he felt the stress of the day ebbing out in turn. The tension of dancing around Argo's little schemes, the headache from navigating another water-based dungeon, the remembered fear of Fallen Elf fortifications…

The disturbing experience of fighting an elite mob with his best friend's face. That had been an exhilarating fight, no doubt about it, but it had taken an effort to ignore what his final foe had looked like. Watching “her” die, by his own hand, had felt horribly like all the times he'd seen the real thing fall in the beta test, only worse.

*It was just a mirror boss,* Kirito reminded himself, eyes falling closed. *Not the first time I've fought something like that in a game. It wasn't real. And anyway, the quest is over now. Tomorrow morning we'll take the Flame down to Liz, get the Baneblade an upgrade, and get back to clearing the floor properly. After crazy doors, mirrors, and an exploding pirate ship, even a sea dragon should be a relief.*

*Besides,* he reflected, thoughts turning to a different kind of awkwardness that had pervaded the Fifty-First Floor's clearing. *the sooner we finish this floor, the sooner everything goes back to normal…*

Click.

Somehow, Kirito wasn't even surprised to hear the door open. He'd reserved the place, so only a party member could've unlocked it; all of them were girls, but he had a pretty good idea who might've done it anyway—especially right after he'd gone and tempted Fate.

“This is the men's side, y'know,” he said without opening his eyes, as the motion of gentle waves heralded someone else slipping into the water. “I thought you were with Rain and Philia, Kizmel.”

A quiet chuckle reached his ears. “Of course, I know where I am, my friend,” his partner said. “Which means we're more likely to be able to talk without being interrupted, yes?” A pause, followed by a long, pleased sigh. “Aaahhh… this feels wonderful. Better even than the baths at the Royal Palace.”

“…I guess I can't argue with that logic,” Kirito admitted. Which part of her logic, he was less prepared to admit to. “Especially after a long day of dungeon crawling,” he added, finally opening his eyes. “I'm starting to understand Asuna just a little… better…”

He trailed off as his gaze lowered to look at Kizmel, and he felt all voluntary functions seize up. Knowing the elf girl's habits well by now, he'd expected to see her in her usual purple swimsuit. He'd even worn his own as a precaution, having half-expected her to walk in on him.

Leaning against the smooth rocks on the opposite edge of the hot spring, half-submerged in water that did absolutely nothing to conceal her, Kizmel was completely naked.

For a long moment, Kirito was stunned stiff, staring at his partner's body, revealed to a degree he hadn't seen since a particularly embarrassing incident in another hot spring, way back on the Sixth
Floor. Just like then, the only thing she wore was an amused smile, not at all abashed.

Kizmel's low chuckle snapped him out of it, alerting him to the fact that he'd been staring for at least half a minute. Whipping his head around, face flaming, he quickly began to stand. “Um, actually, maybe we should talk in the morning,” he blurted. “I was just about to fall asleep in here anyway, and that’s never a good thing in a spring, so I'll just leave you to enjoy—”

“Stop.”

The sharp snap in his partner's voice stopped Kirito mid-turn, before he could even begin to make for the door. It was an authoritative command, with an overtone of genuine irritation that he wasn't used to hearing from her. Especially not directed at him. “K-Kizmel—?”

“I said stop,” she repeated. “Look at me, Kirito-kun.”

Against his will, unable to disobey the order of a Knight who was used to being obeyed—or a trusted partner who'd fought through many a battle by his side—Kirito turned back to face her. She hadn't moved from her place by the hot spring's edge, though she had folded her arms—in a way that emphasized her figure, rather than hiding it.

He'd never really looked at her this way. For every reason possible to a young man with no social skills and a proper Japanese upbringing, any time Kizmel had been naked around him, he'd done his best not to see too much. Now, forced to, the first inane thought to come to mind was etymological. They call player bodies “avatars”, from the Sanskrit “avatara”. Right now, I don't know that's far off…

If Kizmel were the manifestation of a deity, she would have been an ethereal war goddess. A figure that any girl, human or otherwise, would be jealous of; dusky skin, lilac hair, and long, pointed ears that lent a sense of the exotic and otherworldly. Normally hidden by her modest armor, Kirito could see toned muscles under supple skin, the sleekness of an athlete rather than the bulk of a bodybuilder.

…She really is beautiful…

A sigh jarred Kirito out of his reverie, and his eyes snapped back up to see her frowning at him. “Kirito-kun, why are you so afraid to look at me?” She waved a hand when he opened his mouth to reply, shaking her head. “And please, don't try to say you're afraid of my reaction. By now, you certainly ought to know I am not a tsundere.”

He had the sudden conviction Argo had something to do with the whole situation. Only the Rat could've put a word like that in the elf girl's head, he was sure.

“Indeed, I'm not human at all, as you well know. Human standards are not my concern. Nor should they be yours, as much an outcast as you are among Swordmasters.” Kizmel sighed again, eyes falling closed. “Am I wrong?”

“W-well, not exactly—but—” Kirito fumbled for words, for some argument that would actually get through her casual unconcern. “I mean, we're not alone here, and—”

“We are at this moment, Kirito-kun. True,” she admitted with a slight grimace, “if others were here, even Asuna, I'd respect human customs. But she is not here to punish you for being a 'pervert', Argo is in no position to humiliate either of us, and even Rain and Philia are elsewhere. Between the two of us? I've worried about human customs long enough. You're my partner, Kirito-kun, and my best friend. Neither of us has any reason to be bothered by you seeing me naked.”
Kirito gulped, blush intensifying at her blunt forwardness. She'd never been exactly shy around him, but this was taking things to an entirely different level. “Kizmel… I…”

He wanted to look away. Not, admittedly, from her body—or at least, the more primal part of his brain didn't; he was a teenager—but definitely from that hard stare. Not least because her logic was, in a way, very difficult for him to refute. Certainly it didn't seem likely he'd suffer any consequences for just letting himself enjoy the view. As she'd pointed out, they were alone, and for whatever reason the anti-harassment code had simply never worked properly around her, before or after she obtained player privileges.

“Kirito-kun,” the elf girl said then, voice softening. “If you do have a reason besides irrelevant human taboo, please, tell me.” She leaned forward in the water, pulling up her legs to hug her knees. “We're partners. Friends. We've shared battles, grief, and beds. Don't you trust me?”

…Now that was just not fair. Because yes, he did trust her, more than he sometimes thought was sane—and because he knew how fragile her trust was in return, even if she didn't, he had always done his very best to never, ever lie to her.

No matter how much it hurt.

With a long, shuddering sigh, Kirito finally slid all the way back into the water. “…I'm afraid,” he said, this time having no trouble meeting her eyes. “I'm afraid of screwing things up, because I never quite know where I stand with anyone. If I wasn't afraid, I might not even be here.”

Kizmel looked at him over her knees, gaze indecipherable. “Tell me, Kirito-kun.”

He didn't want to. He'd never told anyone exactly why he'd fled into video games, long before he literally became trapped in one. Never admitted to a living soul how he always felt like he was standing on shifting sand.

Even so, Kirito found the words came surprisingly easily, as if he'd been waiting to unload the burden for a long time. “I told you about my sister, right?” he began, finding himself imitating Kizmel's posture, arms wrapped around his knees. “And how we're not actually siblings?” When she gave a sober nod, he continued, “Well… the thing is, I didn't actually know that myself, for a long time.”

Another slow nod. “Go on,” Kizmel urged him softly. “How did you find out the truth?”

“Completely by accident. I was… searching through a database—um, kind of like the Mystic Scribing we use in this world. Just messing around, really.” He shied away from mentioning just why he'd been throwing himself into the computer that particular day; the memory of his last day in the dojo remained a painful one. “I decided on a whim to look up information about myself, partly just for the challenge—I kind of wasn't supposed to be able to get into those records at all—and… didn't find what I was expecting.”

_And isn't that an understatement_, Kirito mused bitterly.

“If I hadn't been quite so good at it, I still wouldn't have figured it out,” he continued, lifting his gaze to the floor above. “Getting in was a challenge by itself. Tracing changes in the records back to a deletion—Um.” Seeing the blank look on Kizmel's face, he quickly rephrased. “I found out portions of my record as a citizen had been destroyed, and I was able to recover part of it.” He smiled; a bitter expression, not at all happy. “I didn't exactly expect to find out that I used to have a different name.”

Kirito could see her digesting that, and for a moment reflected on just how different she was from
any NPC he'd ever known. A “normal” AI, if it could've understood at all, would've doubtless drawn a conclusion in a fraction of a second; Kizmel took as long to think it over as he might've expected a human to, and he didn't think it was a “programmed” delay.

No wonder I'm always so confused with her, he thought ruefully. She can't be human, but she doesn't make sense as AI, either... but if there's one thing I am sure of now, it's that she's real. ... Which just makes some of this harder.

“How old were you, when you found out?” Kizmel asked at last. There was a glimmer of understanding in her eyes, though, as if she already had an idea of what he was going to say.

“Ten years old,” Kirito told her. He chuckled; a reaction as humorless as his previous smile. “Just a kid, sure, but not that young. Ten years old, and I found out my parents were my aunt and uncle, and my sister was my cousin. Everything I thought I knew about my life, turned upside-down in one little accident. It was like... like I'd been standing on solid rock all my life, and it suddenly turned to quicksand.”

Two moments from that day, he could remember all too clearly. The pain of his grandfather's hand on his face, while his sister tearfully declared she'd carry on the family legacy for both of them—and the gut-wrenching disorientation of learning that grandfather was the only member of his family who actually was who Kirito had always believed him to be.

“So,” he went on after a moment, forcing that pain back into a password-protected folder in the back of his mind, “after that, I drifted away from my family. I didn't know how to deal with them, whether I should think of Sugu as my sister or my cousin, her parents as mine or as aunt and uncle. I spent all my time playing games to run away—and that didn't really help, either. On the other side of a screen, there's no way to know if the people you see are really what they look like.

“And then I came here, and got stuck in a place where guessing wrong about where I stand could get me killed.”

Even the warmth of the hot spring couldn't chase out the chill. Because the few people he did genuinely believe he could trust, he'd driven away for their own safety—and the only way he'd been able to ensure that safety, once, had been to make others believe he was something different from what he really was.

“Kirito-kun.” Kizmel's voice pulled him back to the present, and he found himself meeting her eyes again. “We've been partners for a long time now. Do you truly believe you cannot trust where you stand with me?”

Kirito swallowed hard. “I trust you,” he said, voice barely a whisper. “More than anyone. But, Kizmel... you don't know where you stand with me.”

It all came down to that. It always had. He knew the truth about Kizmel's world, about the people in it, and she didn't. So long as that imbalance stood between them, it felt like he was lying to her every moment. And every time they came close to the subject, he was terrified she'd demand an answer. Terrified of how she'd take that answer.

It hurt, deeper than anything since that discovery about his family.

He was startled, then, when the elf girl tsked at him. “Kirito-kun,” she said, shaking her head. “You've told me before that there are things about this world that you can't explain. I can tell that you're afraid of what will happen when I finally do understand them. But you've also said you try to treat this world as 'real', even if you cannot truly believe that.” There was a look in her eyes that he
couldn't quite understand, now. “And you told me that you believe I'm real. Was that a lie?”

“No!” Kirito said at once, stung. “No, if there's one thing I'm sure is real here, it's you! But—”

“Hush.” Kizmel smiled now, and rose to her feet—abruptly reminding him that she was still naked. “I can't promise that I won't be angry, when I learn your secret. I am—I was—a Knight, not some pure-hearted priestess.” Slowly, she walked toward him across the spring, halting so that she was standing over him. Folding her arms under her breasts, she went on, “But I will promise you this: whatever happens, whatever hardships come upon—or between—us, I'll always be honest with you. If I'm angry with you, I'll tell you. Just as you can be sure you'll know when you have my favor.”

He shivered despite the warmth. That was a level of trust he wasn't used to anymore, and it scared him. But this time, he couldn't just run away from it. She wouldn't let him, and just like he'd been pulled by the sense of family the Black Cats had had, he found himself craving it.

“Are you… sure about that?” he asked hoarsely.

“So long as you trust me in return. I'm your partner.” She unfolded her arms, propped one hand provocatively on her hip, and extended the other to him. “I won't hurt you, Kirito-kun. So please, don't insult me by looking away.”

With a deep, shuddering breath, Kirito took the offered hand, and let her pull him to his feet. “I'll… try,” he got out, eyes glancing at her bare body as he struggled with the contradicting dictates of cultural and habit, and his partner's command. “But it's not something I can just change right away…”

“That's all right, my friend. I'll do my best to… aid your efforts.” She smiled; a calm, encouraging smile, without the teasing he'd honestly expected under the circumstances.

Okay, he thought, his heart rate beginning to calm. I can do this. I'm still not sure this is quite the right thing, but… she's my partner. One step at a time. I got used to the swimsuits and the Sunblock, right? Start small, and—eep!

Kirito let out a squeak even he couldn't deny as the naked elf suddenly pulled him into a hug, pressing herself tightly against him and resting her chin on his shoulder. “There are other things I have to say, my friend,” Kizmel murmured in his ear. “But I can see it's too soon for that.” She chuckled; a low, throaty sound that sent an entirely different kind of shiver through him. “Mm… another time, then, Kirito-kun.”

His brain gibbered, froze up, and BSOD’d for several seconds. A forced mental shutdown took a dozen seconds more, as the shameless girl laughed in his ear. When higher brain function finally rebooted, he found that his autonomic nervous system had carefully reciprocated the hug, one hand resting at the small of her back, the other just below her neck.

If the NerveGears hadn't been tampered with, Kirito was absolutely certain he would've incurred a forced log-out from a dangerously elevated heart rate.

With that escape denied him, and Kizmel showing no inclination to let go, he could only go with the flow, mind frantically trying to calculate an appropriate response. In the end, his memory completely lacking any prior context from which to derive an answer, he simply blurted out the first remotely coherent thought that emerged.

“You blush like any human girl when Argo teases you, but you're willing to do something like this?”
Another of those low chuckles, which did nothing for Kirito's peace of mind. “The exigencies of war are one thing, Kirito-kun,” she whispered, warm breath tickling his ear. “Much less what a girl does in private, with a trusted partner. The Rat is something else. I am not an exhibitionist.”

Humming to herself, Kizmel settled herself back into the warmth of the spring with a light heart. *Perhaps it didn't go quite as well as I'd hoped,* she mused, watching with some amusement as her partner tried not to stare at her, while at the same time he tried not to look away too obviously. *But I think it counts as a step forward.*

Now that she knew Kirito did have a legitimate concern, however misplaced she thought it was with her, she was content to give him time. Pushing too hard would scarcely accomplish anything, after all. Besides, there was no real hurry; there was time enough to make her move, before the clearing of the Steel Castle was complete.

Not that the conversation had been entirely to Kizmel's liking, if she were honest about it. She still suspected he was omitting details about his past; it hadn't escaped her notice that his search that had so changed his life had occurred about the same time as his falling-out with his grandfather. Something told her that was more serious than he was admitting.

*And, if I'm truly honest... something in me is afraid,* she thought. *Over a year he's known me now, and Kirito is still afraid of how I'll take whatever “truth” he's hiding.*

That there was something off about the world, compared to what she'd grown up believing, Kizmel had herself begun to suspect some time before. The ominous words on the wall of a cave about a spell to dull the minds of Aincrad's people had resonated all too well with observations she'd made in the months since reuniting with Kirito. That, and with the steadfast belief most Swordmasters had that Aincrad was nothing but a deadly dream.

Not to mention the strange girl she'd met the day they began their current quest, who'd uttered a disturbing prediction of doom.

*As if the world around me was changed, the day the Swordmasters arrived. It sometimes feels as if... I was dreaming, when Kirito fought through the “beta test”, and somehow I was drawn into that dream that day. The more I see in our travels, the more I wonder...*  

Shivering at the thought, Kizmel clung to a few certainties. No matter the condition of the world around her, she was real, her partner was real, and the Swordmasters—and if no one else born of the Steel Castle was quite as they should have been, her sister's spirit had certainly been. However her world had changed, not everything wavered.

*More, some things are steadier than they've ever been,* she reflected, letting the hot spring chase away the dark thoughts. The water itself, for one. Ever since she'd begun experimenting with the hidden option in the Swordmasters' menu, the Dark Elf had found baths to be more enjoyable than ever. At least, when she dispensed with the utterly extraneous swimsuit.

*All the more reason to bring Kirito to his senses on the subject.* Smiling to herself, Kizmel watched her partner gradually recover from the shock she'd inflicted on him. She'd contemplated sitting close enough to lean against him, but regretfully decided that might've been a step too far. At least for now. Just being in sight seemed to be enough of a source of tension for him.

Taking pity on him, the elf girl cleared her throat. “About your Mystic Scribing,” she began, “I've been wondering, Kirito-kun. These 'computers' are the means by which the sorcerer Kayaba interferes in this world, right?”
“Huh?” Kirito started. “Oh! Um, yeah, that's right. A lot more complex than the menus players have access to, though.”

“I thought as much. Still,” she continued thoughtfully, “you mentioned that you breached records you 'weren't supposed to' when you were quite young. In your world, then, you're quite a skilled sorcerer yourself?”

“W-well, I wouldn't say I'm in Kayaba's league, but I guess I'm not bad,” he said. He scratched the back of his head, looking uncomfortable; and not, she judged, because of her unclad body. This time. “Though as long as we're stuck in Aincrad itself, there's not much I can do without a better interface than the menus players get…” He trailed off. “Uh, Kizmel, what's this about, anyway?”

“Ah, nothing important, Kirito-kun,” Kizmel replied, giving a casual shrug and a smile. “Merely… planning for the future, I suppose.

“After all, why should we play this 'game' according to Kayaba's rules? Or even his game at all…”

Chapter End Notes

Kirito wants everything to go back to "normal". Kizmel has decided she wants a "normal" closer to her own standards. Three guesses who wins that? (Kizmel fights dirtier, for one thing...)

Several subplots advanced in this chapter. I'm honestly curious to see if anyone here at AO3 picks up on one point in particular from late in the chapter; no one at FFnet seems to noticed a very significant detail about the Hyrus Fortress boss room. I didn't think I was that subtle.

Incidentally, the last section of this chapter was problematic to write, and not just because of Kizmel being shameless. Or rather, not just because of trying to balance fan service and plot: this would be about the point in the story Kizmel started to trying to move her relationship with Kirito forward faster than the plot mandated. Finding a balance between her actions--darn character acting like she knows better than the author!--and the needs of the plot was... interesting.
Chapter XVI: Serenade of Water IV

January 17th, 2024

After four days in swimwear, adventuring in a tropical archipelago, it felt just a bit strange to Rain to be back in standard clearing gear, walking Algade's streets amid weather more appropriate to the calendar. It was a jarring transition, really; despite her ordinary armor, she was shivering from the drop in temperature.

She figured Philia probably had it worse, though. For their brief return to the Fiftieth Floor, the treasure hunter was back in her midriff-baring armor—the only set of its kind Rain had actually seen in Aincrad. Which, now that she thought about it, might actually have been the reason her friend used it. Rare treasure was the blonde's pride, after all.

The duo they'd formed a temporary party with, on the other hand, were dressed both for the weather and to avoid attention. Kirito had equipped a gray, fur-collared parka—the farthest he was comfortable going from black, Rain figured—instead of his trademark longcoat; Kizmel's distinctive pointed ears were hidden beneath a red hooded cloak she'd gotten from somewhere.

Rain couldn't really blame them. After recent events, neither of them would've wanted to draw attention, and with their most memorable traits out of sight, they slipped through Algade's crowds without a second glance.

*Lots of people here,* the redhead reflected, as the foursome made their way from the Teleport Plaza to the town's merchant district. *Even more than last time. Looks like a lot of the mid-levels are setting up shop here.*

She supposed that was fair enough. After the price the clearing group had paid in blood to fully open the floor, it was nice to see players appreciating it. Though she wondered how long it would be before some enterprising merchants took advantage of the Fifty-First Floor's potential as a vacation destination. It seemed to her that that might be even more profitable than Algade's enviable merchant accommodations.

*Vacation destination,* Rain thought with a suddenly moment of disorientation. *Wow, I really have gotten used to this world. Who'd think about taking a vacation in the middle of a death game?*

Eyes sliding toward their party leader, though, she knew the truth. Everyone had their own ways of coping with the trap they'd all been caught within, and some players had adjusted better than others. Some had “adjusted” by having complete mental breakdowns; others she could name had somehow begun to make a transition toward “resident” without quite losing sight of reality.

As though feeling her gaze on him, Kirito slid a glance her way as they turned off Algade's main street toward the merchant district. “You two didn't have to come with, you know,” he said quietly, apparently misunderstanding Rain's scrutiny. “It's just a brief stop to upgrade a weapon before the field boss. You guys could've waited for us on the boat.”

Rain shared an eye roll with Philia at that, both of them noticing he didn't suggest the elf might've
stayed behind, even though there wasn't really any need for Kizmel to be along for their little delivery either. Of course, anyone with half a brain knew after spending as much as a day with them that they went as a matched set as a matter of course.

Though I wonder if something happened last night, the redhead thought, favoring Kirito with a very shrewd look. Kizmel never did come back to the hot spring—and Kirito looked awfully red after we all got changed this morning. Very suspicious...

In a way, she regretted her suspicions. The so-called Black Swordsman really was cuter than he seemed to realize, not to mention nicer than most guys in Aincrad. But, eh. Kizmel's got first claim by a long shot. It's crazy, but… kinda sweet, really.

Aloud, after letting the boy sweat for just a little bit, Rain smiled and shrugged. “Sure we could've, but do you really think we're going to pass up seeing the end of the quest? I know those old stories too, y’know. I want to see what happens when you temper the Baneblade.”

“Yeah!” Philia agreed cheerfully. “We've earned that, don't you think? That was quite a quest—especially at the end there!”

“They have been through a great deal with us, Kirito,” Kizmel said, nodding beneath her hood. “I agree that it's best we all saw it through to the end.”

Kirito raised his hands defensively, a rueful smile spreading on his face. “Okay, okay,” he said, shaking his head in defeat. “I didn't say I had a problem with it. I just thought you guys might be bored seeing me get a new upgrade when you don’t.”

Philia rolled her eyes again, tapping the hilt of her new Swordbreaker as if to remind him he hadn't been the only one to get a reward from the Hyrus Fortress quest. Not at all, Rain agreed silently, thinking of the book carefully stowed in her inventory. Even if I'm not quite sure what to do with my share just yet.

She didn't have much time to think about the enigma she carried, though. Turning one last corner down a side street, Lisbeth's Weapon Shop came into plain view. Busier than the last time Rain had seen it, judging from the customers coming and going from the modest smithy's front door.

The four of them passed a white-armored member of the Knights of Blood on his way out on their way in, and found the blacksmith herself finishing a transaction with a man with short-cropped brown hair, wearing heavy gray armor. “…That should be everything,” the pink-haired girl said, handing over a Guard Lance. “All sharpened and polished.”

A member of the Divine Dragons' Alliance, Rain realized with a wince. Not one she recognized, but…

Lisbeth noticed them before the Dragon Knight did, and nodded past his shoulder. “Okay, then! If everything's in order, please excuse me. I've got a prior appointment to take care of now.”

Settling the heavy lance against his shoulder, the Dragon Knight frowned. “An appointment?” He turned to face the newcomers. “These guys?” he added, giving them a closer look than Rain was really comfortable with. “I never heard of you doing appointments, Lisbeth…”

“Even I have VIP customers, Schmitt,” she said, voice hardening. “Besides, no player really likes anybody else knowing what exactly their gear loadout is, right? Some of my customers like a bit more discretion than usual, just to be safe.”

“Hmph.” The Dragon Knight's frown deepened. “Still. Haven't I seen that guy…? Oh, whatever.”
Shaking his head, he stalked past the treasure hunting party, not quite slamming the door on his way out.

Lisbeth was quick to follow behind him. Before even taking the time to greet her new customers, she hurriedly went out the door, hung up a “Closed” sign, and dashed back in to close it almost as firmly as the DDA player had.

Kirito blinked. “Uh… What was that about, Liz?”

“The DDA’s cranky lately, that’s all,” the blacksmith said, lifting her hands with a roll of her eyes. “Crankier than usual, I mean. I almost had to kick one of ’em out of the shop earlier for picking a fight with a KoB guy. But never mind that, now. Your message said you got the Forge? C’mon, let’s go to the backroom.”

Joining her teammates in dutifully following Lisbeth into her workshop, Rain privately wondered if it was really that simple. Schmitt had just seemed a bit gruff, but she’d heard from Argo that some members of the DDA had gotten a lot more belligerent than that in the last couple of months. It would be insane to take it out on one of the best blacksmiths, yet if there was one thing Rain had learned since the death game began, it was that some players really were crazy.

The workshop was a bit cramped with five people, plus the furnace, anvil, various smithing tools, and a chair for the blacksmith to rest. It was also uncomfortably warm, making Rain long for her swimwear. Lisbeth didn’t seem to notice, though, despite her blacksmith’s apron.

“Honestly, Schmitt's not that bad, really,” Lisbeth said then, heading over to the forge. “The guy's just kinda high-strung. Quetzalcoatl, now, he's a real jerk… And let me tell you later what I've heard about the Army lately. But right now, gimme! We've got a sword to temper!”

Rain could tell Kirito wasn't exactly satisfied with that—neither was she, for that matter—and if anything, Kizmel's expression was even darker. They both left it at that, though, and Kirito silently opened his menu and produced the torch they’d retrieved from Hyrus Fortress.

Hefting the brand, with its blue-black flames, he smiled ruefully at Lisbeth’s expression. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “We thought the treasure was the Forge itself. Turns out it was the 'Flames' we were supposed to get; apparently lighting a regular forge with this torch causes an additional effect.”

Giving a low whistle, Liz took the torch and brought up its status window. “Huh… Okay, I guess that makes sense. Come to think of it, I have heard some rumors from other blacksmiths about special items to improve smithing—though I'd only heard about rare hammers before now… Okay, let's try it.”

Moving with the exaggerated care Rain would've thought more appropriate for someone working with actual fire without benefit of a Safe Zone, the blacksmith girl slipped the tip of the torch into her furnace. At once, the orange glow inside flared bright white, then settled into a deep, ethereal blue.

“Whoa…”

*Sounds about right,* Rain thought, silently sharing Philia's interest in the sight. *But, uh… What does it actually mean?* Over the year she’d been stuck in *SAO*, her focus had been purely on survival skills; while she generally knew what she wanted when she took her weapons to a blacksmith, she didn’t really know anything about the mechanics.

Lisbeth did, though, and that was the important thing. After peering into the furnace for several moments, she tapped the side of it to bring up its status, studied the result, and gave a thoughtful nod.
“Okay, looks good,” she announced. “I still dunno if this'll work, Kirito, but let's give it a try.”

“Right.” With a few more strokes in his own menu, Kirito materialized the Baneblade, drew it from its scabbard, and handed the tarnished sword over to the blacksmith.

Rain had very seldom seen the Baneblade—only once in combat, now that she thought of it, when Kirito had used it in the final charge against Vemacitrin. Either because of its outdated stats or its rumored effects in PvP, he almost never actually equipped it; given its decrepit looks, the former seemed as likely as the latter. Still, she knew the games it had obviously been drawn from as well as any player. It would, she suspected, be interesting to see what happened next.

After checking over the rust, tarnish, and nicked edges one more time, Lisbeth thrust the Baneblade into the Flames of Hyrus' Forge.

The actual process of tempering a sword, Rain quickly realized, was kind of boring to watch. Liz left the sword in the fire for exactly two minutes, then pulled it out with a pair of tongs and laid it on the anvil. With the blade still glowing with heat—and, if Rain wasn't seeing things, covered in a faint sheen of blue-black flames—the blacksmith took out her hammer and went to work with a loud clang.

Fifty times, the smith's hammer struck. The redhead knew, because she counted, having absolutely nothing better to do. A long, monotonous process, during which the party of clearers watched with what could've been mistaken for rapt attention.

Then, with the fiftieth blow of the hammer—

The Baneblade glowed, much as an ingot being forged into a new sword might've. Not quite a blinding glow, though; squinting against the light, Rain could see the notches in the Baneblade’s edges smooth out and fill in, while rust and tarnish seemed to just melt away, leaving unmarred metal behind.

When it faded, the sword shone with a silvery gleam, as if it had never been damaged at all. The wing-like hand guard remained folded up, but even so, Rain could feel the tempered strength of the weapon just by looking at it.

For just a second, she could remember the wonder she'd felt when she first understood the meaning of *Sword Art Online*. The Baneblade, she thought, was the purest representation she'd seen of the concept of the World of Swords.

Picking it up again, Lisbeth tapped it to check its status. “Hm… Well, the stats have definitely gone up. I’d have to check it to be sure, but I'd guess it's better than that sword you're carrying right now, Kirito.”

The black-haired swordsman sighed. “Yeah… I was almost afraid of that.” He slumped for a moment—probably thinking of all the different ways other players might react to it—but quickly rallied. “I don't suppose the description says anything new? It looks like there's still another upgrade for it.”


“Not really,” Kirito said with a sigh. Shaking his head, he tucked it back into his inventory. “I'll try it out when we get back to the clearing, I guess… So, how much do I owe you, Liz? For a special order and all.”
The girl bit her lip, frowning. “Mm… Well, none of you guys are blacksmiths, right?”

Rain exchanged a look with Philia, before both of them shook their heads. Kizmel did likewise, adding, “I fear, my friend, that my own talents with a hammer are limited to not actually dropping one on my own foot. I've never had much skill with arts other than war.”

“Okay, then,” Lisbeth said, seeming to come to a decision. Without, Rain noticed, waiting for Kirito to reply; which she supposed made sense, everybody knew the Black Swordsman was all about frontline clearing. “In that case, my fee is the Flames. An edge over the competition is worth more than any Cor that bit of tempering might be.”

“Are you sure that's a good idea, Liz?” Kirito asked her, frowning. “I mean, sure, we don't have any use for the Flames, but if word got out you were using a unique item…"

*Ouch. Didn't think of that.* There weren't that many items in *SAO* that could really be called “unique” from a functional standpoint—there were, Rain knew, some apparently unique swords among the thousands possible, but they tended to be no better or worse than any of dozens of others—but the ones that were, tended to be the center of attention.

And if anybody knows why, it'd be Kirito. Even Argo hadn't been willing to sell the full details, but everyone in the clearing group knew the Black Swordsman carried more than one such item himself, the Baneblade being only a single example. It was half the reason he was still sometimes cursed as a “Beater”, after all.

Lisbeth, though, waved aside his concern. “I told you, there's been talk lately of other special items. The Flames might be one-of-a-kind, but this'll just keep me a little bit ahead of the game. You worry about that sword of yours, Kirito.” She sobered then, eyes taking on a shadow on concern. “You're gonna use that in today's field boss raid?”

“I can't afford to hold back in a boss fight, Liz. Well, not too much, anyway.” Before Rain could begin to wonder about that qualifier, he flashed a reassuring smile. “Hey, it'll be fine. So far the Fifty-First Floor's been a breeze, really.”

“I suppose,” Liz said dubiously. She looked at him through narrowed eyes for a long moment, before finally huffing again. “Fine, then, get going. You don't want to be late for Asuna's briefing, right?”

Even Kizmel flinched at that, while Kirito went pale. Only Philia seemed unaffected; Rain herself shivered, remembering the last time she'd seen Asuna the Flash in a bad mood.

The blacksmith girl grinned. “Okay, so you are more afraid of her than the boss! I guess I'll take your word for it. But bring your gear right back here for maintenance after. I don't want you breaking that sword before we find out how to max it out!”

For once, Kirito was glad a boss fight was only a couple of hours away. It provided a very welcome distraction from, well, everything. Like the girls gathered around him as he walked away from Ousetta Island's most isolated inn, all of whom were back in attire better suited for the Fifty-First Floor's tropical environment.

*It's a good thing nobody else knows what goes on with us in private,* he thought, doing his best to avoid the jealous glares he was getting from some passing players. *Kizmel sure wasn't kidding last night.* His elven partner had abandoned any pretense of humoring human standards of modesty, and had made it silently clear she was going to hold him to their new agreement on the subject.

Kirito was trying to decide if that was more or less disturbing than the blade currently riding his
shoulder. The players they passed on the way to the building serving as a briefing amphitheater for the field boss raid didn't even seem to notice it, but he felt its weight with every step.

He'd never been comfortable with the Baneblade. So far, he'd only really used it in a couple of boss raids, where its special buff against “evil” had come in handy, but he knew the weapon's true purpose. In a “game” where death had become real, a sword with mods that came into play in PvP could only be meant to kill.

Kirito didn't like to think about what that said about Kayaba's mindset. He really didn't like to think about the fact that the Baneblade had seemingly been meant for him, specifically, in a quest only he and his partner had even been eligible for.

The implications of being noticed by SAO's gamemaster had kept him awake some nights.

*I need to be at my best for a boss fight, though, even on a breather level. This wouldn't exactly be the first time I did something I didn't want to for the sake of everyone else—*

“Oi, there you are, Kirito! Just the man I was hoping to see!”

Startled out of his dark reflections, Kirito came back to the present to see a group of seven players waiting just outside the temporary raid headquarters. All of them wore shades of red, and at the forefront was a rough-looking man with a goatee and a rakish bandana, grinning. “Klein?!” he blurted. “Wh—what are you doing here?”

“Heh! Don't be so surprised, 'Black Swordsman'! Didn't I tell ya we were getting close to ready for the frontlines?” Fuurinkazan's leader struck a pose, hand resting on the scabbard of his katana with thumb pressing against the hand guard. “Just got in this morning, right on time for the—”

Klein broke off with such suddenness, freezing completely still, that Kirito was more than a little alarmed. He started toward the ruffian-samurai, reaching out a hand—then noticed none of Fuurinkazan looked at all worried. Actually, they looked exasperated; and after a moment, Kirito realized why.

It wasn't him that Klein was looking at anymore, but rather Kizmel, Philia, and Rain. Dressed for the floor, and all grouped around Kirito himself; one of them standing very close to his side.

*Three girls in swimsuits, two of them Klein hasn't met yet,* he thought, covering his face with one hand. *Standard Klein introduction in three, two, one…*

“Oof!” An elbow to his gut left Klein staggering, clutching his stomach as he tried to catch his virtual breath. “Oi, what was that for?!”

“Do you have to do this every time, Klein?” The blue-haired girl who'd hit him sighed, shaking her head. “Honestly. By now you've met almost every girl in Aincrad, and you still keep up that routine. Give it a rest while you still have a little dignity.”

Kirito could only stare for a long moment, and it wasn't because of the red one-piece swimsuit the girl was wearing. On top of the swimsuit, she was carrying a sword on her left hip of much higher quality than he'd last seen, matched with a gleaming shield slung over her back. More than the shinier equipment, he was surprised by her attitude, sniping so casually at her guildmaster.

“Sachi…?”

Sachi turned away from her aggrieved leader and smiled warmly. “Kirito, Kizmel! It's good to see you both again!” Stepping away from her guild, the former Black Cat startled Kirito by pulling both
him and Kizmel into a tight hug. “How have you been?”

Kirito couldn't manage a reply, brain glitching up at the way he was squished; the part of his mind that was still functioning reflected that only the previous night's experience kept him from a BSOD. Kizmel, though, only chuckled, returning the hug with full strength. “We should be asking you that, my friend. We've been quite well. Yourself?”

“I'm a lot better, now,” Sachi replied, too close to their ears for Kirito's comfort. “I've still got a long way to go, but Christmas helped a lot. Now... I think I'm finally ready. If I can make it on the frontlines, then it won't all have been for nothing.”

She pulled back a little then, just far enough for him to see her face. She wore a determined look, and if there were still shadows deep in her eyes, well, he couldn't claim that made her unfit for clearing. He saw the same darkness often enough when he looked in a mirror, and he was pretty sure a lot of her nightmares weren't so different from his.

*It's better than how she was before Nicholas, that's for sure.* Even so, Kirito couldn't fight back a shiver, knowing that someone else he felt some responsibility for was joining the clearing group.

“Are you sure about this, Sachi?” he murmured, just loud enough for her and his partner to hear. “You must've heard about the last boss raid…”

“That's why we're here, Kirito. Someone has to fill in for the ones who died—and I've come all this way for the sake of the people I've lost.” Sachi met his gaze steadily; there was no trace left of the terrified, uncertain girl he'd met six months before. “You, and Kizmel—and the bandit behind me—you taught me I can be strong enough. I have to put that strength to use.”

Well. No matter how much he wanted to, Kirito couldn't argue with that. He'd thrown himself into trouble enough times for that same reason; and Sachi, even more than most clearers, shared the same trauma he did. A beta tester who hadn't known quite enough.

A loudly-cleared throat reminded him there were others around. “Hey,” Rain said pointedly. “Is someone going to introduce us? I kinda feel like we're missing something, here.”

Kirito pulled back so hastily he tripped, earning smiles from Sachi and Kizmel and a guffaw from Klein. “Right! Ahem.” Gathering the scraps of his dignity, he coughed into his hand and began, “Rain, Philia, this is Klein, Sachi, and the rest of Fuurinkazan—”

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“'The rest?'” Dynamm muttered, stroking his piratical mustache. “What are we, extras?”

“No all of us look like hero material,” Dale said mournfully, looking down at his own—not exactly flattered by swimwear/avatar. “I swear, I hate Kayaba for not letting us change body type more than anything…”

“—They may look a little rough,” Kirito continued doggedly. “But there's nobody I'd trust more to have my back. I'd rather have them with me in a fight than all of the KoB.”

*I'd trust Asuna more, sure, but not the rest of 'em. Some of those guys give me the creeps.*

His praise of the group seemed to mollify them, and Klein sketched a perfect formal bow, briefly looking every bit the noble samurai despite his attire. The others followed suit, reminding Kirito once again that even if they'd taken their name from the coda of Takeda Shingen for fun, they'd long since made it their own.

Stepping to one side now, Kirito gestured grandly at the temporary members of his party. “Klein, everyone, this is Philia, greatest treasure hunter in Aincrad, and Rain, our ninja.”
“Hiya!” Philia said with a grin and a cheerful wave. “Welcome to the front, guys. Just don't get between me and rare items!”

“…Ninja?” Rain muttered doubtfully, a deep frown on her face. “Scout, maybe… Well, like Blackie over there said, I'm Rain. I'm new to the clearing, too, so I guess we're in the same boat.”

“Klein, Guildmaster of Fuurinkazan,” the self-styled samurai said formally. “This will be our first raid boss fight, so we'll be in your care, Philia-san, Rain-san.” Straightening, the formality vanished, replaced with a rakish grin. “And if you're looking for a guild when you're done hanging out with the troll over there, Fuurinkazan is always recruit—Ow! Will you give it a rest already?!”

“If you'll remember we can't even feel pain in here,” Sachi told him, withdrawing her elbow with a long-suffering look. “Rain and Philia, right?” She bowed deeply. “I'm Sachi, newest member of Fuurinkazan. I hope Kirito's taking as good care of you two as he did me.”

Kirito felt a stab of guilt at that, and fought hard to push it away. Kizmel's light touch on his shoulder helped, silently reminding him that whatever else had happened back then, he hadn't failed completely. He'd saved his partner, and Sachi had not only survived, but pulled herself up to a level he'd never hoped to see.

More importantly, he thought, deliberately turning to more cheerful thoughts as the others finished introductions, I have got to bribe Argo to tell me what's been going on with them. Just what has Klein done that's got her treating him like she did Keita?

“We'd best be getting inside,” Kizmel said at length, politely interrupting with a nod at the building ahead of them. “I don't think any of us want to be late for the briefing, do we?” Her lips quirked in a shadowed smile. “I'd not care to see Asuna's reaction—or give Lind more reason to be irritated.”

On the one hand, that name made Kirito bristle. On the other, he had to admit it was nice to see the same teeth-gnashing look on just about every face around: even if they hadn't all met before, at least they were all united in thinking the DDA were jerks.

There was, Kizmel decided, something sillier than the idea of wearing a swimsuit in the bath. Once she wouldn't have believed that possible, but now she had indeed found such an improbable thing. An entire raid's worth of Swordmasters laying out a plan of attack in swimsuits.

As she and her party took their places at the unofficial “unaligned” section of the meeting room, Fuurinkazan taking a place not far away, the elf girl found herself distracted by the sheer incongruity of it all. There were, certainly, a few Swordmasters who seemed perfectly calm to be so dressed, their bodies leaving them no reason to be embarrassed. Many of the others, however, had reactions more akin to Dale's, whether their physiques actually merited the concern or not.

Lind, Kizmel was particularly amused to notice, appeared to be having a bit of trouble maintaining his usual air of a dignified knight and leader. Almost as amusing was the KoB’s Heathcliff, who genuinely was maintaining a stoic aplomb despite the way his enormous shield and cross-hilted sword clashed with his “armor”.

Somehow, the girl at the head of the KoB table carried the same air of unconcern as her commander—though her demeanor was marred by a blush, suggesting she wasn't quite as comfortable presiding over such a meeting in a white bikini as she appeared.

“Is everyone here?” Vice-Commander Asuna asked, sweeping her gaze over the Swordmasters assembled at the tables as she rose from her seat. “Then I'll begin with a brief report on the clearing
status as a whole. As you all know, we suffered significant casualties in the last Floor Boss raid.”

Wincs, grimaces, and other expressions of dismay suddenly became the norm in the meeting room, chasing away embarrassment; Kizmel and her partner among them. Eight players, a full sixth of the raid, had died against Vemacitrin, more than had been lost in any such battle in which Kizmel had fought. Five days of relative relaxation in the warmth of the Fifty-First Floor had soothed the wounds that had left, but by no means healed them.

Asuna saw the wave of gloom that crossed the room, and nodded slowly. “Eight dead,” she said quietly. “And more lost from the raid group, as some of the survivors have chosen to retreat. That being said,” she continued, raising her chin, “we haven't lost all of them for good. I got word from Orlando this morning that the Legend Braves are going to be returning, once they've had a chance to recover.”

There was no small relief from the gathered Swordmasters at that, Kizmel noticed. A feeling she shared. Though she only knew of the guild's tumultuous history in the early days of clearing secondhand, they'd returned to the frontline at the same time she had. Where once they'd held a position among the clearers by strong equipment gained through deceit, they'd returned by sheer effort and training.

If they can push forward despite losing Beowulf, they may well be a beacon to us all, she thought, sharing a quick glance with Kirito. Their determination is exactly what the clearing group needs, now more than ever.

“That does still leave us with a hole right now, of course,” Asuna said then, when the raid group had had time to digest the news. “And Beowulf-san was only one of the losses we suffered that day. However, the nature of the current floor has drawn a number of new higher-level players to the frontline, some of whom are here today. In particular, I'd like to welcome Fuurinkazan to the front.”

She gestured to the table of red-clad players, and as attention turned there Klein came to his feet. “Klein, guildmaster of Fuurinkazan,” he said, with a bow. “There's only seven of us, but I haven't lost one yet. The gloomy guy over there taught me pretty well, back when all this started; we won't hold you back.”

Kirito groaned, burying his face in his hands. Kizmel found herself smiling, though, as the looks Klein’s declaration brought to them weren’t nearly so hostile as they might’ve been. Well, the Dragon Knights are glowering, but that is nothing new. Even they, I think, can understand the implications of Kirito having taught Klein—after all, they wouldn't hate him so much otherwise.

“We're grateful for your help, Klein-san,” Asuna told the samurai, a smile breaking through her raid-leader stoicism. “This does still leave us a bit understrength for today's raid, of course,” she continued, returning her attention to the group as a whole. “But if things hold true to the difficulty curve of the floor so far, and the information we've gathered is correct, we shouldn't have too much trouble.”

“And where does this 'information' come from, Vice-Commander Asuna?” Lind asked, expression inscrutable. “The DDA hasn't found much about the field boss since we began exploring this floor.”

Kizmel wondered what lay behind that expression. The other Dragon Knights in attendance, Quetzalcoatl in particular, were shifting in their seats, faces displaying various degrees of discontent; that was normal enough, given the events of recent months. She even expected it out of them, after the clashes she and her partner in particular had had with them.

Lind, she wasn't so sure about. He'd been oddly wary of her ever since their duel on Christmas Eve,
and as sharp as he'd been after Vemacitrin's defeat, he still had been much calmer than his subordinates. What his thoughts were now, she couldn't guess.

“Some of it has been gathered by the Knights of Blood,” Asuna told him, meeting his gaze levelly. “More, by sources trusted by Argo. Speaking of whom… Argo, if you would?”

Heads turned to one of the far corners of the room, where the Rat had indeed been lurking. Emerging from shadow with a grin, Argo moved to a spot where everyone could easily see her, a small book in hand. “Well, briefin' ain't normally part of my gig, but I guess I'll make an exception fer today. And don't worry about your wallets, guys, the KoB's already paid for all this.

“I did think of charging the rest o' you for it,” she added thoughtfully, “but I figured that'd be bad for business. Going above and beyond once in a while builds goodwill, right?”

The frightening thing was, there was no way to tell if she was joking. As Kizmel had had cause to learn, there was a reason even Argo's friends called her “The Rat”. She thought the info broker was just having a little fun, though… this time.

The expressions—and no little amount of grumbling—among the other members of the raid group said hers might not be the majority opinion. Argo clearly noticed, but if she was concerned, it didn't really show.

“Tough crowd,” was the Rat's only comment. She shrugged, flipped open her book, and continued, “Well, here's what I got. Like we've all known since day one on this floor, the field boss is 'Medrizzel The Sea-Lord', an' he lurks in the middle of the Ship Graveyard. Right where everything's foggiest, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Lind repeated, expression turning sour. “Which, in the middle of all those shipwrecks, makes it all the more likely that we'll crash our own boats before the boss even has a chance to hit them. I don't suppose one of your sources came up with any kind of trick to the battle?”

“Hold yer horses, Blue Boy, I'm gettin' there.” Argo's own sour look suggested she hadn't exactly forgotten their past grievances, and was less interested in hiding it than the DDA guildmaster. “First off, one tidbit we dug up says it's best to leave player boats at the edge o' the Graveyard, an' hop the wrecks to get to the center.”

“Oh, that's gonna be fun,” Rain muttered in Kizmel's ear. The elf girl nodded fractionally in agreement; she remembered from their own party's foray into the Ship Graveyard that many of the wrecks were none too stable. The better part of a full raid of players traversing them, in the middle of a boss fight?

_We'll all need to be light on our feet, I suppose. So long as we can coordinate enough not to put too much weight in any one place…_

“Second point,” Argo said, flipping to the next page in the book. “Accordin' to the ghost of a cabin boy, Medrizzel's responsible for the fog in the first place. Hidin' out, as well as a sea serpent can. When the fight starts, it's prolly gonna clear that fog by itself, while it tries to fry everybody.”

“Fry?” The question came from a Dragon Knight Kizmel couldn't recall having seen on the frontline before—though, she realized with a start, she had seen him before, that very morning. The ill-tempered man with a large shield, whose expression looked no happier now. “Are we dealing with a fire-breather?”

“That would be kind of bad,” Kirito murmured with a wince. “Fire and wooden boats really don't
Kizmel winced, remembering the final moments of the pirate ship *Kobayashi*. Her fiery demise would've been bad enough even without the explosion that had nearly sunk their own boat along with.

“Nope, not fire,” Argo answered Schmitt, to the elf girl's relief. “Medrizzel's a two-headed sea dragon, but lucky you, both heads have the same attacks: lotsa different ways to eat ya, and lightning.”

Philia *eeeped*, and this time the sentiment was clearly shared by most of the Swordmasters in the room. Lightning was a less indiscriminate attack than fire, and could be evaded with only minimal cover, but in some ways it was more immediately dangerous. As bad as fire would've been for that particular battlefield, its direct effects could have been avoided simply by dropped into the water. Lightning had the potential to paralyze. Bad enough on land, where it would merely have left the victim helpless to avoid further attacks. At sea, falling into the water and drowning was an all too real possibility.

“So!” Argo said brightly, turning pages in her guide with a fangy grin. “Happens there's a few tricks to dealin' with the lightning. Some of the wrecks should have enough metal to be lightning rods, if ya can lure Medrizzel into firin' just the right way. And then there's this little gem a little birdie sold me last night: there's one or two swords out there that're s'posed to be able to tank Lightning Breath…”

At least he had some experience navigating around other boats, Kirito reflected as he guided *Black Cat* toward the Ship Graveyard. It had been over a year, but he remembered the battle against Biceps Archelon, back on the Fourth Floor; maintaining formation with a few other boats outside of combat wasn't too hard, compared to that.

Of course, back then he'd been helming a mere gondola, with only Asuna as a passenger. Today, he was at the wheel of a twelve-meter sailboat, with no fewer than four girls riding with him.

“Thanks for taking me on for the boss fight,” Sachi said from near Philia's position at the mast. “It's always tricky, deciding the party; we knew we'd have to split up for a boss fight, but we weren't sure who to put where, so….”

“Of course we'd be happy to have you in our party, Sachi,” Kizmel assured her, lazily leaning against the railing entirely too close to the wheel. “You're our friend.” She shot an amused look at Kirito. “And even were you not, I'm sure our leader would be glad to do Klein a favor regardless.”

Kirito would have liked to grumble at that, but he knew it wouldn't do any good. While Kizmel shared his lingering guilt over what had happened to the Black Cats, she tended to needle him over his regret where Klein and Fuurinkazan were concerned.

So did Klein, for that matter. Fuurinkazan's twenty-four-meter sailboat *Kusanagi* was riding the waves close by; more than close enough for Kirito to see the samurai's rakish grin. With seven members, the boat looked more than a little cramped—and it was one too many to have the entire guild in a single party, which was why Sachi had joined the treasure hunting team for the field boss.

“I'm still grateful,” Sachi said, just loud enough to be heard over the sound of wind and wave. “For that, and for… remembering.”

Rain glanced back from the bow, where she was keeping watch with sword in hand. “Oh, that's right. You were… Um. Never mind.”
“It's okay,” the last of the Black Cats told her, shaking her head with a sad smile. “It still hurts, but it would be worse if nobody remembered. I owe it to Tetsuo, Sasamaru, and Ducker not to forget.”

She did not, Kirito noticed, mention Keita. He still didn't know how much of her old Guildmaster's recent behavior she knew, but she clearly suspected something. Not that she was likely to miss it, after how the two of them had parted. Keita's final words before retreating to the First Floor hadn't really been kind to any of the other survivors of the battle that day.

“We're coming up on the Graveyard, guys!” Philia called out; she was already reducing sail without prompting. “Rain, get ready with that anchor!”

“I thought I was supposed to be 'captain'?” Kirito muttered under his breath. Kizmel caught it, though, and laughed; and truth be told, he wasn't really bothered. It wasn't like he was really any kind of leader, after all.

A dozen player-commanded boats of various sizes, dominated by the DDA's enormous Kraken but truly led by the KoB's sleek Blood Oath, came about and slowed to a halt on the edges of the Ship Graveyard. Anchors dropped, and forty-three players gathered by the rails of their boats, peering into the fog.

“You all know the plan!” came a shout from Blood Oath, Asuna's voice carrying easily through the stillness. “Keep your parties together as well as you can, and keep in sight of the parties on your flanks as we advance toward the center! The fog should clear when we engage Medrizzel; in the meantime, just watch your footing on the wrecks, and we'll be fine!”

That was going to be the tricky part. From his own party's exploration of the Graveyard several days before, Kirito knew some of the wrecks were about ready to sink—and even if the Graveyard wasn't an instanced map, he wasn't convinced they wouldn't go down at least briefly. He'd known some pretty large trees to be destructible, on lower floors.

Asuna seemed to take a moment to make sure everyone understood, and then her voice was ringing out again. “All right, then! Raid group, move out!”

There was a cheer—or maybe just a general roar; Kirito was pretty sure the DDA didn't sound too happy anyway—and then Swordmasters were leaping off their boats and onto the wrecks.

His own party started off trying to be cautious, mindful of the tricky footing. That lasted all of about ten seconds, before they discovered that with that many people many of the half-flooded ships started to sink alarmingly quickly. Which was also when the Pirate Ghosts started coming out to join the fun, of course.

From there, it became a race, players trying to rush from one wreck to another before the sea could claim them, all the while having to dodge, parry, or bodily assault ghosts. One moment Kirito was trying to keep his footing on a slippery deck as he prepared to jump to the next hulk; the next he was stabbing a Pirate Ghost Bosun at the same time he pushed off in a clumsy leap.

Kizmel caught his arm when he landed, saving him from a nasty fall. Together they ducked under a flailing Philia, who in turn was caught by Rain and Sachi, and then the five of them were off and running again. Along the way, a Pirate Ghost Cannoneer tried to clothesline the lot of them, only to be hurled off by their sheer combined momentum.

Two wrecks later, as the fog began to thin just a little, Kirito caught a glimpse of Asuna furiously stabbing a Pirate Ghost in the throat, a murderous expression on her face. He couldn't help laughing at the sight, even as he leapt from a railing to a pilothouse, then onto an algae-slicked deck. It looked
like his old partner still had problems with noncorporeal mobs, just like in the old days.

Five minutes later, there was a chorus of yelps, screams, and a couple of truly vile curses a little ways to the left. That was followed by a heavy enough series of thuds that Kirito was grateful his party was currently racing across one of the larger boats, and then a wild laugh. “Oh, man, what a rush!” Klein declared, leading the rest of Fuurinkazan in a mad dash to catch up. “Oi, Kirito! Is it always like this on the frontline?!”

“Thankfully, no!” he called back, unable to help a grin of his own. “Remind me to tell you later about the mess we had on Kobayashi the other day; we really had a blast then!”

“I'll hold ya to that, buddy!”

The fog gradually thinned as they went; at the same time, it seemed the wrecks they crossed grew more and more broken, yet paradoxically more stable. Kirito had a sneaking suspicion that was a mercy the system was granting the players—one which he was pretty sure wouldn't have been given on any other floor. It made him just a little nervous, especially since there hadn't been any scouting for this particular boss, due to the low visibility.

“We should be almost to the boss now!” Asuna called out. “If the information we got is right—look out!”

With shocking suddenness, the fog surrounding them was blown away in a blinding flash of blue static; players were thrown around right along with, scattering away from the lightning in a confused rush that jumbled some entire parties around.

Somehow, Kirito's party and Fuurinkazan managed to maintain something resembling order, though he noticed they'd somehow ended up three ships east of their last position without him noticing. Crowded together on a splintered stern jutting into the air, it gave them all an excellent view of what had fired off the lightning.

As the briefing had said, [Medrizzel The Sea-Lord] had two heads. A huge, sapphire sea-dragon with two heads splitting off from a single serpentine body, its eyes crackling with blue sparks as it glared down at the raid party, lightning flickering in both its mouths.

He knew it was only flavor text, but right then Kirito believed the ghost of a cabin boy Rain had met, who had claimed Medrizzel had gone mad. Mad, and vengeful.

Clinging to a broken plank to his left, Klein shot him a dirty look. “You have got to be kidding me.”

The giant sea-serpent was Sachi's third boss battle, since the death game had begun, and the first for which she'd been—supposedly—prepared. The Commandant had come out of absolutely nowhere, while Nicholas the Renegade had been a thing of rumors before he had actually appeared in the flesh. Medrizzel The Sea-Lord she'd known was coming, and roughly what its attacks were likely to be.

It wasn't her previous experience with bosses, though, or the pre-battle intelligence that Sachi found of most use when the battle actually began. No, when Medrizzel opened the fighting with lightning, it was the long hours she'd put in against Venom Mantises that had her leaping away in time. The reflexes from those long-lost training days were what reminded her when to dodge away from ranged attacks—even if lightning was a completely different threat from corrosive venom.

“We planned for this!” the KoB's Vice-Commander Asuna called out after that first blast of lightning had faded. Perched atop a broken mast, she pointed her rapier toward the sea-dragon. “Keep
A team each of the KoB and DDA, two of the five full-strength parties in the raid, leapt ahead to obey. It was a clumsy advance, hampered by the only footing being barely-floating chunks of boat, but they were experienced raid veterans. They made do, jumping from wreck to wreck to reach Medrizzel's flanks.

The dragon's heads tried to turn to follow, one mouth already filling with lightning again. Asuna wasn't done, though, and she slashed her blade through the air in a forceful gesture. “Team E, Team F, keep those heads busy! Draw aggro until the other teams are ready!”

That was the cue for both the bulk of Fuurinkazan, and the temporary party Sachi was with. With a loud cry of “Banzai!” Klein led her guildmates in toward the lighter pieces of wreckage near the base of Medrizzel's heads; Kirito wasn't far behind in taking point for their team, bright sword in hand.

The battle went against the normal rules of SAO boss raids. With the footing so treacherous, true tanking was difficult at best; the normal tanks of the raid group were thus gathered into Teams G and H, four-player parties formed as part of the juggling to compensate for the smaller raid. For now, they were clustered toward the rear of the group, on more secure perches, waiting for the right moment to rotate in.

Accompanying Kirito and his current band in after Fuurinkazan, Sachi found herself wishing it was a more normal raid for other reasons. The fighting style she'd developed for herself over the past months made her more of an ambush predator, which ordinarily would've been very good against even a boss like Medrizzel. Unfortunately, it relied heavily on her Nightcloak, which just wasn't practical on the tropical Fifty-First Floor.

At least I still have Foe-Hammer, she thought, holding her gleaming sword tight as she jumped from a shattered bow to a section of broken planks that might've come from anywhere. I can still—there!

Medrizzel was still focused on the parties moving to flank it when Fuurinkazan first struck. Klein was the first to land a blow, his katana biting deep into the sea-dragon's belly. Not wasting any time, he pushed off and away, leaving the half-shattered skiff he'd been standing on free for Dynamm.

Kirito and Kizmel hit it simultaneously from a couple of meters to the right just after that, one blade cutting a numeral four into deep blue scales, the other stabbing a cross. With a yell, Rain came down over them, landing a Sonic Leap; then the three of them were scattering, giving Philia room to score a Horizontal Arc.

There wasn't quite room for Sachi to get in that close, but she didn't need to. From over two meters away, her sword stabbed forward, a Vorpal Strike lancing from the tip of the blade into Medrizzel's body with practiced force.

I can do this, Sachi told herself, landing in a crouch on a bit of flotsam as she waited out the post-motion. Above her, the Sea-Lord bellowed in pain, distracted from the flankers. If I can just make it through this, then I know I'll be able to keep going. I can make it all mean something!

Medrizzel's heads swung back around and down, trying to catch the ants that had dared to bite it. Most of them were already out of reach, though, and Sachi took the chance to launch a Sonic Leap at the left head just as it came close. It was a light blow, off the cuff, but enough to get her in range to try and use the boss' own head to push off—
Her plan worked a little too well, Medrizzel swinging its left head right into her feet. The impact knocked a good five percent off her HP and sent her flying; on the other hand, that was more or less what she’d intended, and she refused to panic as she hurtled back.

Heading for a landing she hoped wouldn't take too much more HP away, Sachi's vision was suddenly obscured by dusky skin. At the same time, her trajectory changed, ending up in a much more controlled arc toward one of the more intact wrecks at the edge of the battlefield.

“I've got you, my friend,” Kizmel told her, after a bone-bruising landing. Setting her back on her feet, the elf girl smiled reassuringly. “A good start, Sachi.”

“Thanks, Kizmel.” Only two blows, and it had gotten her knocked around for her troubles, but Sachi figured that wasn't too bad for her first time against a regular field boss. *But next time, I'll be faster!* Out in the water, the flanking teams had taken full advantage of the opening the skirmishers had given them, and Medrizzel bellowed again. Its mouths filled with flickering blue arcs, while its heads whipped around toward Teams C and D—

“C, D, retreat and evade!” Asuna shouted. “A and B will engage! All teams, lightning incoming; get moving!”

The leading teams from the KoB and DDA darted in, unleashing a hail of Sword Skills the moment they were close enough; but it wasn't enough to stop the Lightning Blast Medrizzel's heads had been charging up. The furious attack only deflected their aim, resulting in bolts of blue hurling out in random directions.

Jumping away with Kizmel just a moment too late, spared the full shock but not a startling numbness in her right arm, Sachi's heart hammered in her chest like the old days. Even so, she refused to heed the old terror; she knew now that she could fight, whatever her nightmares still whispered to her at night.

*I can keep going,* she told herself, racing to join the rest of Kirito's party by the southern edge of the battlefield. *I won't die. Not before I reach the end.*

“G, H, draw aggro off the DPSers!” Asuna snapped, leading her team in a blur to the west. Her chestnut hair was frizzed out in all directions, static crackling, and her HP had taken a definite hit; if she was concerned, though, her voice didn't show it. “Everyone else, heal if you need to and get ready to move in again!”

The two tank teams, lead by the KoB's own Heathcliff and a dour Dragon Knight, moved in with as much speed as they could with their heavier equipment. It wasn't quite fast enough, though, and when Medrizzel recovered from the backlash of its own attack and started charging up another before the tanks were in position, Kirito and Klein exchanged a long-suffering look.

“Up to us, eh, buddy? This, uh, happen a lot?”

“More than I'd like, yeah…”

Going right back in, without a chance to catch her breath. Sachi shook her head, but didn't argue; she'd known this was what the frontline was going to be like, after all.

*I'll do it. However long it takes. Until I can face Keita and tell him—*

“Adds!”
Running away from walking, air-breathing piranha by jumping from one bit of floating junk to another was not what Klein had been expecting when he finally brought Fuurinkazan up to the frontlines. Especially not wearing just a pair of swim trunks and sandals, while simultaneously fending off flying squids.

“Oi, Kirito!” he called to his nearest ally, catching a Flying Ignition Squid with an Ukifune’s upward-launching stroke mid-leap. The fire-flinging cephalopod was sent high into the air and out of the way, giving him time to catch his balance on a floating mast. “Tell me something: is this normal?! You told me on the way in it wasn’t!”

“Platforming isn’t, no,” Kirito said, impaling a Land Barracanha and using it as a jumping-off point to reach a bowsprit sticking up out of the water. “But you’d better get used to weird bosses. Kayaba got creative with some of them!”

The cocky bastard made it look easy, Klein thought with a carefully-concealed, most unmanly pout. He was having a hard enough time just keeping his balance while fighting; he wasn’t even going to try Goomba-stomping mobs anytime soon.

Or leapfrogging with anyone, for that matter. The rest of Fuurinkazan was actually keeping up pretty well—even Dale, whose body wasn’t exactly the best-balanced—but none of them were up to jumping clear over each other. Not like Kirito’s partner promptly did, spinning high over his head to slash an Ignition Squid’s head in two with a Helmsplitter. She came out of the midair somersault in a perfect swan dive, slipping into the sea with barely a ripple.

“I’m highly tempted to get ‘creative’ with that sorcerer myself, if I ever meet him!” Kizmel growled, hauling herself up onto a chunk of planking one-handed. “If he is to blame for all the tentacles… Kayaba’s crimes grow legion!”

Klein had a sneaking suspicion there was quite a story behind that. Maybe more than one. Not that he had any intention of asking; if there was one thing he’d learned from Sachi over the past few months, it was that there were some questions best left unsaid. Women could be scary.

Speaking of…

He took a flying leap onto an almost-intact shipwreck, only to find a Barracanha waiting for him. Apparently as surprised to see him as he was to see it, its opening attack was “only” to take a bite out of Klein’s gut, knocking off five percent of his HP. Yowling at the pain he didn’t actually feel, he slipped his katana close to its scabbard, then whipped it back out again in a Zekkuu slash.

The samurai wasn’t quite sure if the blow actually killed the walking fish, despite opening up its belly in a spray of polygons. He didn’t really care, either, since it did send the mob sailing off the wreck and into the water, giving him a chance to take stock of the situation.

The raid as a whole was going pretty well, from what Klein could see. They’d already taken down Medrizzel’s first lifebar—which, he noticed now, had triggered another wave of adds—and so far it seemed like no one had gotten too far into the yellow. The rotation between tank and DPS was as smooth as anything he’d ever seen in an MMO, despite the crazy conditions.

I guess Asuna-san didn’t get her position from her looks, eh? But then, she used to be Kirito’s partner. He’s good at teaching noobs.

Most of the rest of Fuurinkazan had fallen a bit behind, but so far they were still in the blue; Klein noted approvingly that rather than try and keep up with the last couple of jumps, they’d settled in a fairly stable area to whittle down the adds. Sachi he could only catch glimpses of, though she seemed
to be doing pretty well with the rest of Kirito's party on the other side of Medrizzel.

That was about all he was able to work out before the Sea-Lord's tail suddenly swept toward his current perch. Yelping, Klein hurled himself out of the way at the last second, avoiding the dragon's direct attack.

The debris sent flying when the tail smashed the wreck to pieces, not so much. A two-meter-long splinter went right through his back and out his stomach, turning his leap into a fall right into the water.

For a few seconds, Klein thought that might really have been the end of him. He'd practiced the art of swimming in Full-Dive well before getting to the frontlines, of course—Sachi had demanded Fuurinkazan get the hang of that, for reasons she refused to explain and he didn't dare ask. All the same, swimming under controlled conditions was one thing; “swimming” when the impact was unexpected and he had a giant chunk of wood through his gut?

Choking, Klein flailed helplessly at first, completely disoriented. HP steadily dropping, he finally got a grip on the splinter, gritted his teeth, and yanked it out. By then, though, he was completely turned around, and had sunk a good two or three meters below the surface. *And now I'm starting to hit Drowning status, c'mon, which way is up, I'm gonna kill that psycho programmer if it kills me dammit which way—*

Hands seized his arms, and he was hauled bodily to the surface to be dropped heavily on the wreck of a dingy. “You okay there, Klein?” Kirito asked him, crouching to look the samurai in the face.

“That was a rough strike,” Kizmel agreed, bending to set Klein's beloved katana close to hand. “Can you continue?”

“I'll... be fine... in a sec,” Klein gasped out. Ignoring his sword for just a second, he dug into his menu as quickly as he could to pull out a healing potion, all the while cursing the floor's conditions for not allowing pockets.

_Not to mention cursing a certain lucky bastard_, he thought with a grumble as he downed the potion. *Damn fine catch he's got there. Even if she is AI._

Tossing aside the used potion, Klein levered himself into an upright sprawl while he waited for his HP to recover. “Since we've got a second to breathe, Kirito,” he said, eyes narrow, “can you tell me something?”

“Sure,” Kirito replied slowly, a wary look in his eyes. “What is it?”

“Just something I gotta know. How the _hell_ did the antisocial guy I met back on the first day wind up with an entire team of girls? On a floor where the best 'armor' is swimsuits?” The angry look faded from Klein's face, replaced by pleading. “C'mon, buddy, tell a poor, lonely guy your secret!”

“Secret?” The younger swordsman's expression went from nervous to bewildered. “I don't—Look, Klein, Rain and Philia just happened to know something about a quest I was looking for! It's just a coincidence that they're—”

“E, F, get moving! Lightning blast heading your way!”

“Aaw, hell!” Klein scrambled back to his feet, snatching up his katana. “Why us?!” he yelled plaintively, pushing off in a flying leap to the next piece of wreckage. “This boss is just—!”

“Don't worry about it, Klein!” Kirito shouted back, leaping after him in tandem with Kizmel.
Improbably, he was grinning—like being about to be zapped half to death wasn't as scary as being asked about girls. “Breather level, remember? This won't be too bad!”

“Oh, yeah, _sure_ it won't be—!”

Blue lightning struck just behind them, sweeping inexorably forward. Centimeters from Klein’s back, it came, and he had just a second to unleash a sulfurous barrage of curses before it caught up.

Apart from watching her new friend and party leader get struck by lightning, Rain thought the battle wasn't actually that bad. Admittedly, it was only her second boss fight ever, but next to Vemacitrin it was practically a cakewalk.

Not that she really had time to pay attention to the battle as a whole just then. Other than a quick glance at the HP bars on her HUD to make sure Kirito was all right—which, well, twenty-five percent from one hit wasn't nice, but it could've been worse—her attention was focused on more immediate things. Like the Barracanha trying to bite her arm off at the shoulder.

At least it was her left shoulder that the walking fish had latched onto. That left Rain's right arm free to drive her sword into the Barracanha’s flank; not a Sword Skill, but it was what she could do from that position, unable to properly start any pre-motion. It was enough to make the fish pause in its attack, at least.

Then its jaws abruptly went slack, a ridge-backed sword having sawed its tail off. Shattering into blue fragments, its disappearance revealed Philia, just lowering her weapon. “You okay, Rain?”

“Think so, yeah. Except we're sinking.” Flicking her gaze up to her own HP, Rain winced, but had no time to deal with it. Together with the treasure hunter, she quickly pushed off from the wrecked pilothouse the Barracanha had caught her on. Like with most wreckage in the battle area, it wasn't stable enough for two, and neither of them wanted to deal with swimming combat in the middle of a boss fight.

The barge they landed on seemed to be a deliberate resting place; a concession to regular boss tactics, the redhead figured. Sachi and the rest of Fuurinkazan were already there, several of them downing healing potions.

“Stop and catch your breath,” Kunimittz advised. His spear was laid on the deck next to him, while he tried to straighten his never-neat hair. “Your guys and our boss should be over here in a sec anyway. 'Sides, the Vice-Commander will let us know when it's time to dive in again.”

Following his advice and downing a potion, Rain looked at him sidelong. _Pretty confident for somebody I know hasn't been on the frontlines before,_ she thought. Still, she could see Kirito and Klein being hauled out of their shocked Paralysis by Kizmel, who then gestured toward them. _And as for Asuna-san…_

“G, H, nice work blocking the lightning! Pull back for POT rotation; C and D, engage now! Everyone else, regroup!”

The girl in white was on a different perch from where Rain had last seen, but her hair had settled down and she’d found time to heal. Now her rapier jabbed here and there, directing the battle with the same ease the redhead remembered from the Vemacitrin fight.

_Nobody dead so far, and we're almost down to the third lifebar,_ she thought, watching as one of Medrizzel’s heads lunged for the retreating members of the DDA tank party. _That's better than—ooh, that's gotta hurt!_
The Sea-Lord managed to get one of the tanks by the foot, yanked him into the air, and started shaking him like a terrier with a rat. Rain found herself having to stifle the urge to rush in and help—she was too far away to get there in time, but she wanted to try anyway. She remembered all too well what had happened against the Fiftieth Floor Boss.

_Come on, somebody get in there... That's Schmitt next to him, isn't it? That lance of his has to be good for something! Why doesn't he—?!_

Her breath came out in an explosive sigh when one of the incoming members of Team C smashed Medrizzel's head with a mace's Hammerblow. The tank fell into the water from there, floundering but safe, and the rest of Team C took the chance to batter at the head while it was still stunned.

"D, watch out!" Asuna snapped out, breaking into Rain's relief. "The other head is preparing another lightning attack!"

It was. Blue sparks were spilling from its mouth and crackling around its eyes, and Team D was heading straight into it. Even if they broke off right then, Rain could see, there was nowhere they could jump to in time. Not large enough for all them, anyway.

"They'll be fine." Startled, she looked up to find Kirito, Kizmel, and Klein had finally caught up. They all looked as if they'd had fun with light sockets, but they were safe; the black-haired swordsman was even smiling. "It's a bit of a, well, shock, but the head has an attack delay after that'll let them get out of range and heal. Or get in a few hits, if they've got the guts."

"Easy for you to say, Mister Over-leveled." Klein grumbled, popping the cap on a potion. "That's twice I've nearly drowned today... But yeah, I guess you're right."

"I would not have wanted to deal with it before I became a Swordmaster myself, I must admit," Kizmel said with a rueful smile. Settling into a sitting position on the rotting deck, she set aside her shield to run her fingers through her hair, trying to comb out the frizzing. "I suspect that would be a painful—"

She was interrupted by the loud crackle of Medrizzel unleashing its shocking breath on Team D. One of them somehow managed to escape it entirely, taking a flying, flailing leap onto what looked like the shell of a long-dead giant turtle. The others weren't so lucky, collapsing and convulsing where they were.

Still, like Kirito in the last blast, none of them looked to have taken life-threatening damage. More, as he'd said, the head that had started it was drawing back instead of pressing the attack, while the other was still occupied by Team C. If none of them had been unlucky enough to suffer a full Paralysis—

One of the shipwrecks suddenly erupting in a violent explosion was enough to startle both resting parties half out of their skins. Kirito almost tumbled right off the barge, only caught by Kizmel's quick reflexes. For the players directly involved, it was worse.

This time Rain did jump to her feet, unable to restrain herself. "Powder magazine?" she asked Philia, already drawing her sword. "Like _Kobayashi_?"

"Looks that way." Philia wrinkled her nose as she stood. "Smells like it, too, even from here."

"We're going in?" Kirito looked resigned, though he picked up the Baneblade again readily enough. "I barely even had time to heal properly..."

Klein grinned, thumping him on the shoulder. "Hey, you're the one always playing the hero, Kirito! Gotta live up to that!"
Yeah, Rain agreed silently, glancing at the Baneblade’s newly-polished edge as she made for the edge of the barge’s deck. Hero… That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it? To be heroes for the all the rest of the players? Someone has to make the stand.

“E, F, take the heat off them!” Asuna snapped, even as Medrizzel's heads began to recover from C’s attacks and its own. “The tanks aren’t ready yet. Teams A and B will be right behind you!”

Grinning despite herself, Rain took a flying leap off the barge, ramming her sword into an Ignition Squid as she went.

*Swimsuit armor, sunblock, ghost pirates, exploding ships,* Philia counted off to herself, bounding from one piece of flotsam to another with her party in their haste to rescue Team D. *Doors with timezones, mirror bosses, and now a lightning-breathing dragon.*

*Oh, and fish with way too many teeth!* She fell behind the others for a few paces when a Barracanha lunged out of the water at her; only quick reflexes with her sword arm kept its jaws off her throat. Its teeth caught on the spine of her new Ridgeback Sword, locking blade and fish in place. Virtual muscles strained against each other, metal struggling with tooth—

With a hideous noise Philia hoped she’d never hear again, the Barracanha’s jaws lost the battle, teeth snapping against the Ridgeback. That alone took a nice chunk out of the fish’s HP; the simultaneous thrust of another sword into the back of its head, neatly pithing it, finished it off.

The blonde treasure hunter flashed a quick grin and thumbs-up at Sachi, and the two of them rushed ahead to catch up with their teammates.

*Most fun I've had since I've been here,* Philia admitted to herself. *I never would've gotten this sword on my own. Never would've seen the extended Elf War quest, let alone gotten far enough for the Hyrus stuff.*

The “normal” Elf War, she had gone through. She still wondered how in the world Kirito had managed to trigger a variation where the first Dark Elf survived, let alone the extended questline that had gotten him the Baneblade and a permanent companion. She did know one thing, though: seeing more of it firsthand had been awesome.

Not to mention the awesome treasure, of course.

*No time to think about loot right now, though. Dragon!* Casting a quick glance up at Medrizzel, Philia blanched and put on a burst of speed, just barely carrying her out of the way of a tail swipe by the sea-dragon. The Fuurinkazan members trailing her made it pay for it, though, ripping into the tail with a barrage of Sword Skills before it could recover from the post-motion.

“Keep moving!” Dynamm called out, waving his cutlass. “We’ll keep the big guy busy, just get those guys out of the water!”

She spared a brief moment to wave back. Then she was reaching the scattered members of Team D, whom the rest of her team were already helping. Kirito and Kizmel were dragging a bedraggled lancer onto a half-smashed dingy, while Rain and Klein held off a pair of Ignition Squids that were making a determined effort to set the whole area on fire. With Sachi's help, Philia hauled a dazed axeman onto a relatively stable chunks of blanks; the poor guy wasn't just bleary, she noticed, but covered in soot.

“You okay? That was quite a blast.” As soon as the DDA player was upright, Philia pressed a healing potion into his hand. “Watch out for bombs; this floor's got some nasty surprises.”
“Tell me about it,” the axeman choked out after he'd emptied the potion. Shaking his head in an effort to clear it, he continued sourly, “I wish I'd paid more attention to the news about the Dread Pirate Quests. Knew they'd said something about the damn ship blowing up…”

“Yeah. It kinda does that.” Her party hadn't gone back to try any other quests in that area, but she sure remembered the one visit they had made to Kobayashi. “We should've figured other wrecks might have black powder—”

“The boss is down to its last lifebar!” Asuna's voice cut across the battle. “Watch out for a state change—D, E, F, get out of there!”

Philia's head whipped around, just in time to see both of Medrizzel's heads turning directly toward her group. Both of their mouths were filled with lightning, crackling with what looked suspiciously like even greater intensity than before—and if she was right, they all had about two seconds to get out of the way.

Three members of Team D were still the water. None of them were fully healed yet, and if their current footing was destroyed, they'd have to swim quite a distance to find more. And Philia's party and Fuurinkazan were still in the middle of rescuing the DDA team, not really in a position to start moving—

Lightning flared, just as a figure blurred into motion and raised a shining sword with a roar of defiance.

The most frightening thing Rain had seen during the year she'd been trapped in SAO was without a doubt Vemacitrin's berserk charge when it hit its final state change. The most awe-inspiring experience would probably have been watching Heathcliff hold off that nightmarish boss by himself for a full ten minutes.

A close second, though, would easily have been Medrizzel The Sea-Lord trying to fry her entire party to a crisp, only to be short-stopped by Kirito holding up the Baneblade like a lightning rod. A third she'd openly admit was Heathcliff appearing out of absolutely nowhere to help hold the line with his massive tower shield.

Medrizzel's latest lightning breath attack lasted much longer than any before, and if Rain was any judge it was far more intense. For thirty seconds, though, the sword of the most infamous beta tester and shield of the leader of the Knights of Blood held off the crackling storm, protecting the players cowering behind them.

Not without cost. Rain could see on her HUD that even with the Baneblade, Kirito's HP was being slowly ground away, and in the flickering glare of lightning she could see his face tightening in a harsh grimace—but as with Vemacitrin, they held.

The rest of Heathcliff's tank group arrived somewhere near the end of the lightning assault, their shields adding to the defense. Forty seconds, then fifty; the DDA tanks slammed into position where they could amid the treacherous footing, holding tight against the last of the blast.

The moment the storm ended, Kirito and Heathcliff both dropped to their knees. In that same moment, Kizmel took a flying leap over her partner's head, aiming a Reaver at Medrizzel's left head. Rain took off in a Sonic Leap only an instant behind, determined to take advantage of the opening their defenders had given them.

Somehow, Rain wasn't surprised to notice Sachi jumping right in after her. Klein's war cry did catch her a bit off-guard, though, as the samurai flung himself without hesitation into Medrizzel's teeth.
In a blaze of shining swords and spray of red polygons, four blades tore into the sea-dragon's heads. Still recovering from their own massive lightning storm, neither of them could do more than shriek in agony as the players exacted revenge for the attempted zapping. The shrieks only grew louder a second later, when other players ripped into Medrizzel's tail from behind.

Rain only caught a glimpse of the latter attack, though. Her Sonic Leap did exactly what she wanted it to, scoring deep into Medrizzel's right head just below its left eye; what came after wasn't quite so simple. The latest breath attack had destroyed even more of the footing in that section of the battlefield, leaving Rain with few good choices for a landing.

Rebounding from the Sonic Leap, she awkwardly bounced toward the other head, stabbed her blade into it with a normal thrust, and tried letting gravity do the work.

Which it did, kind of. Anchored by her sword, Rain slid down Medrizzel's neck, her descent turning into a spiral as it recoiled again in simulated pain. Toward the base of the necks, where they merged into one body, she braced her feet on its scaly hide and shoved off again, praying for something solid to land on.

That prayer went unanswered, her feet finding nothing but water at the end of her fall. With a spluttered curse, she sank like a rock.

Before she even had a chance to panic, though, Rain found her arms gripped tight. With a yank, she was hauled up and out of the water, dropped onto a deck just barely above the surface, and found herself looking up at Klein and Sachi.

"You okay there, Rain-san?" the scruffy samurai asked. "Nice attack, by the way. Gutsy."

"Ah, it was nothing," she said, waving it off; as she spoke, she realized she even meant it. "You think that was nuts, you should've been there for the last floor boss."

"Yeah, heard about that. That's rough… Oi, Kirito!" Klein called. "Think you lost something, buddy!"

The deck shook, bobbing in a way Rain was not comfortable with, and the rest of her party was suddenly there. "Thanks a lot, Klein," Kirito said, nodding to the samurai. "Do you need to heal, Rain," he continued, turning to her, "or are you ready to go back in?"

To her own surprise, Rain found herself grinning. "And miss out on the end of this? Not a chance, Kirito!"

"All teams, get ready! It's about time for the final push!"

Kirito grinned back. "Well, then, you heard Asuna. Kizmel, Klein, everybody! Let's do this!"

It wasn't anything like the final assault on Vemacitrin, when they charged in on Medrizzel. To the very end, the Asura had been a terrifying threat, taking players down even in its death throes; Rain had been honestly stunned to realize she was still alive when it finally shattered into polygons.

The Sea-Lord was something else entirely. It kept on biting and swiping at players as they tore into its final lifebar, and even managed to fire off a few small bolts of lightning. Here and there, players were knocked back, had to retreat to heal, or simply missed a jump and fell into the water by their own mistake—but there was no desperation.

This was what Sword Art Online could've been, Rain realized as she slashed a Horizontal Square into Medrizzel's belly, before ducking away to let Philia drag the saw-toothed back of her sword...
through scales in a Horizontal Arc. This was a battle that was fun, even with the ever-present risk of death in the back of her mind.

And, maybe... this is what it means now. Klein thrust a Tsujikaze into the sea-dragon, stumbled as a remaining Ignition Squid grabbed at his ankles; recovered, with Sachi's blade chopping the squid's tentacles clean off. What Kirito and Heathcliff did—it wasn't about the weapons they used.

Medrizzel's health dwindled, and a cheer went up from the raid party. Rain's grin, which hadn't faded since the final assault began, widened. Feeling bold, she leapt in close enough to slam a flying Side Kick into the sea-dragon's guts.

She almost fell into the water just in time for another miniature lightning blast, and her heel did hit the surface long enough for her to discover that aside from the lack of pain, SAO simulated electric shock pretty well. Philia caught her before she could take a full plunge, though, and Rain took out her frustration on the last Barracanha.

"Just a little more!" Asuna shouted, burying her rapier in Medrizzel's left head in a startlingly powerful Linear. The Sea-Lord shrieked, and that head shattered into azure pieces with shocking suddenness, spraying red polygons. "One last push! Charge!"

We can't get too cocky. This is only a breather boss, after all. With a howl, Fuurinkazan launched a surprisingly coordinated flurry of attacks; swords of at least three kinds and several polearms carved a crisscross of red into sapphire scales. Medrizzel's tail slapped them away right after, but the damage was plain to see in the steady drain of red from its lifebar.

But this is what we're all here for, on the frontline. Right now, and what Kirito and Heathcliff did back there. Shouting together, Rain and Philia hit Medrizzel with paired Vorpal Strikes. The dragon's thrashing in reaction sent waves through the sea, capsizing the floating wreckage they'd been standing on—before they could slip too far under, Heathcliff and the DDA's Schmitt hauled them back to safety.

Taking a second to catch her breath, Rain saw that Medrizzel's HP was down to just a sliver now. Playing a hunch, she glanced over to her teammates, and saw that Kirito and Kizmel both were preparing for a final leap. Trying to maintain their record, she thought wryly.

So what, though? That's just part of the job. You gotta be larger than life, when you're supposed to be heroes leading everyone back to the real world.

They crouched, swords glowing with charging Sword Skills, waiting for just the right moment to begin the last attack—

A flash of blue flickered by, just before they could leap. A shield batted aside a last, desperate lightning bolt, as a curved sword drove a Fell Crescent into Medrizzel's eye. The Sea-Lord shrieked loud enough to make Rain wince; shook its head violently, trying to throw off its tormentor.

The swordsman somehow maintained his balance. Drew his sword out, and rammed it deep into Medrizzel's other eye.

One last wailing shriek, and a flash of lightning that cast the swordsman away in blue arcs. There was one final crackle of static after, and Medrizzel The Sea-Lord exploded into thousands of glittering shards—leaving Lind of the Divine Dragons Alliance to land heavily on a shipwreck, scorched but victorious.

January 22nd, 2024
Kirito groaned, flopping down on one of the inn room's pair of beds. “Ugh, what a crazy floor that was… Kizmel, have you ever thought you need a vacation from a vacation?”

Sitting on the edge of the other bed, Kizmel smiled. “I don't believe I've ever experienced a 'vacation' as a human would know it, Kirito-kun. I admit, however, that the past nine days have not quite been what I would have expected from the expression 'breather level.'” She raised one curious eyebrow. “Was it really so bad, though?”

“…No. No, I guess it wasn't.”

Only an hour before, the clearing group had defeated the Fifty-First Floor's Pillar Guardian, Agreus The Wind Fish. A rather anticlimactic battle, Kizmel thought, after the chaos that had been Medrizzel. Lacking any exotic attacks save for a strong Wind Breath, it had been a straightforward and relatively brief engagement.

Now, in an inn on the outskirts of the first town on the Fifty-Second Floor, Kizmel and her partner were preparing to sleep for the night. In the morning, they would begin the conquest of the new floor; for now, they had one night to unwind from everything that had occurred on the tropical Fifty-First.

“It was fun, mostly,” Kirito said at length, resting his head on one arm as he stared up at the ceiling. “I'd kind of forgotten how fun it could be, running quests without being too scared. Though I could've done without the explosions, weird doors, and mirror-bosses.”

Kizmel hummed in agreement, but didn't lose her smile. Letting her gaze slide over his still-bare chest—he really was in better shape than he gave himself credit for—she said idly, “In hindsight, I think I rather enjoyed our exploration of **Kobayashi**, actually. Philia and I had a… fruitful conversation. And you can't deny the end of the trip was exhilarating."

“If you call almost being blown to bits 'exhilarating', yeah.” He couldn't help a smile of his own, though. “Though speaking of Philia, I wonder what she and Rain will do now?”

“Likely they'll tell us in the meeting with Argo tomorrow morning. I expect they'll remain with the clearing group, though. We'll see them often enough, Kirito-kun.” Chuckling, the elf girl brought up her menu, checking her share of the “drops” from the latest battle. “After all, they're as apt as we are to search out the obscure.”

**Certainly there was a great deal of treasure to be found on that floor, she mused, scrolling through her inventory. I suppose I didn't receive as much material gain as the others, yet I believe I am content with the progress I did make. Not as much as I might have hoped, but one step at a time. Nothing will be gained by pushing too hard.**

At least now she knew what stood in her way. With what Kirito had told her of his issues, she supposed the best approach was to simply prove to him that whatever issues he might have with others, she would always be there for him to lean on.

“Well,” her partner said then, swinging himself upright, “I guess it's about time to switch back to regular gear, huh? I don't know about you, but I was pretty cold on the way to the inn. Looks like this floor has a more normal climate.”

Kizmel nodded. She'd greatly enjoyed the attire, the Fifty-First Floor's tropical conditions imposed, for a number of reasons, but the new floor left her exposed skin quite cold. Most of the Swordmasters who'd been involved in the raid on the Pillar Guardian had gone straight for the nearest inns on arrival.
As Kirito stood and opened his menu to change to something more appropriate, though, a thought struck her. Feeling a smile blossom on her face, she came to her feet. “Actually, Kirito-kun, I think perhaps a bath might be in order before bed. A little time in hot water would do much to soothe our weariness, don't you think?”

Pausing with his finger just above his menu, her partner gave her a wary look. “…I suppose that wouldn't be a bad idea,” he said slowly. “We didn't get much of a chance for that, the last week or so.”

From the red on his face, Kizmel knew he was thinking of the one occasion they had made time for it. Which was fair enough, she acknowledged privately, given the circumstances. I'll give him space, of course; such concerns are hardly overcome at will.

With a casual swipe of her hand, she brought up her menu again, switched to the [Equipment] page, and tapped a single command. A soft swish followed, accompanied by a brief flash of light, as her swimsuit vanished into the Swordmasters' miraculous storage.

To Kizmel's great satisfaction, Kirito didn't look away. He didn't exactly stare—which she found almost disappointing, really—but neither did he flee from the sight of her naked body, as he once would have. Her partner did swallow nervously, and his blush brightened, yet he didn't turn, even when she began to walk toward the bathroom door behind him.

Of course, I also have no intention of letting him forget. And turnabout, as they say, is fair play, is it not?

On her way by, Kizmel edged just close enough to brush her hand against Kirito's—and then, before he could react, leaned in closer and nipped lightly at his ear.

Yelping, her partner jumped high enough his head nearly hit the ceiling. She caught a brief glimpse of steam literally coming out of his ears when he landed, but simply continued on as if nothing had happened—though there may have been a deliberate sway in her stride.

“Could I ask you to wash my back, Kirito-kun?” Kizmel said over her shoulder, hiding a grin. “Of course, I'll be happy to return the favor.”

Kirito's response, as she opened the bathroom door and slipped inside, wasn't terribly coherent. She hadn't really expected it to be, though, nor did she really mind. Her reminder had been delivered, after all, and most effectively.

Even better, he did follow her, in the end. And even half-coherent, his back-washing technique was as wonderful as ever.

January 23rd, 2024

There was something undeniably satisfying about being back in his standard black longcoat, Kirito thought as he descended the stairs to the inn's first floor. He wasn't going to say he'd hated the conditions of the Fifty-First Floor, exactly, but darn it, he liked the solid, heavy feeling of his coat. Not to mention proper boots, after all that time barefoot.

But especially the coat. I didn't know how attached I was until I realized I was still wearing it in my dreams.

He supposed that said something about his state of mind. If it did, though, tough luck; normal Japanese social conventions just didn't work in the death game.
Argo was, as Kirito had expected, waiting for him in a dark corner of the inn's dining room. The only player there, in fact, though a dozen or so NPCs were scattered around. Like him, she was back to normal, with her usual hooded cloak—not that her whiskers, or her grin, had been away at all. “Oi, Kii-bou!” she called, waving him over to her table. “Kii-chan's running late?”

“Philia came up just as I was leaving; I guess they wanted to talk about something.” Kirito slid into a chair across from the Rat, noticing idly how unusual it was for her to have chosen a table for six, with another large one right next to it. Though he supposed it made sense, given how many people they were going to be meeting. “Though actually,” he continued, sobering, “it's just as well. There's something I want to ask you, Argo.”

“Aw, that sounds kinda ominous, Kii-bou.” Argo leaned back in her chair, propped her feet on the table, and popped what looked suspiciously like a potato chip in her mouth. “C'mon, tell Argo-nee-chan what's on yer mind! Standard rate fer any info ya need, o' course.”

“Actually,” he said, lowering his voice, “I'll be paying a retainer for this one, Argo.” Glancing around for any prying ears, and finding none—not too surprising; they'd chosen that inn for a reason—he leaned over the table. “I've got a long-term job for you.”

As Kirito detailed his request, Argo's eyes first went wide, then narrowed intently. Briefly, he thought he caught a flash of a grin; then, he could have sworn he saw a hint of tears. Of course, that made no sense. This was Argo the Rat, after all. She had her favorites, but she was mercenary to the core.

“That's a heck of a job you've got for me, Kii-bou,” she said when he was done, munching on her snack between words. “Awful lot o' Cor you're gonna be paying me, and maybe for nothin'. You really think it's possible?”

“I think I've seen a lot of things in this world in the last year that I would have sworn weren't, Argo,” he said seriously. “I think I'm starting to understand some of it, though. If I'm right, then yeah. There's a way. And if I'm wrong?” Kirito shook his head. “I've still got to try. She deserves that much, Argo.”

For a long moment, the Rat simply stared at him searchingly. He wasn't sure what she was looking for, exactly—he never did with Argo—but finally, a slow, genuine smile spread across her face. It actually kind of scared him. He wasn't used to Argo smiling when it didn't mean fun for her.

“Kii-chan's a lucky girl, y'know that, Kii-bou?” she said whimsically. “Not too long ago, I'd have called ya crazy. Now… I'm just gonna say you're a hopeless romantic.”

“Now just a second,” he protested instantly, face heating up; he wasn't quite fluent in English, but he recognized the last word she'd stuck in well enough. “I didn't say it was anything like—”

“Shush, Kii-bou. I used th' English 'cause it's got two meanings, and I ain't tellin' ya which I meant. Maybe a little bit o' both. An' I didn't say it was a bad thing, did I?” Argo chuckled to herself; a friendlier sound than he was used to out of her. Then she sobered, but kept that smile as she reached a hand across the table. “Got yerself a deal, Kii-bou. An' don't worry, I won't tell anybody. Not even fer a million Cor.”

Reassuring, in her own odd way. Kirito decided he'd take what he could get.

They'd only just finalized the deal when light footsteps announced they were no longer the only players around. “Good morning, Argo,” Kizmel said, slipping into the chair to Kirito's right. To his
relief, she was back in her familiar light armor and cloak, as opposed to the entirely too thin
nightgown she'd still been wearing when he left their room. “Have I missed anything?”

“Nothin' big, Kii-chan,” Argo told her, impressing Kirito with her ability to lie through her teeth
without a quiver. “Just shootin' the breeze while we waited for you an' the girls to get here.”

“Just us? I thought Fuurinkazan was supposed to be here, too.”

All three of them turned to see the new arrivals. Philia was first, once again wearing the most
revealing armor Kirito had yet seen in SAO. The only differences were a new half-cape, and the
Ridgeback Sword she'd gotten from Hyrus Fortress. Despite the Fifty-Second Floor's chill, she
seemed perfectly comfortable.

Rain looked a little different from before, though. When Kirito had first met her, she'd worn
unremarkable leather armor; not that different, really, from what he'd favored before the Coat of
Midnight had changed his image forever. Joining them at the table now, she was decked out in a
light purple, double-breasted coat. Only knee-length, shorter than Kirito's usual calf-length coats, it
had a distinctly piratical feel to it.

*Right, she got that when we were looting the Ship Graveyard,* Kirito remembered. *Looks good. I
wonder how the stats are, compared to mine...?*

“They'll be along any minute,” Argo said, as the two girls settled in at the table. “But there was
somethin' I wanted to give you guys, before the other guys showed up.”

“Now why do I find that ominous?” Kizmel murmured. Kirito noticed a small smile was playing at
her lips, though; unlike Rain, who bore a wary expression he thought was much more sensible.

“Aw, like it's my fault you guys don't get my jokes?” Grinning, the Rat slipped a hand under her
cloak, pulled out a few slim sheets of paper held between her fingers, and spread them on the table.
Four sheets, Kirito realized, one for each of them. “No charge, I got my 'payment' when these were
made.”

Looking more closely at the one Argo slid in front of him, he choked. It was actually a photo, taken
right after Agreus was defeated: the moment his party had celebrated the Wind Fish's defeat. It hadn't
been that tough a boss, but after how desperate the battle with Vemacitrin had been, everyone had
been jubilant at a victory with no casualties.

Some of them more so than others. Philia was hanging onto Kirito's back in her enthusiasm, grinning
and throwing a victory sign at what he now knew to be Argo's recording crystal (however she'd
managed to be in a position for it). A blushing Rain had grabbed onto his right arm, and an utterly
unabashed Kizmel had taken the excuse to press herself quite tight against his left side.

Embarrassing enough at the time, with Klein and more than a few other players glaring daggers at
him. Memorialized this way, Kirito wanted to sink into the floor and never come out again.

“Though ya guys might want copies,” Argo said, blithely ignoring his discomfort. “Specially for that
scrapbook o' yours, Kii-chan.”

*Scrapbook?* Kirito wondered. *What scrapbook?*

While he was debating whether or not to risk asking, Kizmel smiled softly, a faint blush visible on
her dusky skin. “Thank you, Argo,” she said softly, tucking the photo into her inventory. “I
appreciate it. Rather more than I did last time, certainly—though in hindsight, I'm grateful for that, as
well.”
“Yeah,” Rain murmured, looking over her copy with a wistful look. “Thanks, Argo.”

“Hehe, nice!” Philia lifted hers, grinning. “Perfect way to remember our first floor clearing as a team, don’t you think, guys?”

“’First’?” Kirito parroted, distracted from his petty exasperation at being the only one put out by Argo’s antics. “Wait, what do you mean by ‘first’—”

“Hey, there you guys are! Are we late?”

Before he could even finish asking the question, he was interrupted by the arrival of Fuurinkazan. Most of them parked themselves at the next table over, Klein straddling a chair backwards to see the treasure hunting team better, with Sachi ending up at the independents’ table.

“Not really, no,” Kizmel said, neatly distracting the new arrivals while her companions hurriedly hid their copies of Argo's photo. “We were merely chatting while we waited. I trust you’re all doing well?”

“Issin admitted. “I mean, can you say bad timing? We get to the frontlines just after that crazy Asura fight? Gotta say, that wasn't good for my piece of —”

“Speaking of pieces,” Klein cut him off suddenly, “dunno about you guys, but I'd say we should be talking about this over breakfast. Whaddya say?”

On that point, they were unanimous. An NPC waitress was promptly flagged down, and soon it wasn't just Argo chowing down. If there was one thing common to the thousands of players still surviving in Aincrad, it was an appreciation for good food.

“Anyway,” Klein said a few minutes later, between bites of grilled eel, “what Issin said. We were just about ready to finally come on up to join the clearing when we got the news about Vemacitrin. Gotta tell ya, that didn't make our day.”

“Eight dead, and some pretty hair-raising stories about the boss' behavior,” Dale agreed. He took a bite of natto, swallowed, and continued, “Honestly, I was starting to have second thoughts. Even with the word about that Heathcliff guy holding off the boss by himself for ten minutes—which, by the way, I'm still not sure I believe.”

“Oh, he did it,” Kirito said, sharing a quick glance with Kizmel. Remembering those harrowing minutes after Hafner died, he shivered; he could see from the shadows in her eyes that she was thinking of the same thing. “I don't know how, but he did. They don't call him the Paladin these days for nothing.” Deliberately pushing that away, he picked up his simple sandwich and raised an eyebrow. “So? What made you come up anyway?”

It was almost eerie, seeing Klein perfectly serious. Though now that he thought about it, Kirito wasn't sure why; he'd seen the samurai dead serious as early as the beginning of the death game, when they'd parted in the City of Beginnings. That same sobriety was on display now—though if the flagon he'd ordered was any indication, Klein was kind of wishing he could change the “sober” part.

“Two things, Kirito,” he said, a distant look in his eyes. “Somebody had to come up and fill the gaps—and all of us have lost somebody. Almost three thousand people dead now, there's nobody in Aincrad who's been that lucky.” He nodded to the newest member of his guild. “Sachi made that pretty damn clear to me, when we started getting cold feet.”

Sachi blushed, hiding her face behind her glass of orange juice. “I didn't do that much. …Um, did
“I dunno, there _might_ still have been an intact window or two in the Guildhall after you shouted us down,” Harry-One said teasingly. “But seriously, it's not like you were wrong. And you _did_ make us take a few more days to level up before we went to the Fifty-First Floor.”

Kirito nodded slowly. Aside, maybe, from the shouting—though he _did_ vividly remember one time she'd lost her temper—that sounded like the Sachi he knew. As anxious as she'd been when they first met, the former Black Cat had always been very cautious, yet also deeply determined. If the loss of her friends to The Commandant hadn't stopped her, he'd have been surprised if Vemacitrin had.

“Somebody had to do it, huh?” Rain said thoughtfully, leaning back in her chair. “Yeah… I know what you mean. There's thousands of people down on the lower floors who're too scared to do anything. Anybody who's got even a little guts has to do their part, right?”

“That's what I figured, Rain-san,” Klein agreed. “Not to mention, Sachi's been telling us about how the clearers need more than just strength. Especially with—oh, there's the arrogant son of a bitch now.”

Kirito followed his gaze out the window, and felt his face tighten. A contingent of the DDA was walking—strutting, he thought unkindly—down the street past the inn. Leading them was Lind himself, in his usual blue armor. Dressing in imitation of the late Diavel, still trying after so long to publicly inherit the original raid leader's legacy.

Now, though, he'd made an addition: a billowing cape made of sapphire scales. The Last Attack Bonus from Medrizzel, Lind had said absolutely nothing about it, but his behavior had made it perfectly plain he was making a statement by wearing it as much as he was taking advantage of its stats.

Whether that statement was to the raid group as a whole, to Kirito specifically, or both, the swordsman wasn't prepared to say. Though the fact that Lind had broken formation to make that last attack had raised more than a few eyebrows. One way or another, he could feel a shift, and worried about how the climate among the clearers would change from there.

“He's part of why I think we should be here,” Sachi said quietly, watching with narrowed eyes as Lind strode out of sight. “Keita once thought you were exaggerating about the attitudes in the clearers, Kirito, but I remember how that guy acted on Christmas Eve. That wasn't _right_.”

“Yeah, he's always like that,” Philia said sourly, setting down her plate of egg rolls. “He's been getting worse lately, though… But enough about that! We're supposed to be celebrating clearing another floor! And it's great to have another girl in raids, there's only like four of us right now…”

“Yeah—and _I_ wanna know how you get away with bossin' Klein around, Sacchin,” Argo put in, a gleam in her eye and fang visible in her grin. “C’mon, spill!”

Klein made a sound that Kirito was pretty sure he'd deny ever having made if pressed, choked on his ale, and started frantically gesturing with the flagon. The other original members of Fuurinkazan collectively guffawed; and Sachi was left to clear her throat uncomfortably as she turned away.

“That'll cost you fifty thousand Cor, Argo.”

“Ha! The girl's learning! But be careful, Sacchin—someday I might just have that to spare!”

After breakfast, numerous stories, and quite a bit of Cor somehow finding its way into Argo the Rat's pockets, Fuurinkazan headed off. It being their first day clearing a brand-new floor, they wanted to
get an early start. Or, as Klein put it, they wanted to make sure “that smug bastard” Lind didn't have too much reason to brag.

That left the treasure hunters of the Fifty-First Floor to finish their own business more sedately, to Kirito’s considerable relief. He liked Klein and his guild, really he did, but sometimes they got a tad overwhelming for a former solo.

Then, to his even greater relief, Argo took off, pleading a need to get to work on her next guide. Though her cackle as she left didn't leave him with much confidence on that point…

Finally, it was just the four of them again. “Well,” Philia said, standing up to stretch, “I guess that’s one way to start the day. Don't know that I'll ever get used to the Rat, though… So, where to, guys?”

It took Kirito a second to process that statement, and what it implied. “Uh? Wait—we finished the quest, right? You guys got your share of the loot, so we're all even. Aren't we?”

“For the quest, yeah.” Rain also stood, her gaze seeming to linger for a second on the Baneblade's hilt as she faced him. “But Philia and I have been talking, and… Well, we saw a lot of things I don't think we would have, if we'd just been going our own way on that floor.”

“Sure wouldn't have gotten some of this loot!” Philia agreed, tapping the Ridgeback with a smile. “And y'know what? I think I want to see more of this questline you guys have got yourselves into. I think… it's important, somehow.”

“So do I.” There was something somber in the redhead's eyes; but also a bright determination that reminded Kirito of Sachi. “Kirito, Kizmel—I think I'll find what I'm looking for, if I stick with you.”

In that moment, for reasons he couldn't explain even to himself, Kirito felt a kinship with the swordswoman. It wasn't like what he had with Kizmel—whether he was ready to admit it to anyone else or not, he had a pretty good idea of exactly how his feelings there had changed—but he still felt some kind of connection.

Actually… somehow, she reminds me of Sugu. Of how she looked, when she won her first regional competition. I wonder…

The memory of his sister, though, reminded him of why he'd stubbornly stayed apart from other players for so long, only partying with Asuna for a few short months. Why Kizmel had been his only companion since. The same thing that had led him to leave Klein behind that first day, reinforced by what had happened to Sachi's Black Cats. The fear—

A hand on his shoulder made Kirito jump. “This is not like the day you were betrayed, Kirito-kun,” Kizmel whispered, so softly he was sure only he could hear it. “Nor the day the Black Cats fell. Rain and Philia have both proven their strength, haven't they? They fought Vemacitrin, and survived. There has been no greater challenge in the Steel Castle than that.”

Kirito swallowed, feeling for the moment like the two of them were the only ones there. “You… think this is a good idea, Kizmel?”

“I think our mirror-selves in Hyrus Fortress would've been much harder, with only two of us,” she said. “I think finding the way to Kobayashi would have been a sterner task without Rain, and finding our way to the heart of Zaro without Philia's talents would've been a nightmare.

“More than that, Kirito-kun… I think it was fun. Don't you?”

Shipwrecks. An exploding ghost ship full of undead pirates. An undersea dungeon that had shown
him visions that he both was terrified of, and longed for.

Evenings spent on the deck of a boat at sea, idly chatting with people who didn't merely tolerate him, the way so many of the clearers still did even then.

“…Yeah. Yeah, it really was.” It had been strange, working with more players so closely for more than just a raid—but he couldn't say that it had been bad.

And Kizmel's right. They're stronger than Klein was when this started, stronger and smarter than the Black Cats were. And I... know where I stand with them. Don't I?

“Of course,” Kizmel murmured, lips close enough he could feel her breath on his ear, “I'll insist on having you to myself now and again, Kirito-kun. And I certainly don't intend to invite them to share our room.”

Flushing, Kirito turned his attention back to the other two girls, who were waiting with surprising patience. “You two are really sure about this? I mean, you've got to know I don't exactly have the best reputation with the clearers, especially after…”

“Oh, you mean like with Lind?” Philia turned to stick her tongue out at the window through which they'd seen the DDA guildmaster earlier. “Who cares what Blue Boy thinks!”

“Thinks he's some kind of hero,” Rain muttered, casting a glare in the same direction. “If that's what the big guilds are like, I don't want anything to do with them anyway.” She turned back to Kirito and gave a decisive nod. “If you'll have us, Kirito, Kizmel, we're with you. I think that's where I can do the most good.”

Do the most good, huh? Well... I just hope neither of you have to be around the next time I have to play the bad guy, then. Being alone isn't as cool as it sounds.

Not that Kirito had been alone for a long time now, as the light squeeze on his arm reminded him. He was, he thought, just barely ready to contemplate that he could trust where he stood with some people. If he ever wanted to fix the damage he'd done with his sister, he was going to have to take that leap of faith.

“…Okay,” he said at last. “If you guys really want to stick around, I don't mind. But if you are along for the long haul,” he added, standing to bring his menu up in open view, “there's a couple of things you need to know. About what Kizmel and I can really do—and about what we learned in the Elf War. There's something about that quest that even Argo won't sell, and for good reason…”

Chapter End Notes

Just to reiterate, Rain and Philia joining for the long haul does not mean this story is shifting into harem territory. I find their addition to the group dynamic useful, but this remains purely a monogamous pairing.

The boss fight, I'm not entirely satisfied with. I think it was a good concept, but execution was... iffy. Really would've worked better in a setting where the players could fly, or at least had ranged weaponry. I suppose that's why I get for stealing a boss from a game where the player has a dragon, too.
For the curious, Rain's outfit at the end of the chapter is taken from Fatal Bullet. Definitely my favorite look for her.

Ah, one more note regarding the expansion of the main party: they're going to just be a long-term party, not a guild. I've seen Kirito forming a guild in fics before, and it's never rung true to me. He's more of a, "I'll just do my best, I'm no leader--hey, why are these guys following me anyway?" kind of guy, I think, than someone who sets out to lead.

Anyway. Next up, another dragon--but a friendlier one. And Kirito shows why you really don't want to make him mad.
Chapter XVII: Dragon Jubilee

February 18th, 2024

“Please, you have to help me! You… you can't let them get away with this!”

Being accosted by a young Swordmaster in armor indicative of a “mid-level” wasn't exactly something Kizmel had expected, returning from buying supplies for her party. Toresta was the main settlement of the Fifty-Fourth Floor, an unremarkable town distinguished only by it being the current frontline of Aincrad; not a place likely to be visited by any but the strongest Swordmasters as of yet.

Despite that, as she crossed the Teleport Plaza on her way to the inn her party was currently using, the first thing she'd seen was the youth on his knees before a member of the Divine Dragons. At first she'd shrugged it off, assuming it was the DDA's business; but after being pushed away by the Dragon Knight, the mid-level had spotted her and come running.

Now Kizmel was left staring in confusion at the Swordmaster, who knelt at her feet with hands clasped in supplication. “Pardon me?” she managed at last. “I'm afraid I don't understand…”

“You're with the Black Swordsman's party, right?!” the youth blurted out, lifting his head to reveal he was crying. “The one with the Baneblade?! You'd understand, I know you would!”

“Well, perhaps I would,” she said, raising a hand in a calming gesture. “I'm afraid I don't know what it is you're speaking of, however. If you could explain?” Hopefully more quietly and coherently; Kizmel noticed they were creating something of a stir as it was.

Though oddly, only other Swordmasters even seemed to notice. As she'd begun to notice was disturbingly common, the native residents of Toresta hardly spared them a glance.

“Right, right… Sorry.” The young Swordmaster choked back tears, wiped his eyes, and unsteadily came to his feet. “My friends… my friends are dead. I've been trying for days to get someone to do something, but no one even seems to care! But you guys—I've heard the stories, if anyone would listen to me, it'd be the Black Swordsman…!”

Dead friends. Kizmel winced. Not that it was an uncommon tale in Aincrad, among her people or his; it certainly struck home for her. It was that very commonality, though, that made her wonder what made the young man so certain her party would be able to do something for him. Unless he'd heard part of the story of the Divine Stone…?

By the Great Tree of Lyusula, I hope that's not what he means.

“I'm sorry,” he said again, dragging a sleeve over his eyes again. “I'm the guildmaster of the Silver Flags… or I was.” He heaved a deep, shuddering breath; at least half a sob, really. “F-four days ago, we… we were ambushed by an orange guild. I'm… I'm the only one who…”

Confusion was blown right out of Kizmel's mind, first by cold shock—then burning rage. An orange guild… A term only recently coined among the Swordmasters, referring to organized groups of those
recognized by the human “Anti-Criminal Code”. In theory, it might refer to mere thieves; in practice, the first time Kizmel had heard the expression had been after a traumatized survivor announced his party had been set upon by a group called “Laughing Coffin”.

This young man's friends did not die to monsters, to Kayaba's cruel trap. They were murdered.

The elf girl took a long, deliberate breath of her own. Only when she was sure her voice would be quiet, gentle, did she speak again. “Tell me who did this—and what you wish for us to do about it.”

Kirito slowly turned the indigo crystal in his hand, a part of him awed by it. As the original “Beater”, teamed up with the only fully-allied NPC in the entire game, he'd seen more unique loot than practically anyone else, yet this one crystal was probably the single most expensive item he’d ever even seen. How its original owner had even managed to acquire it, he couldn't guess.

That awe was only a small part of the emotions roiling through him, though. The reason its prior owner had gone to the trouble of obtaining it, and then passed it to his party, stirred up things much darker than amazement. Horror, for one.

Let's not forget rage, Kirito thought, staring down into the crystal's facets. I've heard the stories, but this…

Seated sideways at the desk in the inn room he shared with his partner, he lifted his gaze to Kizmel, then swept it over to the other members of their group. The room was cramped with all of them in it, but this was one meeting he wanted strictly private. “PKers,” he said flatly. “And not PoH's group?”

Kizmel, sitting on Kirito's bed, shook her head, violet eyes darker than usual. “No. From the Silver Flag guildmaster's descriptions, this was not Laughing Coffin. The woman was clearly their leader, and their intentions were more pragmatic than PoH.”

“Stealing their stuff, then killing 'em right off? Yeah, Laughing Coffin would've had fun with them, first.” On the other bed, next to Rain, Philia's face held none of her usual good humor. “Like bandits, not serial killers… I dunno if that's better or worse.”

“I don't think I care. Those... ublyudki… are still just killers, whatever their reasons.” Rain fingered the hilt of her sword, looking very much like she wanted to start attacking the furniture with it. “Well, Kirito? Are we going for it?”

Kirito blinked, both at the still-unaccustomed feeling of being “in charge” and at the redhead's unfamiliar epithet. I don't even recognize the language... No, that's not important right now. “…I'm uneasy about this, to be honest,” he said aloud. “Because of what it is, and because it'll mean taking time off from clearing. But we've done 'sidequests' before, and… I don't like the thought of letting something like this slide. It's not a decision I'm going to make alone, though. This could be dangerous, guys.”

Not just to life and limb, either. Maybe not even primarily; if this particular group of PKers had hit the Silver Flags, it was a good bet they—like most PKers—weren't up to fighting clearers straight on, and the odds were against them being as smart as PoH. Physical danger wasn't the only one, though.

Kirito had faced the dilemma before, several times; Kizmel had been with him for one of them. Even so, neither of them had ever quite had to make the choice, and he wasn't sure he wanted his newer companions to face it at all.

“They're killing people, Kirito. We've got a lead on who—and we're pretty much the only ones who paid any attention to the poor survivor.” Rain's hands curled into fists, a grim look in her red eyes. “I
know what you're worried about, but I can't let this pass."

“Me, either.” Philia didn't look as certain as the redhead, her voice low and slow, but she looked Kirito straight in the eyes. “Kirito, we've all known someone who's been murdered, by now. I wish it wasn't up to us, but somebody has to do it, right?”

Reasoning Kirito himself had used all too many times, in the year he'd been trapped in Sword Art Online. He sometimes wondered where he might've ended up, if he hadn't decided he was the only one who could do something quite so much. Dead, maybe. Or wishing I was, after other people died because I didn't act.

Definitely alone.

Having heard the others' votes, he turned to Kizmel, someone he knew wouldn't have even been there if certain decisions hadn't been made in the past. Certainly not sitting on his bed, looking like she thought she belonged there…

He quickly strangled that train of thought, as he'd had to do more often than he liked since the Fifty-First Floor, and forced his attention back to the subject at hand. “Do I even need to ask?”

Kizmel smiled briefly, but quickly sobered. “As Rain and Philia said, we're the only ones even considering it, my friend,” she said softly, shaking her head. “You and I both know all too well what the Silver Flags' guildmaster is going through—and he gave me that crystal simply because I was the only one who even took the time to listen to his story. The dead demand justice, Kirito.”

Yeah. That's what I thought.

Not that Kirito disagreed, in the end. Not after the trap that had killed most of the Moonlit Black Cats. There was a reason he still kept the Baneblade, after having once again acquired a sword that was statistically superior.

“Besides,” Kizmel said then, one eyebrow raised pointedly. “I know you, Kirito. What you really wanted to hear was that we would stay out of it—and then you would try to steal away and deal with it by yourself, wouldn't you?”

He winced, but had no rebuttal. She knows me too well, doesn't she? After Joe's MPK-by-proxy with the Black Cats, and everything Laughing Coffin has done to hamper the clearing… No. I couldn't let this pass. I would've preferred not to get the others involved, but one way or another, these people have to be stopped.

Letting out a deep sigh, he stuffed the crystal into his inventory. “Okay, then. We'll do it. Carefully.” Kirito turned his gaze then to the inn room's door, where one final person leaned casually, silent up to then. “Argo,” he said, fishing a coin bag out of a belt pouch, “can you find us what we need?”

The Rat smirked. “Redhead, wields a spear, really smug? Ain't enough girls in Aincrad for that to be hard, Kii-bou.” Catching the thrown bag of Cor, her smirk widened to show teeth. “Meet me in the bar downstairs tomorrow night, yeah? I'll have somethin' for ya by then.”

“Just the info, Argo,” Kirito said sharply. “If you can get us a name and a general location, we can handle the rest. Don't be taking any unnecessary risks, got it?”

He hated involving the info broker in the PKer crisis at all. Even if this was looking like much less of a threat than Laughing Coffin, he didn't want to find out the hard way if curiosity killed the Rat, too.

Hand on the doorknob, Argo turned a look on him over her shoulder that he wasn't quite used to. Not from her. “You really know how to talk to a lady, dontcha, Kii-bou? No wonder… Don't worry 'bout a thing. Argo-nee-chan is always careful.”
Winking, the Rat slipped out the door. Following her out was a dour look from Rain, who for reasons Kirito had never quite understood never seemed to get along with Argo. “It never gets any easier dealing with her, does it?”

“No,” Kizmel told her, laying back on Kirito’s bed with a sigh. “It does not. If you ever think you’re safe from Argo’s humor… Well. Trust me, you will be proven wrong.”

February 23rd, 2024

If she ever found her way out of the forest, Silica promised herself miserably, she was never going to let fame go to her head again. No matter how “special” her achievement might’ve been, it wasn’t helping her find her way around the Lost Forest.

_Not like it was all my fault_, she thought stubbornly, grimly putting one foot in front of the other as she waited for the next random teleport. _If Rosalia-san hadn’t been so mean and pushy—!

“Kyuu?”

The inquisitive sound from the blue-feathered dragon riding Silica’s shoulder brought the young girl up short. With a sigh, her shoulders slumped as she acknowledged the truth. “I know, Pina,” she muttered, trudging through the brush of the darkened forest. “It’s my own stupid fault…”

Yes, Rosalia had been a jerk to suggest she didn’t need healing crystals when she had a Feathered Little Dragon as a tamed mob. Pina’s Healing Breath couldn’t be used that often, and didn’t restore nearly as much HP as a crystal, and Rosalia knew it. That still hadn’t justified Silica storming off in a fit of pique when the redhead had pushed the issue.

“I can join any party I want! Plenty of players would be glad to team up with me!”

In hindsight, even Silica cringed at that. Just a thirteen-year-old girl with a big head. The title “Dragon Tamer” had made her too proud, and now she knew it all too well. After all, as helpful as Pina was in a fight, the dragon didn’t substitute for a map.

The Lost Forest wasn’t called that for no reason. If a player didn’t know exactly how to get around, and quickly, the place would randomly teleport them after a certain length of time in any given area. Even a teleport crystal would only send a player to a different section of the Forest, never letting them go directly to town.

Given that it had been the leader of the party she’d abandoned who had the map…

She thought it was about four in the afternoon that she’d left the others. Well after dark, she still hadn’t found her way back to the Forest’s entrance. She’d found plenty of enemies, though, and while she and Pina were more than strong enough for them, it still took a toll.

Just to rub it in, Silica was about out of both potions and healing crystals.

Two steps more, and blue light began to flare up around her. _If I do get out of this, I’ll remember it_, she vowed, one section of dark forest trading itself for another. _I’m not going to let words make me do something so stupid again!_ 

_If_ she got out. It was quickly plain to her that the new area to which she’d been teleported wasn’t any closer to the edge of the Forest than any other she’d seen so far. The mess her own impulsiveness had landed her in wasn’t over yet.

_Well, sooner or later I’ve got to find the right way! I just have to keep going, and—_
“Kyuu!”

Pina's more urgent call snapped Silica out of her depression. Whirling to see what the feathery dragon had spotted, her heart leapt into her throat at the discovery of what had crept up behind her: three humanoid monsters, tall and bulky, covered in fur. Carrying a heavy wooden club in one hand and a gourd of some kind in the other, Silica recognized them at once.

Drunk Apes. The highest-level mobs in the Lost Forest, which she'd managed to avoid encountering up to then. Individually, not that big of a threat to her; three at once was something else entirely.

Especially when she was out of healing items. For the first time since she'd set out from the City of Beginnings, Silica didn't find herself at all reassured by the light color of their cursors.

But I can do this. I know Pina and I can!

She was tired, and she was afraid. But she drew the dagger sheathed at her waist and launched into a charging Rapid Bite skill with no hesitation at all: initiative and speed were the keys to successful knife-fighting. Even if she was only a mid-level, that was a lesson she'd learned well.

Silica's decisive action paid off, taking her right up to the first Drunk Ape before any of them had a chance to engage. Her dagger bit deep into its chest, taking off a good chunk of its HP right there. It staggered back with a basso cry, giving her a chance to launch right into the three slashing hits of a Tri-Slice; she just had time to leap back after that ahead of its club.

The one advantage she had was that the Drunk Apes, while powerful, were slow and clumsy. They used low-level mace skills, and no multi-hit combos; for the start of the battle, Silica was able to take advantage of that to tear down her target's HP with near impunity.

Against one, that would've been enough. Against two, with Pina running interference, it might still have been enough.

With three, she was very abruptly forced to abort a Fad Edge before she could even launch it, and threw herself back in a roll to avoid the third Drunk Ape's club. The heavy wood whistled through the air right where her head had been—but it did miss, and Silica came out of her roll prepared to charge into another Rapid Bite to finish her original target.

Even as Pina blew deadly bubbles at the second, though, the third continued its attack on Silica. At the same time, she realized to her astonishment that the first had taken the respite to drink from the gourd in its left hand, and its HP was rapidly going back up.

She hadn't known they could do that. But then, she'd never really fought solo before. Fighting in a party, she'd never seen them live long to have a chance to try it.

I have to kill them quick, then. If I'm fast enough, I can still do it!

Silica didn't remember much of the next few minutes, after. It was a whirlwind of steel, clubs, and Pina's trilling cries as the dragon tried to help her kill the Drunk Apes before they could heal. A war of attrition, both sides coordinating, but only one side truly able to recover over the course of it.

Anxiety turned to fear, to panic as she grew more and more tired. As one of the Drunk Apes healed for the dozenth time, Silica began to truly understand that Death was an ever-present threat in Aincrad, a truth she hadn't had to face in months.

Stabbing, spinning, ducking; watching as her HP ticked down toward yellow, while her foes juggled her to keep their own in the blue. Just before her health bar reached that mark, Pina's breath washed
over her, restoring maybe ten percent, but not enough.

Trying one more time to kill the first Drunk Ape, Silica finally tripped in the middle of a Sword Skill. Her dagger missed its mark completely, and before she could recover the second ape caught her with a heavy blow to the stomach.

Crying out as the virtual air was driven from her lungs, she hurtled back and slammed spine-first into a tree. With a choked gasp, she collapsed to the forest floor, dazed.

No. Worse than dazed, Silica realized. She couldn't move at all. Looking up at her health bar, she saw a single blinking icon above it: Tumble status. Next to Paralysis, the closest to a death sentence there was in Aincrad—especially to a player who was all alone.

Worse still, her HP was suddenly well into the yellow, close enough that one badly-timed critical could well be her end.

No chance to evade, no chance even to reach for a Teleport Crystal. Even as her wits returned, Silica could only look up in terror as the third Drunk Ape advanced on her, lifting its heavy club. It took on a deep crimson glow; she began to close her eyes as it started to come down, unable to watch—

“Kyuut!”

Flashing into the path, a winged shape. In the middle of its swing, the club's skill expended itself, smashing the intervening object to the ground.

Blue eyes looked up to Silica. Pina trilled weakly—and shattered, azure shards leaving only a single tail feather to mark their passing.

At the same moment, something inside Silica shattered, as well. In the loneliness of Sword Art Online, a young girl adrift, the dragon she'd named for the cat waiting for her back in the real world had been her one constant companion. As she flitted from one party to another at a whim, always confident there'd be another one glad to have her, she'd always had Pina.

When feathers turned to fragments, Silica's heart cracked. Her terror disappeared along with the Tumble status, and as her vision went red, she lunged to her feet with an incoherent howl of rage. Driven by fury as much as System Assist, her Rapid Bite struck deep into the heart of the Drunk Ape that had taken her friend from her.

Maybe their AI hadn't expected her ferocious assault. More likely, her reckless disregard for her own health was just letting her do things she wouldn't have dared just a minute before. Either way, the force of her attack drove the Drunk Ape clear down to the forest floor, inflicting a Tumble on it in turn.

Still screaming, Silica flailed at the ape again and again, dagger flashing back and forth, up and down, running through every Sword Skill she knew as quickly as the system would allow. The others began to attack her in turn, and her vision flashed when one of them struck a glancing blow, but she didn't care. Nothing mattered except killing Pina's murderer.

Cutting through her rage-filled haze was her target groaning out a death cry, shattering to pieces beneath her. Silica fell down through its scattering body, landing hard on her knees. At the moment of impact, though, she rebounded, twisting around to face her remaining tormentors.

There were still two of them, both at full health, and only one of her, HP clear down to red. But survival was no longer her concern, irrational as it was. She would avenge Pina, even if it meant throwing herself right into the club swinging toward her—!
Half a meter from Silica's face, the first Drunk Ape's club was abruptly sliced in half. An instant later, its head flew off to join the missing chunk of wood, and the murderous monster vanished in a cascade of polygons. Almost at the same moment, a curved blade burst out of the other ape's chest, sending it to meet its companion in death.

For a long moment, Silica could only stand there in stunned surprise. Surprise, at the abruptness of her enemies' deaths, and the fact that she was still alive. She couldn't even process what had happened, still clutching her dagger in a striking posture.

“Whew… We made it in time. Are you okay?”

A deep voice. Male—and human, the first human voice she'd heard in hours. Shuddering as the adrenaline began to drain away, Silica's dagger-arm went slack, and she finally took stock of the fact that she was no longer alone.

The speaker, standing where her near-killer had been, she could barely see. Between his dark clothes, hair, and sword—now being returned to a scabbard on his back, after a quick flourish—all she could really make out was light reflecting off equally dark eyes.

“I fear she's in shock, my friend. It seems we… may not have been as quick as we had hoped.”

Silica's head whipped around to the source of the new voice: a girl who managed to be even darker than the boy, dusky skin hidden by armor and a hooded cloak shrouding her face. She had a sense of the unreal about her, something Silica couldn't quite pin down.

Then the girl's words registered, and grief came crashing down on Silica so hard she sank to her knees. “Pina...” she whispered, eyes filling with tears. With shaking hands, she picked up the feather that was all her companion had left behind, and held it close to her chest. “Pina… I'm so, so sorry… This is all my fault…”

She didn't know how long she knelt there, crying. There was a soft murmuring that might've been her rescuers whispering to each other, but she couldn't muster the will to care. Not when her own stupidity had brought her to this point, and cost her so dearly.

Eventually, though, she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Hey,” the boy said softly. “I'm really sorry we didn't get here sooner. But, um… are you okay, at least?”

Sniffling, Silica finally looked up into dark eyes, and managed a weak nod. “Yeah,” she whispered. “I… I'll be fine… Thank you… for doing what you could.” A practical thought pierced the fog in her head. “Um… how did you even get here when you did? This place… I've been wandering here for hours, and I can't believe anybody was looking for me…”

“We've been here a time or two before,” the hooded girl said, a wry note in her voice as she crouched next to the boy. “We were here on business of our own when we encountered your party leader, who said you might need help.”

A few hours before, that would've been a boost to Silica's pride. After what had just happened, it was only another reminder of how badly she'd messed everything up. She was distantly grateful that the other party had at least cared that much, but the fact that they hadn't actually looked for her themselves was a blow to her ego.

“Thank you,” she said again. “And, um, don't… don't apologize for not being quicker. That… that's all my fault…”

There was a long silence after that, her rescuers seeming to be caught up in their own concerns while
she brooded in her grief. Silica was still alive—but she had no idea what she would do now. She'd lost not only one the one thing that got her so many party invites, not just the pet that helped her through fights she might never have challenged otherwise, but the one emotional lifeline she had in the game of death.

_Pina… I… I…_

“Excuse me,” the hooded girl said gently, “forgive me for asking this, but… does that feather you're holding have a name?”

_A name?_ It hadn't even occurred to Silica to examine the feather Pina had left behind. Now, with a trembling hand, she tapped it, and was surprised to see a name come up: _Pina's Heart_. “E-eh? What's… this…?” _Pina's heart_? Just seeing that her companion had left something like that started to make her break down all over again.

“Wait!” the boy said hurriedly, raising his hands. “There's still hope. That item—according to information clearers dug up recently, that means the pet can be revived.”

Silica's head snapped up, eyes widening in sudden, terrifying hope. “It—it does?! How?!?” she demanded, heart hammering in her chest. “Please, just tell me—!”

The hooded girl placed a hand over the one still clutching Pina's feather. “There is a story,” she began, “among the elves that live in this castle. On the Forty-Seventh Floor, far to the north, there is a place called the Hill of Memories. A flower blooms there that can bring animal companions back to life, if brought together with the Heart.”

Hope surged higher in Silica's heart—then plummeted, as the other girl's words fully registered. The Forty-Seventh Floor wasn't the frontline, but it was still ten levels above her own margin. Even if she'd still had Pina with her, attempting that would've been suicide.

“The Forty-Seventh Floor, huh,” she whispered. “W-well, if I grind enough, then someday… maybe only a few weeks…”

The black-clad boy cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Um, the thing is… apparently you have to do it within four days, or the 'Heart' item turns into 'Remains'… B-but don't worry!” he said hastily, as despair rose in her again. “Look—oh, I'm no good at this… Here, take these.”

A system window materialized in the air before Silica's eyes. Confused, she realized it was a trade offer, holding items she'd never seen before: Silver Thread Armor, Ebony Dagger… Names she didn't know, but could see were much stronger than anything she'd ever used.

Uncomprehending, she looked up into the boy's dark eyes. “U-um, what's this…?”

The hooded girl chuckled. “What my friend is trying to tell you is that we'll help you. That equipment should compensate some for any lack of strength on your part, and with the two of us by your side, there should be nothing on the Forty-Seventh Floor of any significant threat.”

Confused, Silica looked from one stranger to the other, hope warring with suspicion. She'd never seen either of them before, and just from looking at them she couldn't tell much about them; the boy's longcoat and calm demeanor made it hard to gauge his age, while the girl's hooded cloak and exotic features if anything made her even more enigmatic.

“Why… why are you so willing to help…?”

She wanted to believe the offer was genuine. Truthfully, the boy's eyes seemed to have a kind of
innocence to them, and the fact that one of SAO's rare female players was teamed with him probably meant that he wasn't out to win her heart, as some others had been. Yet without Pina—without the tamed dragon that made her "special"—she honestly couldn't think of any reason a couple of random strangers would take such a risk in a world where one misstep was lethal.

The long silence after her question didn't make her feel any better, but at last—after a Look from the hooded girl—the boy coughed. "W-well," he began, "I could say something trite about how you remind me of my sister, but the truth is..." He hesitated, flicking a quick glance at his partner. "The truth is... I know what it's like to be attached to something of this world. Or someone." The boy nodded at the feather she still clutched tightly.

Silica blinked. Took another look at the boy's eyes, and did a double-take. Innocent, maybe—but sad, too. It was a look, she thought, that she'd sometimes seen in the mirror, when she let herself think about what would happen when the game was finally cleared.

Glancing back at the boy's partner, she realized the smile the girl was favoring him with had a sad edge of its own.

Exactly what their story was, Silica didn't know, and didn't think she should ask. Still, she found herself believing the boy's words, and tension finally drained out of her. "Well, um, thank you, then," she said, letting herself finally start to hope. "Oh—I'm Silica! I'll be in your care."

"Kirito," the boy said, finalizing the trade with a shy smile. "This is my partner, Kizmel. Pleased to meet you."

Kirito...? Somehow, she thought the name ought to have meant something, though she wasn't sure what. And Kizmel... that sounds foreign. Come to think of it, she doesn't look Japanese, either.

Just then, though, she didn't care. These strangers were offering her hope, and as they began to lead her out of the Forest, Silica decided that was good enough for her.

At one time or another, Kirito figured he'd probably been through just about every town in the conquered floors of Aincrad, at least briefly. He couldn't say that anything about the Thirty-Fifth Floor's Mishe stood out to him, though; between its fairly bland architecture and how long it had been since the frontline had been centered there, anyway.

The pig-tailed young girl leading him and his partner through Mishe's streets seemed familiar enough with it, at least. And it with her, he mused, as Silica repeatedly greeted other players and begged off more than one party invite. I'm actually surprised I've never heard of the "Dragon Tamer" before, if she's this well-known in the mid-levels.

Kirito actually thought it was kind of funny, the dirty looks he and Kizmel were getting for "line-cutting" with the girl. He was wearing one of his older coats and a sturdy but unremarkable sword, while the elf had on a far plainer cloak than was her wont; as long as Kizmel kept her hood up, neither of them looked to be anything special.

For once, people are glaring at me without even knowing about the "Beater" stuff. That's kinda fun.

At least something in that night was lighthearted. When he and Kizmel had set out on their mission, rescuing a girl just after she'd lost a beloved pet wasn't quite what they'd expected to do. It looked like it would fit into their plan well enough, but Kirito really hadn't counted on the complication.

She's just a kid, he thought, glancing over at Silica as she led them around a corner. Damn, I think she's younger than Sugu... Didn't her parents pay any attention to the CERO rating? I mean, sure,
nobody expected the whole death trap part, but this is still a pretty mature game.

Not a point Kirito intended to make to Kizmel, that. Seeing as she'd been his rather eye-opening introduction to just how “mature” SAO actually was. If he did say anything about it, she'd laugh at him. If he was lucky.

They were almost to the inn Silica had recommended, he thought, when a voice called out—one different from the myriad people trying to recruit the Dragon Tamer. “Oh? So you found her, I see! Good to see you made it out of that forest after all, Silica-chan.”

Silica stopped dead, turning to face the owner of the voice. Kirito didn't blame her for the way her face visibly tightened; not when he saw exactly who was standing on a street corner, casually leaning against a long spear like a giant walking stick. A tall redhead in armor not quite as revealing as Philia's, wearing a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

No, it does. It's just not a friendly look.

“Hate to say it, though,” the redhead went on, “but we already distributed the day's drops. Sorry about that.”

Silica didn't seem to buy the sympathy any more than Kirito did. Drawing herself up to her full height, she retorted, “I told you before, Rosalia-san, I don't care anyway. It was about time I left, anyway.”

“Hm. If you say so, Silica-chan.” Rosalia rubbed her chin with her free hand, looking thoughtful. “Oh, but… something seems to be missing.” She glanced over at Kirito and Kizmel, one eyebrow raised. “I guess our party leader's info wasn't good enough, eh, Blackie? Looks like you were a little late.”

The mourning Dragon Tamer wasn't the only one who bristled at that. Even if he hadn't had very personal reasons for sympathizing with Silica's plight, the way Rosalia oozed false concern would've raised his hackles.

“Late, perhaps,” Kizmel said softly, before Kirito could say anything he might have regretted. From beneath her hood, the elf girl gave the redhead a measuring gaze, continuing, “But not, I think, too late.”

“That's right!” Silica said fiercely, glaring at her former teammate. “Pina's gone now, but I'm going to revive her!”

Rosalia's eyebrows went up at that, and she gave a low whistle. “So, that means you're headed for the Hill of Memories, hm? That's rather reckless of you, Silica-chan. With your level, I'm not sure you can manage that.”

Enough. “The Hill of Memories isn't that hard a dungeon,” Kirito said, stepping forward so he was partly between Silica and Rosalia. “With a little help, she won't have any trouble.”

A few more levels, actually, and he suspected Silica would've been able to handle the Hill all by herself. There wasn't time for that, though—and monsters weren't what he was really worried about for this particular quest. At least, not Kayaba's monsters…

Now Rosalia's attention drifted to him and his partner. Judging from her expression, she wasn't exactly impressed. “Oh, another boy she's charmed? Greedy, aren't you, when you've already got a girl with you?” Her lips curved in another unfriendly smile. “With gear likes yours, I'd be careful, were I you. This world has surprises, you know.”
Kirito managed to let that jab slide right off; in a way, it was easier knowing that the redhead had no idea just how right she was. Silica, on the other hand, he could see was a barely-restrained bundle of fury—not that he could blame her, considering how fresh her own wounds were.

To her credit, though, the pig-tailed girl held in her tears, and simply said in a tight voice, “Think whatever you want, Rosalia-san. I don't care. …The tavern is right over this way, Kirito-san, Kizmel-san.”

Rosalia's sickly-sweet “Good luck,” and low laughter followed them down the street.

Kizmel had met a wide variety of Swordmasters since first meeting her partner. Most of them, in her experience, had been doing their best to further their cause in their own way, however unpleasant their personalities could sometimes be; Kibaou and Lind came readily to mind as aggravating but well-intentioned. The likes of PoH were monstrous, yet straightforward about their nature.

Rosalia's particular kind of poisonous false-friendliness was something she'd never encountered before, and honestly hoped not to again. Lind at his worst merely thought too highly of his own wisdom; Rosalia hid a predator's fangs behind a smile.

Sitting at a table of the large Weathervane Tavern across from Silica, as close beside her partner as she dared, Kizmel could tell the older girl's words troubled the tamer deeply. From entering the tavern until Kirito produced a bottle and poured each of them a cup, Silica was silent, trembling; only after she'd taken several long sips did she begin to loosen up.

“This isn't something the tavern sells,” she said, frowning. “It tastes like wine, but…”

“Moontear wine,” Kizmel told her, savoring the sweet and sour burn of her sister's favored drink. “A specialty of the Dark Elves. They seldom come this far up the Steel Castle, but Kirito has contacts with them.”

The exact nature of those contacts, she left unsaid for now; there was a reason she still wore her hood up even in the safety of the tavern. Kizmel regretted keeping secrets from Silica, but the encounter out in the street had proven the necessity of their precautions.

“It's good,” Silica decided, nursing her glass. “But, um, this must be rare stuff. Are you sure it's okay for me to have some?”

“Not as rare as you might think, if you know where to look,” Kirito said easily, leaning back in his chair with a small smile. “Besides, drinking is more fun with other people, right?” His expression sobered. “Especially after something like that. Are you okay, Silica?”

Staring down into her cup, she bit her lip. “…I will be,” she muttered. “It's just… why do people have to be that mean? I know I was too full of myself, but what Rosalia-san said…”

Sighing, Kirito set his own cup on the table and leaned his elbows on either side of it. “I'm guessing this is your first MMO, Silica?” When the girl nodded, he continued, “Well, to be honest, this kind of thing is pretty normal for MMO players, not just in Aincrad.”

Kizmel's interested was instantly piqued, though she refrained from glancing at her partner lest she break her cover. Human society in his world was still something she knew relatively little about, and the culture of “gamers” in particular was something she had knowledge of only in relation to Aincrad itself.

“There's always a thrill to being anonymous,” Kirito said now, looking at yet somehow also past
Silica. “When you're wearing the mask of a character, you can be kinder than your 'real' self... or crueler. They call it 'roleplaying', and as long as you're not a total griefer, it's all in good fun in a regular game. Honestly, I was into PvP myself before all this, and... Well. Let's say I might have done some kill-stealing here and there.”

He looked a bit sheepish at that. Kizmel found herself wondering what it might've been like, meeting her partner in such times; from the sound of it, she would have found him either vexing, or a charming rogue, depending on what his attitude had been during such actions.

She chose to believe in the charming rogue. Certainly it fit better with how she did know him.

“That was before, though. Before the game turned real—and before Full-Dive.” Kirito clasped his hands, fingers visibly tightening. “I don't understand how anyone can steal or kill for the fun of it when our real lives are at stake. And to be honest... I've been thinking about this for a long time now, and I've come to the conclusion that roleplaying a villain isn't healthy in Full-Dive at all.”

Silica tilted her head. “Kirito-san?”

“Duels are one thing. PvP, so long as both sides agree, isn't any different from a kendo match in our world. Even in VR. But if you can look someone in the eye, someone weaker than you, threaten them—hurt them—and laugh?” Kizmel could hear tendons in his fingers creaking. “Anyone who can act like that is garbage in both worlds.”

The heat in his voice was enough to make Kizmel jump almost as much as Silica did. She'd very occasionally heard Kirito complain about the behavior of certain of his fellow Swordmasters, but only occasionally, and never in such forceful terms.

*Even some of our fellow clearers have fewer manners than they should,* she reminded herself. *Those who have turned to banditry, even were this world truly the game they believed it would be... Yes, I suppose it's no surprise my partner would feel this way.*

Kirito seemed to realize, then, that he'd not only startled his companions but drawn the gaze of some of the other patrons. Forcing his fingers to relax, he hunched his shoulders and lowered his voice. “Sorry. It's... kind of personal for me.” He cracked a smile; a bitter, humorless one. “Not that I'm one to talk, anyway. Being around me... isn't always healthy.”

*Alright, that's enough of that.* Doubtless the loss of the girl's pet had brought old wounds back to the surface, but her patience for her partner's self-recrimination was wearing thin. Laying her hand on his thigh under cover of the table, Kizmel leaned in close to his ear. “You save far more than you have lost, my friend,” she murmured. “Nor is the responsibility yours alone.”

“T-that's right!” Silica said quickly, blushing faintly. “You did save me—and you're helping me bring Pina back. You're nothing like Rosalia-san!”

Apparently realizing at the same time the girl did exactly what position he'd ended up in with Kizmel, Kirito reddened and coughed lightly. “Ah. Well... maybe so. I do my best, anyway.” Despite his clear embarrassment, the elf was pleased to see tension easing out of his shoulders. “So! How about we get some dinner, and work out the plan for tomorrow?”

Conversation after that, Kizmel was relieved to find, was much lighter. Kirito and Silica exchanged a few more cheerful stories of past adventures as they ate, the elf making a few quiet contributions of her own between bites of stew. A very good venison stew, that was; her own people had something similar, but human chefs had created something with their own unique touch.
Another sign, she had to admit, that the kitchen was one area where human variety was truly a marvel.

After the meal, which was capped off with the wonderful human dessert that was cheesecake, Kirito pushed back his chair. “Okay, then,” he said. “Why don't we head upstairs? We can get tomorrow's schedule figured out behind closed doors, then get some sleep.”

Kizmel stood, and with a puzzled frown Silica followed suit. “Um, sure,” the girl said. “But, um, why behind closed doors…”?

“Ah, it's probably nothing,” Kirito said easily, with a careless shrug. “But the walls have ears, y'know? In this world, it's better not to take chances.”

Looking doubtful, Silica nodded and followed the swordsman to the staircase in the back of the tavern.

*For a “mid-level”, she seems innocent of the subtler dangers Aincrad holds,* Kizmel mused, taking up the rear. *I wonder, is it that she's simply been fortunate, or has her skill kept her away from such threats without her ever noticing? Or perhaps… perhaps others have protected her, whether they knew it or not.*

*In a way, I envy that innocence. I pray tomorrow will not hurt her too badly.*

Silica was mildly surprised to find that Kirito and Kizmel had rented only a single room for themselves, when they reached the second floor. “Um… I'm not getting in the way or anything, am I?” She probably didn't have anything to worry about, *SAO* was only supposed to be rated fifteen and up, but there were those rumors she'd been hearing…

Leading the way inside, Kirito blinked. “Huh? …Oh.” He coughed, coloring faintly, and waved a hand. “No, don't worry about it. Kizmel's… circumstances when we first teamed up meant it was easier for us to just share a room back then. Now it's just habit.”

Something about the look on Kizmel's face then—something subtle enough Silica suspected Kirito didn't catch it—suggested to the Dragon Tamer that the two weren't quite in complete agreement about that. She decided to take it at face value, though, and entered the room with a muttered, “Excuse me.”

Inside, Kizmel casually sat on the edge of one the beds and nodded for Silica to take the other, while Kirito pulled a chair away from the room's desk. The black-clad swordsman parked himself close to a low table in the center of the room, materialized a small box from his inventory, and set it down.

Silica peered at it curiously. Inside was a small crystal ball, reminding her of some magic crystals she'd seen. When Kirito clicked on it, a menu appeared in the air; a few quick touches later, and the whole thing began to glow with bright blue light.

A hologram quickly formed in the air above the item, a brilliant sphere displaying what looked like a floor map. Unlike the basic map any player could call up from their menu, though, this one showed locations in three-dimensional detail, even individual buildings and trees.

“Wow!” Silica breathed. “What's that? I've never seen an item like that before!”

“It's called a Mirage Sphere,” Kirito told her, smiling. “They're still pretty rare, and expensive, but if you can find them they're pretty handy.” He pointed at one of the villages floating in the display. “This is a map of the Forty-Seventh Floor, and we'll be starting right about here…”
She listened with rapt attention, soaking in every detail of the path that would lead her back to Pina. A part of her noticed Kizmel occasionally glancing at the door, making Silica worry just a little that she really was intruding; but the majority of the older girl's attention also seemed to be on the Mirage Sphere.

When Kirito had finished outlining their route and closed down the Sphere, Silica prepared to make a quick exit. After all, whatever the two were to each other, she was sure they'd want to get to sleep as soon as possible. She was in hurry to, for that matter, even if she didn't think it would be easy for her; the sooner she was asleep, the sooner she could start off to get Pina back.

Before she could stand, though, Kizmel leaned into the space between them. “Silica,” she began, “I've been meaning to ask—if you don't mind, that is. How exactly did you come by such a dragon in the first place? I've never heard of such a creature being tamed.”

Any other night, Silica might've answered that question proudly. Now, after realizing just how big she'd let her ego get, she ducked her head and blushed. “To be honest, it was kind of by accident,” she said. “I was in a forest one day a few months ago, and I just kinda saw this little dragon wandering around the edge of the path. At first I was worried—the dragon was a mob, after all—and she even attacked me. Except, well… she turned out to be more interested in my snack.”

“Your snack.” Kirito's eyebrows went up. “Uh, what were you eating at the time?”

She shrugged. “Just ordinary peanuts.”

“Peanuts.” Kizmel nodded slowly, a solemn expression on her face. “Of course. I've heard some of the smaller dragon breeds are fond of them. It had not occurred to me to try using them to tame a dragon, but if anything would work, it would be that.”

Unsure if she was being made fun of, Silica gave the older girl a sidelong look. Some people had mocked her for that, before she started getting a reputation. Kizmel, though, maintained such a perfectly straight face that she couldn't decide if it was genuine or not.

Giving up, she shrugged again. “That's really all there is to it. I gave her peanuts, her cursor turned yellow, and ever since she's always been with me. That's why I named her Pina; she reminded me a lot of my cat, back in the real world.”

“A good name, then.” Kizmel smiled, looking just a little sad; and so did Kirito, when Silica glanced his way. “We'll do our best to help you get back to both of them, then. I promise.”

When Silica had gone, returning to her own room for the night, Kirito reclaimed his bed and flopped into it with a sigh. He was sure she hadn't meant to, but the girl had brought to mind things he'd done his best not to think about too much in a long time.

*The “real world”, huh? ...How long has it been since I really thought of it that way? It's been more like a dream, after this long...*

Pushing that thought aside, he turned his head toward his partner. “So. Eavesdropper, right?”

“Yes,” Kizmel confirmed, doffing her hooded cloak now that they were alone. “They were very quiet, but I suspect they remain unaware of whom I am.” She paused, glancing at something he couldn't see; a few finger strokes at empty air, and he realized she was checking a message. “Ah. They also failed to notice Rain.”

“That's that, then.” A bit over a month since they'd first met Rain, and Kirito still didn't quite know
what made the redhead tick—or what all her skills were, for that matter. He'd bet on her skills at both Hiding and fighting over any PKer, though, so as far as he was concerned the plan was still on track.

"Yes, I think things are proceeding well." Kizmel stretched out on her bed; without her armor, the motion made Kirito reflexively begin to avert his eyes, before once again remembering her recent demands. "Kirito-kun. What's wrong?"

She could read him like an open book. Yet another reason he was ever more convinced she wasn't an ordinary NPC by any measure—and why he was careful never to outright lie to her, no matter how much it hurt.

"It's nothing big," he said, resting his head on his hands. "It's just… Well, you know how most Swordmasters don't like to think about home too much. I'm actually surprised Silica used a pet's name like that. For most of us, that would just hurt more."

"I would say everyone copes in their own way, Kirito-kun." Kizmel glanced at the door Silica had left through. "Perhaps Silica finds that a comfort? From what I've seen tonight, she has few, if any, people in this world she can truly count as friends." She quirked one of those teasing smiles he'd always thought she'd adapted from Argo in his direction. "Not everyone has an elf to keep them from going astray, after all."

"You and Asuna really do think I need a keeper, don't you?" Kirito complained. He made no attempt to deny it, though. Remembering how he'd felt the first night of the death game, when it had really sunk in how completely he was separated from his family, he wasn't sure if he could've stayed sane alone. Not after over a year trapped in Aincrad, anyway.

"Well, of course you do. With how much you take on yourself, someone needs to rescue you from your own occasionally excessive gallantry." The elf girl's smile turned warmer, losing its teasing edge. "Like Silica, you've precious few to call your friends, despite all the good you've done. I may be neither dragon nor cat, but I think saving my life and my people was a better enticement than mere peanuts."

He felt a pang of guilt at that, but he pushed aside the thought of what he knew that she didn't with the ease of entirely too much practice. Burying unease under good humor, he said, "You make it sound like I tamed you, Kizmel."

Her response was a low, throaty chuckle. One Kirito remembered from very different circumstances, and thoroughly distracted him from his depression. "Oh, I don't know that I would say tamed, Kirito-kun… after all, what would be the fun in that?"

February 24th, 2024

Silica had heard stories about the Forty-Seventh Floor, and how it was sometimes called by players the “Flower Garden”. The reality, when she teleported with Kirito and Kizmel to the town of Floria, blew away her expectations.

There were flowers everywhere, of every color imaginable. Some she recognized from the real world, and others she thought might have been types she'd just never seen before; a few she was sure were only possible in VR, and all the more amazing for it. In small gardens, large parks, and even just boxes built into the buildings, they were easily the most eye-catching element around.

Ever since learning that SAO saved processing power by only giving objects full detail when focused on by a player, Silica had done her best not to stare too hard at anything out of a paranoid terror of causing system glitches. Even so, here, she couldn't help but give her full attention to everything
around her, drinking in the sights.

This is what this world is supposed to be, isn't it? It's all so amazing...

A low chuckle took her out of her awestruck reverie. “Beautiful, isn't it?” Kizmel said, smiling softly. “A pity we've not the time to visit the Forest of Giant Flowers, on the northern edge of the floor. It truly is a sight that should not be missed. Dangerous, of course, but any rose has thorns; I expect many even of the lower-leveled players here will visit before they leave.”

With a sheepish start, Silica remembered they were hardly the only players around. Glancing about, she realized that, for perhaps the first time since being trapped in Aincrad, there was actually a roughly equal balance of male and female players, something she was used to seeing only among the NPC population. For that matter, it was mostly pairs...

About the moment she understood why that probably was, Silica noticed Kizmel was also watching them—and though it was hard to tell with the older girl's face obscured by her hood, she looked somehow wistful, her gaze sliding from the groups of players to her own partner.

Kirito’s face was oddly blank, with just the faintest trace of a blush.

Gripped by a sudden feeling like she was intruding on a date, Silica cleared her throat. “So, um—where is the Hill of Memories, exactly?”

“North of here,” Kirito said promptly, looking distinctly relieved. “A bit over halfway to the Forest of Giant Flowers. That would be… this way.”

On the heels of that statement, accompanied by Kizmel's low chuckle, they set off down Floria's streets, heading for the north exit.

Flowers continued to be the defining feature of both the town and the floor as a whole. Vines with countless white flowers twined around the silver arch that marked the border where Floria's street became a red brick highway, leading into green hills that stretched out into a morning haze. Along the edges of that brick road, a rainbow of flowers spread out as if pointing the way.

The contrast from the last “adventure” Silica had been on was stark. Bright flower fields with only the occasional tree for shade, instead of a dark forest; a single, gently-curving path to her destination, not a maze of teleport gates. She had only two companions on the journey, who gave her none of the special treatment she'd gotten used to as the “Dragon Tamer”, yet were altogether more pleasant. Their stories of higher floors were more interesting than anything she'd ever heard in party chat before.

She did have a few questions she didn't quite dare to ask, though. Kirito had handed her a Teleport Crystal just as they left Floria, with stern instructions to use it if things went wrong—and she still didn't know just why he and Kizmel had been on the Thirty-Fifth Floor in the first place. She could understand, vaguely, why they'd found her plight important enough to delay their own business, but it almost seemed like the detour suited them beyond that.

Maybe they'd already finished whatever it was they'd wanted from the Lost Forest. That didn't explain what they'd wanted, though; the only significance Silica even knew of to the place was vague rumors about an event the previous Christmas. She hadn't heard of anything since then.

At least she found herself in complete agreement with Kizmel on one thing, though: for reasons the older girl also didn't explain, she had a pathological hatred of anything with tentacles. When giant plant monsters with long, limb-like vines appeared, Kizmel had instantly turned from friendly to
merciless, striking at them with a ferocity Silica had seldom seen.

Considering what she knew of tentacle monsters from a few manga she totally had stumbled on by accident—and had wanted to burn afterward—Silica was glad to help the dusky girl turn them to mulch.

“Kizmel's had a grudge against tentacles since we fought some land-going squids in a dungeon on the Thirty-Seventh Floor,” Kirito murmured after Kizmel killed a second Chlorofiend with righteous anger and an attack resembling a buzz saw. “At least these things don't have ink attacks.”

*What kind of pervert designed these mobs, anyway?!

Chlorofiends aside, it was only late morning when the three of them took the path up a gentle hill into gradually-deepening woods. The soft flutes of the BGM and brighter colors kept it from being half as oppressive as the Lost Forest, even as the trees grew denser around them; it was more like a fairytale wood, Silica thought, than a nightmare forest.

Then, finally, the trees opened up again in a large clearing, filled with another rainbow of flowers. Orchids, roses, lilies… A riot of colors that she thought gave it a feeling of life.

*The Hill of Memories…*

In the center of it all stood a shining white plinth, reaching up to about chest height for Silica. “And that would be our goal,” Kizmel said quietly. “Atop that stone—”

Silica was off and running before the older girl finished speaking. So quick was her dash that she almost collided with the stone pillar; she had to flail her arms to keep her balance. She didn't even care about that, though, focusing her gaze firmly on the top of the pillar.

At first, there was nothing there, and ice began to fill her veins at the thought that it had all been for nothing. A hand fell on her shoulder, though, and a voice murmured in her ear, “Wait, and watch. … There it is.”

Just as Kirito said, a shape began to rise from the stone: a white flower bud, rising like in a time-lapse video Silica remembered seeing in science class in those long-ago days in the real world. First simply lifting up on a green stalk, then blossoming and unfolding before her very eyes. Seven petals stretched out, holding in their center a shimmering drop.

“There it is,” Kizmel said softly, stepping up behind Silica's other shoulder. “The Pneuma Flower. The drop of water inside will restore breath to your dragon, when touched to the Heart.”

*Pina…!* With trembling hands, Silica touched the Pneuma Flower; as though waiting for her, its stem shattered cleanly away, leaving only the flower itself in her palm. “So then… now we can…!”

“Yes,” Kirito agreed, smiling down at her. “But I think we should get back to town first. We don't want to be interrupted by monsters, do we? This is one thing we don't want to mess up, no matter what.”

“Right!” Carefully tucking the Pneuma Flower away in her inventory, it was all Silica could do not to replace it in her hands with the Teleport Crystal she'd been given. Now that she had the flower, all she wanted was to return and revive her friend the moment she could.

She restrained herself, though, turning around to walk back to Floria with her companions. Teleport Crystals were rare and expensive as it was, used only in dire emergency; after everything Kirito and
Kizmel had already done for her, she hoped to at least return it to them unused.

It would only take an hour or so to walk back to Floria anyway. That long, Silica could wait, knowing what was waiting for her. After everything she'd been through in just a day, she was willing to take the time to do things right.

They'd been quick enough, it seemed, that monsters hadn't yet had time to respawn for their return journey. Down the hill and back toward more open land, Silica felt she was floating more than walking; before she knew it, they had reached the bridge crossing a stream halfway back to town.

“Kirito.”

Kizmel's quiet voice broke the silence they'd traveled in since leaving the Hill of Memories. At the same time, Kirito gripped Silica's shoulder, stopping her in her tracks with a startled gasp. “Kirito-san—?”

The black-clad swordsman was staring into the trees on the other side of the bridge, a hard edge in his eyes. “We know you're there,” he called, his voice harsher than she'd yet heard from him. “You're not going to be able to ambush us, so why don't you come out where we can see you?”

_Ambush? What? I don't see—_

Then, after long moments of no sound but the BGM and wind whispering through the leaves, cursors began to emerge from the treeline. Green ones, which meant they were players, and not even criminals—but why would ordinary players be lying in wait for them…?

One stepped right up to the foot of the bridge, and Silica's eyes went wide. Flaming hair, revealing black armor, a long spear— “Rosalia-san?! What are you doing here?!”

Rosalia's lips curled in the kind of smile Silica had always hated. “Isn't it obvious, Silica-chan? I'm here for you, of course.” Her gaze lifted. “I'm impressed, I admit. Which one of you was it who saw through my hiding? It takes a high Search skill to catch me.”

“No, not so high as you might believe,” Kizmel said evenly. “And there are more ways to pierce it in this world than you may realize.” Her hand moved to rest casually on the hilt of her saber. “I fear you don't understand the situation as well as you think you do.”

“Oh, I think I understand it pretty well, actually. Don't you worry about that, girl.” Rosalia turned her smile back on Silica, seeming to dismiss her companions. “If you're on your way back, you must have gotten the Pneuma Flower. Good for you, Silica-chan!” Her eyes narrowed, and her smile lost any trace of friendliness. “Now be a good girl, and hand it over.”

…_What? At first, Silica could only blink at her former teammate in confusion. Rosalia had been infuriatingly high-handed before—that was what had set off Silica's foolish flight in the first place—but she had no clue what the redhead could possibly want with a Pneuma Flower. It wasn't like Rosalia had any kind of pet._

_But then... why does she have all those people with her? _Ice crept into Silica's veins as she began to realize something was very, very wrong._

“Come now, Silica-chan,” Rosalia said, when the silence began to drag on. “Even the mighty Dragon Tamer has to realize what's going on, right? So do the smart thing and give it to me. Now.”

“That's not going to happen, Rosalia-san.” Kirito stepped in front of Silica, one hand lifted to bring up his menu. “Or do you prefer Guildmaster Rosalia, of the orange guild Titan's Hand?”
“Orange guild? Silica’s eyes went wide again, even as Rosalia’s gaze turned very sharp indeed. “But—she’s green!” the pig-tailed girl protested. “They all are! She can’t be—”

“Orange guilds have green players to run their scams,” Kirito told her, eyes never turning from Rosalia and her companions; all the while, he smoothly nudged commands in his menu, out of her sight. “After all, they need a few people who can still enter towns. That’s how you were able to track down and kill the Silver Flags ten days ago. Isn’t it, Rosalia-san?”

If anything convinced Silica that something really, really wasn’t right, it was that the redhead didn’t even turn a hair at being accused of murder. Even if Kirito were mistaken, to not even care—

“Oh… I remember them,” Rosalia mused, touching a finger to her chin in apparent thought. “Hardly even worth the trouble; they didn’t have much. And it was so annoying, the way the one that got away kept crying like a baby as he ran like a wimp.”

Kirito’s finger jabbed one last time, banishing his menu. “You have no idea, do you,” he said in a low, dangerous voice as his equipment flared blue. “You don’t understand at all what you did to them. Is this just a game to you, Rosalia-san?”

When the light of the equipment change faded, his shabby longcoat had been replaced by a much sleeker one, and his sword by a weapon with a gleaming hilt and a guard resembling folded wings. Something about it nagged at Silica’s memory—but if Rosalia even noticed, she didn’t seem to care.

“Of course it’s all a game,” she said, flipping her hair in a dismissive gesture. “Oh, come on, don’t tell me you’re one of those idiots who actually believes the nonsense about how ‘dying here is dying for real’? Tch.” She rolled her eyes. “Like a game can really do that. And even if it did… Rosalia licked her lips. “It’s not like anyone but Kayaba’s going to get the blame when this is all over.”

Silica could feel the way Kirito bristled at that. For a moment, she thought SAO’s emotional display system was actually making him burn with anger; and from the quiet rattle of a sword being loosened in its scabbard, the calmer Kizmel was no happier about it.

“I see,” the black-clad swordsman said softly. “Then there’s nothing else to say, is there?”

“Nope. I don’t really care to hear your self-righteous babble, boy.” Rosalia raised one hand, gesturing toward the woods from which she and her companions had emerged. “I’ve waited long enough for my prize, after the little idiot got lost. Take them out.”

At first, Silica thought the green players were actually going to be insane enough to attack, branding the whole group as criminals. Then, out of the trees, came another group of about ten—and these players, brandishing weapons, one and all had orange cursors.

All, at least, except for one she saw behind the main group. As the others, dressed in flashy outfits with lots of silver accessories, advanced toward the bridge, one young girl in blue, with a cursor impossibly identifying her as an NPC, simply stayed back and watched.

There was no time to wonder about that, though. At Rosalia’s order the others came on, and Kirito stepped forward as though to meet them halfway.

“Kirito-san!” Silica burst out, heart hammering. “Please, we have to run! They—they’ll kill us if we stay—!”

“I’m not running from this, Silica,” he replied calmly, a smile like a razor on his face as he drew the shining sword from his back. “Not from them.”
“Be at ease, Silica,” Kizmel murmured, when the girl opened her mouth to protest again. “Things are not as they seem.” One hand remaining a comforting weight on Silica’s shoulder, the other grasped the edge of her hood and pulled it back.

The sight of the pointed ears the hood had up to that moment kept concealed puzzled Silica—and made Rosalia’s orange subordinates slow their advance. “Wait—did she say Kirito?” one of them blurted, hand tightening on the hilt of his scimitar. “A one-handed sword, no shield, all in black—and that’s a Dark Elf!”

“Is that the Baneblade he’s got?!” A man with a heavy axe stopped in his tracks, eyes wide. “Rosalia-san, it’s the Black Swordsman! The Beater!”

The Black Swordsman? A… Dark Elf? Sucking in a sharp breath, Silica looked again at Kizmel, and understood what those long ears meant, despite the player-green cursor above her head. Understood why the dusky girl had kept her hood up at all times—and why the two of them had agreed to help a girl who’d lost a pet from her own stupidity.

“I know what it’s like to be attached to something of this world. Or someone…”

“Who cares who they are?!” Rosalia snapped, glaring at her hesitant minions. “Even if they’re clearers, there’s two of them and ten of you! Kill ‘em already!”

Silica didn’t know exactly what was going on, but she could read the numbers as well as the redhead. Heart leaping into her throat as Rosalia’s command urged the orange players into motion again, she shouted, “Kirito-san, please!” Why isn’t Kizmel-san even trying to help him?!

Kirito ignored her, striding confidently ahead, and then it was too late. The man with the scimitar was the first to strike, his curved blade tearing right through Kirito’s chest; the one with the enormous axe was next, landing a blow that by rights should’ve cut him clean in half.

A flurry of Sword Skills followed, buffeting Kirito’s body again and again. Bizarrely, he didn’t even raise his gleaming sword to defend himself, which only seemed to encourage his attackers. “Hah!” a dagger-wielder called out, cackling as he drove his blade into Kirito’s kidney. “Easy money, guys!”

“Yeah! And we’ll be the ones who bagged the Beater himself!”

She still had the Teleport Crystal Kirito had given her. Any moment, she could just leave, and save herself. But Silica’s hand, trembling, edged toward the hilt of her own dagger instead. “I can’t let someone else die for me! Not after Pina—!

Kizmel’s hand tightened on her shoulder. “Wait,” the elf girl murmured. “Wait, and watch.”

Silica almost broke away anyway, the sight of Rosalia licking her lips as if excited by the murder happening in front of her serving to urge her on even more. Then, just as she started to draw her dagger, she realized—why wasn’t it already over?

Some of the bandits seemed to finally get a clue at about the same time. “What the hell?!” the axeman burst out. “Why won’t you die, dammit?!”

“Is that really the best you have? I guess you are just gankers after all.” With a look of pure disgust, Kirito suddenly swept out his shining sword in a Serration Wave, forcing all of them back in a single flash of blue light. “Four hundred HP in ten seconds. I’m Level Seventy-Eight, with fourteen thousand, five hundred HP. Battle Healing alone restores six hundred in the time it takes you to take four.” He *tsked*. “I could take off my armor, and it’d still take you all day to kill me with scratch damage.”
Silence, as the one they called “Beater” glared at them. Then, “Impossible,” one of the bandits breathed. “Levels can't make you invincible!”

“You haven’t played many MMOs if you think that. You’re just too used to killing people too weak to fight back.” Kirito looked past the stymied bandits to glare at their leader. “It’s over, Rosalia-san. Give it up, and go quietly.”

Rosalia shook, but rallied quickly. “Like you can catch us anyway, Black Swordsman? Half of us are green, you stupid boy—”

Several of the orange players took that as a signal and turned to run—at which point Kizmel finally moved, blurring into motion to smash her shield into the scimitar-wielder's back. Squawking, he tumbled to the bridge's stone roadway; cried out again, when Kizmel's knee landed on his back, and she drove a knife dripping a green liquid through his armor.

The elf girl stood, but the bandit made no effort to move, even as he spewed curses at her. Paralyzed, Silica realized, shocked. She used a poisoned knife. But— “Kirito-san, Kizmel-san, the others are getting away!”

Kirito still didn’t move. “We came here hunting you, Rosalia-san,” he said, voice still dangerously calm. “We came prepared—and we didn’t come alone.”

Just as the other orange players reached the tree line, two more figures blurred into view from either side of the road. There was a flurry of light from Sword Skills, cries of shock, and outbursts of curses that made Silica want to cover her ears. Maybe five seconds, the “fight” lasted, and then only two remained standing: a blonde in armor more revealing than Rosalia’s, and a redhead in a calf-length coat. Both of them had weapons dripping with the same poison as Kizmel's.

“Sorry 'bout that,” the blonde said, voice dripping insincerity. “Oh, and if you're wondering about your eavesdropping friend, we already caught him. He's waiting for you in the Black Iron Castle's dungeon.”

“He's lonely, too,” the redhead said, her voice a whimsical tone that didn't match her expression at all. “You don't want to keep him waiting, do you?”

Rosalia swallowed hard, turning so she could see the two on the bridge at one side, and the two in the forest when she turned her head the other way. “There's nothing else you can do,” she said, voice trembling despite her efforts. “The rest of us are green. And you 'good guys' wouldn't dare go orange just to take us out. Not when you preach about how evil murder is.”

“Rosalia-san.” Now Kirito did move, stalking toward the woman with slow, deliberate steps. “If death here wasn't real death, we’d all have been freed over a year ago. You can use whatever self-serving justifications let you look in the mirror, but all you're doing is fooling yourself. For what you've done? Oh, yes. I'd go orange in a heartbeat, if it saved even one life from you.”

“Just try it, Blackie! Like you've got the guts!” Rosalia’s free hand darted into a pouch at her belt, yanking free a Teleport Crystal. “Teleport—!”

Silica had never seen anyone move so fast. One moment he was striding on the bridge; the next, he was right in front of Rosalia, coat flaring high with the wind of his passage, and the dagger that had somehow replaced his sword was buried in her gut.

Silica stared in pure disbelief as Kirito’s cursor flickered from green to orange. If anything, the now-paralyzed Rosalia was even more shocked, looking a breath from passing out from shock. “You…
"Think whatever lets you sleep at night, Rosalia," he said coldly, dropping the honorific at the same time he pulled the knife free. "People. Are. Dying. And because of you, there are four more people who will never go home to their families. No more."

Kirito let her fall to the forest floor with a graceless thump. A short gesture switched out the knife for the sword Titan's Hand had called the Baneblade, and for a long moment Silica was afraid he was going to turn it on the other green members of the guild.

From the looks on their faces, so did they.

Instead, he only sheathed the blade, while Kizmel and his other companions moved in to guard them. "Understand something," he said, raising his voice. "I'm the Beater. I know places I can go to wait out going green again. Doing what I have to to stop you won't even slow down my grinding." He swept his glare over the bandits who still stood. "But killing you isn't what I'm here for."

Digging into his own belt pouch, Kirito pulled out a crystal of a deeper blue than what Silica had been given, or Rosalia had tried to use. With a gasp, the girl recognized it as a Corridor Crystal: the rarest crystal there was, capable of taking an entire raid party to a chosen point.

"The leader of the Silver Flags didn't want revenge. He just wanted you stopped. He spent every Cor he had on this, and gave it to my party with the understanding it would be used to imprison you, not kill you." He jerked his head at the incapacitated Rosalia. "You can go willingly, or I can paralyze the rest of you and toss you in after. I don't really care which. Either way, this is over."

After Kirito's demonstration of just how far he was willing to go, there wasn't much question what would happen next. When he triggered the crystal, opening a blue whirlpool in the air, the green members of Titan's Hand trudged through with barely a curse. Kizmel and his other friends tossed in the paralyzed orange players, and soon only Rosalia was left.

Hoisting her up by her collar one-handed, a display that spoke volumes about his STR stat, Kirito stared hard into still-shocked eyes. "I pity you, Rosalia," he said quietly. "You can deceive yourself now, but when the Castle is cleared, you'll have to wake up to reality. Whoever the law ends up blaming, you'll have to live the rest of your life knowing you stole those people from their families. …Enjoy your delusion while you can."

Silica didn't know if Rosalia would've responded or not, or even if she could. Kirito only glared at her a moment longer, then flung her bodily into the corridor.

The silence that fell after the swirling azure gateway vanished was the most profound Silica had experienced since the moments after Kayaba Akihiko's "tutorial", before the rioting began on the day the nightmare started. Between the shock that Rosalia was a criminal, after her no less, and the bewildering violence that had followed, she didn't know what to think or say.

After a long, long pause, tension finally flowed out of Kirito's shoulders. "Sorry," he said to his companions. "That… wasn't quite what we planned, was it?"

The redhead—who thankfully shared no other quality with Rosalia—shrugged carelessly. "It worked out, didn't it? Not like those ublyudki didn't deserve it."

"So we went with Plan B." The blonde switched out her poisoned dagger in favor of a sword with a wicked-looking ridge along the back and sheathed it with practiced ease. "After catching that spy this morning, I kinda figured something like this would happen."

you actually…?"
“Indeed,” Kizmel said, swapping back to her own saber. “Rest easy, my friend. Such behavior is only to be expected from bandits, especially those who refuse to face reality.”

“…Thanks, guys.” Kirito turned back to Silica then, and bent his head. “I really do owe you an apology, Silica. We used you as bait. We did think about telling you, but, well, we figured you'd be scared, and… No. That's no excuse. I'm sorry.”

As the adrenaline finally drained away, Silica found herself shaking her head. “It's… it's okay, Kirito-san,” she said, voice wavering a little from lingering tension. “People like that—you had to stop them, right? And, um, Rosalia-san was after me anyway, so if you hadn't done that, she'd just have attacked me when I was alone.”

He smiled; a bittersweet expression. “Well, I guess you have a point there. Though I like to think we could've caught her before that anyway.”

That group might've been able to do it, Silica realized. Yet she also understood well enough why they'd gone with the scheme they had. Four clearers, one of them someone an NPC with player privileges? People like Rosalia, who preyed on the weak, would never have gone anywhere near Kirito's party as they were.

As it was… “Um, but, Kirito-san,” she began anxiously, glancing above his head, “are you going to be okay? You can't go into a town as long as you're orange!”

Kizmel's lips twitched in a smile. “Don't worry about that, Silica. There are places few Swordmasters can reach, where such trivial matters are of no concern.” She stretched out a hand to the younger girl. “Come, we still must revive your pet. If you're willing, we can take you with us to a very safe place indeed.”

Hand still trembling, Silica accepted the elf's grip—and as Kirito raised another crystal high, she suddenly remembered another NPC. Glancing quickly about, she saw no sign at all of the girl in blue who'd accompanied Titan's Hand—

“Teleport: Royal Capital Lyusula!”

Thoughts of odd NPCs, and even the whirlwind of violence she'd just witnessed, were blown out of Silica's mind the moment the blue glow of the teleport faded.

Trees were the first things she noticed: pine trees, she thought, caught in an eternal winter. They were covered in snow, like dozens of Christmas trees; something she'd seen once in a remote corner of the Ninth Floor, she realized after a moment, yet somehow more dreamlike than the areas she'd seen of it before.

The smooth stone streets around them might've had something to do with the fantastical feeling, as well. Dark cobblestones, dusted in snow, offsetting bright stone buildings surrounding the plaza they'd appeared in; and in front of them…

The gleaming castle straight ahead looked like something out of a fairytale. Actually, it reminded Silica of pictures she'd seen of Neuschwanstein Castle, but with colors inverted. Despite the dark stone walls, it had the same sense of grandeur as Mad Ludwig's castle, as if it were larger than life. Like the trees around it, it wasn't something she'd seen in Aincrad before, either.

“…Where are we?” she asked, trying to take in everything at once. “I thought Teleport Crystals could only go to hub towns, and—wait, are those elves?!”
The NPCs walking the streets of the dreamlike city, she finally noticed, all had dusky skin and pointed ears, much like one of her companions. Not even a single “human” NPC was in sight, or even any other players.

“That was a special crystal,” Kirito told her, tucking it back into his belt pouch. “Unlimited use, but you can’t use it in dungeons, and it only goes to one place: right here.”

“Welcome to the Royal Capital of the Kingdom of Lyusula, Silica,” Kizmel said with a smile, sweeping her arm toward the castle as she bowed. “Allow us to guide you to Moongleam Castle. Few humans have ever been allowed here, but Kirito and Asuna’s deeds granted them the honor—and any friend of theirs is most welcome here.”

Silica could only nod dumbly, falling into dazed step as the elf and her partner headed toward the Castle with a confident stride. Distantly, she hoped this would be the last shock for the day; she wasn’t sure she could take anymore, after everything that had already happened since her foolish actions in the Lost Forest.

“Kinda overwhelming, isn’t it?” the blonde said with a chuckle, falling back to join the younger girl. “Oh, I'm Philia, by the way. Treasure hunting's the name of the game for me—and believe me, this kind of treasure is exactly why I hang around those two!”

“I, um, can see why,” Silica said, giving herself a shake. “That's—is this an instanced map?”

“Actually, no.” The redhead fell in on her other side. “I'm Rain. Kirito calls me the team ninja, but don't listen to that... Anyway. This is one of two Dark Elf maps that isn't instanced, but since not many players ever completed the Elf War quest, you probably won't see anyone else around; we couldn't get here either, if we weren't in Kirito's party. Actually, I'm not sure most players can get to Moongleam Castle at all, the run of the Elf War questline Kirito and Vice-Commander Asuna did went weird...”

Which reminded Silica of something else that had been bothering her, though she hadn't really had time to think about it yet. Between Kirito's willingness to go orange to stop Rosalia, and teleporting to a place even more like a fantasy than the rest of Aincrad...

“Is Kizmel-san really an NPC?” she blurted. Quietly; they were approaching the Castle gates, and while Kirito's orange cursor didn't seem to matter to the Dark Elves, she didn't want to push her luck. “I mean, she's—well—”

“A Turing-class AI,” Rain said softly, glancing ahead to make sure they were far enough back. “Don't ask me how, Kirito doesn't know either and he knows this stuff way better than I do, but she is. ...She doesn't know the truth, though, and we're all kind of afraid to try explaining it. So, if you could please keep it quiet...?”

“I won't say anything,” Silica swore at once. As shocked as she was by the party's actions, she was convinced they were good people—and she owed them. Helping her fix her mistake by getting Pina back was enough to earn her gratitude by itself; realizing that Rosalia had been stalking her, maybe even planning to kill her?

She shivered. Maybe it wasn't so bad that the Royal Capital felt like a dream. She was pretty sure she was going to have nightmares, once she'd processed the day's events.

There was a brief pause as they reached the edge of a moat surrounding Moongleam Castle. A few soft words from Kirito and a flash of some kind of ring he wore, though, and a drawbridge was noisily lowered. He and his elven partner led them across, then into the Castle itself.
The inside was just as grand as the outside, leaving Silica certain she'd have gotten lost right away without Kirito's party to guide her. As it was, they walked confidently through the Castle's huge halls and up several staircases, occasionally greeted by passing Dark Elves; the pig-tailed girl couldn't help but stare at some of them, too, especially when she caught snippets of conversations in words that weren't any language she knew, but still seemed strangely familiar.

“You've probably heard some of that in movies,” Rain whispered to her as they walked down a third-floor hallway. “From what Kirito's said, Kayaba cribbed some of the elf stuff from other sources; like he said, Kayaba's a genius programmer, but probably not so good with creating languages.”

Oh. That made sense. Aincrad was an amazing achievement as it was; trying to create an entire language just for a side quest most players might never even see? Even Kayaba's perfectionism had to have had limits.

A series of dizzying turns and staircases later, and Kirito was showing them into a large sitting room in one of the Castle's towers. A sizable oak table stood in the middle of the room, with two huge fireplaces along one wall, soft chairs and couches arrayed in front of them, and a nook by one set of windows that looked perfect for watching a sunset.

“I figure we'll stay here for the day,” Kirito announced, pulling out chairs at the table. “There's bedrooms through those doors—” he nodded to a set of three in the wall opposite the fireplaces “—and we can work out where we're all going next in the morning.”

Kizmel slid into one of the chairs, offering her partner a smile that seemed equal parts fond and wry. “Our first priority we know, of course, my friend. We can hardly go about our business until we've cleared your 'criminal' status.”

“Well, yeah…”

Accepting another of the chairs, Silica paused in the act of opening her menu. “Um… actually…” She bit her lip. “I've been thinking, Kirito-san. I know I need to build up my levels a lot first, but do you think, someday, maybe…?”

It wasn't something she'd considered before. She'd always been content as a mid-level, keeping herself alive, and—just maybe—helping out a few others at her own level. After seeing Rosalia and Titan's Hand, though, and how Kirito's party had gone out of their way to stop the orange guild…

Taking his own seat only after Rain and Philia had, Kirito gave her a small smile, as if he clearly heard the rest of her question. “I'm sorry, Silica,” he said, shaking his head gently. “But you'll never be a clearer. Your skills are good, but you're so far behind the clearing group now you'd never catch up. Not enough to fight in a Floor Boss raid.”

“Which is not to say you can't help, Silica,” Kizmel told her, when her head sank at Kirito's words. “There are only forty-eight Swordmasters to a raid, and seldom are there shortages for those. What there are never enough of are those to chart the course. With a little time and effort, you may yet join those mapping each new floor, and that is an invaluable task itself.”

Silica took a deep breath, and forced herself to nod. She wanted to do what she could—but getting too far ahead of herself was exactly what had gotten her into this whole mess. Overestimating herself again was something she refused to do.

“Enough about that stuff for now!” Philia said, reaching over to ruffle Silica's hair. “C'mon, you guys did all that for a reason, right? Let's do this!”
Right! Hands trembling as adrenaline filled her veins again, Silica brought up her menu, flipped to the Inventory, and carefully materialized the feather that Pina had left behind. Then, with even greater caution, she brought out the Pneuma Flower, with its drop of life-giving water.

*Kizmel-san said to touch the drop to the Heart…* Her own heart hammering in her throat, she slowly, precisely, tipped the flower to let the drop in its center slide onto the petals and fall onto Pina's Heart.

For an instant, Silica was convinced it wouldn't work, that she'd truly failed her companion. That everything she'd done, that Kirito going orange to stop Rosalia, had been for nothing—

Blue light flared, bright as any teleport, outshining the midday sun casting its rays through the tower's windows.

“*Kyuu!*”

Blue feathers swarmed into Silica's arms, her fears forgotten as her beloved dragon wrapped around her. “*Pina!*” Tears of relief starting to flow, Silica held the Feathery Dragon tight. *It worked, she's back, she's alive… and I'm never going to be so stupid and lose her again!*

After a day whose first half had involved mayhem of a kind to make his blood boil, and the second giving a deliriously happy mid-level advice on how and where to start serious grinding, Kirito found it a distinct relief to be able to curl up in a fireside chair.

Night had fallen, and after having dinner with some of the lesser nobles in Moongleam Castle, the party of players had returned to the room where Pina had been revived and gotten ready to turn in. None of them had been quite ready to go to bed right away, though. Silica was curled up with her dragon by the tower windows; having finally drifted off, Kizmel was just then tucking a blanket around them.

Rain and Philia had each taken half of a couch in front of one of the fireplaces, quietly chatting about the quest they'd be tackling once Kirito's cursor had gone green again. Their preparations for it had been just about done when the Silver Flags' guildmaster had encountered Kizmel, and after days of hunting orange players they were eager to get back to normal activity.

Kirito himself had claimed a large, soft chair by the other fireplace, and wrapped himself in a blanket as the day's events finally sank in. Between just how close to home Silica's plight had hit him, and his own actions against Titan's Hand, the warmth and crackle of the fire was a much-needed comfort.

“*Kirito?*”

He glanced away from the flames, gaze settling on the elf girl who'd called him. The sight proved to be a distraction in itself, as Kizmel had changed into her—very sheer—nightgown, and was looking down at him with a smile that made him tingle.

“I fear there's a chill this evening,” she said, when it was clear she had his full attention. “*May I…?*”

Kirito considered, briefly, suggesting she could put on something warmer. Knowing she knew perfectly well he knew what she was doing, he instead lifted the edge of his blanket. The chair was, after all, just barely big enough for two people, if they were slim enough.

If they didn't mind sharing. He couldn't help a shiver from something totally unrelated to the cold as Kizmel curled up against him, settling into the crook of his arm so that she was almost in his lap. “*Much better,*” she murmured, settling her head against his shoulder.
It felt… nice. Nice enough that he found his arm naturally curling around her, his hand come to rest against her flank. Nice enough to remind him exactly why he’d empathized so deeply with Silica’s plight, even before the PKers had stomped on one of his berserk buttons.

“You're troubled, Kirito-kun,” Kizmel whispered, violet eyes turning to look up at him. “Tell me.”

I'm terrified of losing this. I'm terrified of how much that terrifies me. I... never expected anything like this, and I don't know how to deal with it.

Pushing aside the concerns he couldn't voice, Kirito focused on the other issue gnawing at him. “I… threatened to kill people today,” he said in a low, halting voice. “Not just in the heat of the moment, like with PoH.”

He wasn't sure she'd understand. After all, from her perspective, they'd both fought and killed plenty of “people” in the Elf War, even if most of those who'd fought to the bitter end had been the twisted Fallen Elves. For him, fighting players was something else entirely, but she had no particular reason to see it that way.

Kizmel slowly nodded, though. “Against the Forest and Fallen, it was as if you were still in the dream,” she said softly. “Your own people have always been very real to you.” She paused for a long breath. “You would've done it.

It wasn't a question, reminding Kirito again of just how well his partner had come to know him. “Yes,” he said, voice a whisper only elven ears could catch. “If we hadn't been able to paralyze them… I would've killed them, rather than let them murder anyone else.”

“That frightens you.”

“Yes.” His answer was soft, but curt. He didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to think about it— but his best friend, his partner, the girl he cared about more than he wanted to admit was asking him, and he knew he needed to say it to someone. If he kept it all bottled up, he was afraid he'd lose it.

“Kizmel… what's happening to me?”

“You're adjusting to the world in which you have been imprisoned.” A long, low sigh. “Which is exactly the problem, of course.”

Staring into the crackling flames, Kirito nodded, feeling a trickle of relief at her quick understanding. “Someday, if I survive, I'm going to go back to my own world, Kizmel. And in the country I come from, most people don't fight. They don't even know how to use a sword, except for criminals. If you cross the kind of people who do, you're expected to let the authorities handle it. That's how we're all brought up.”

Only there were no authorities in Aincrad. That had almost gotten Nezha of the Legend Braves killed, when the absence of rule of law let mob reaction come to the brink of murder. In the end the worst-case scenario had been averted… but orange players appeared after that, and something had had to be done.

Caught up in the middle of it when he first stumbled on PoH's conspiracies, Kirito had been forced to learn new habits, and quickly. Just how far that had taken him from being a law-abiding Japanese citizen, he'd never realized until that very morning.

“When I'm threatened,” he said after a long silence, “I don't think about going to get help. If we hadn't planned the ambush this morning, where we could get the drop on them with paralysis, I would've gone right for the Baneblade, and…”
Visions of that “holy” sword embedded in Rosalia in place of a poisoned knife filled his mind. It didn't take much imagination to picture what its critical bonus would've done, had she been an orange-marked player herself.

“Someday,” he whispered, “I'm going to have to make a choice... and when I go back, no one will understand what I've done. They'll expect me to just go back to being like everyone else. And I... don't know how anymore.”

There would be therapy, Kirito was sure. Just as he was sure that the therapists would have no idea what they were really talking about. No one who hadn't lived in Aincrad could ever hope to understand what it was like to fight through the Steel Castle with their very lives on the line.

No one would understand what it was like to look in the mirror one day, see the Black Swordsman looking back at them, and realize it felt normal.

At length, Kizmel let out a long breath. “I wish I had an answer for you, my friend. In truth, I understand well how you feel; as deeply as I treasure what I've gained, I still feel cast adrift without the title of Pagoda Knight. I, too, am learning where it is I truly belong, and who it is I've become.”

Yeah. I guess you are. Even if she still didn't understand the true precipice her very existence stood on, his partner had sacrificed the basis of her worldview in a bid to better understand the Swordmasters. Four months on, and she was still obviously adjusting to no longer being of the Knights of Lyusula, let alone the changes in her very body.

“There are still forty-five more floors to clear,” she reminded him, “before there is any need to worry about what your society will think of you. If you must become a different person to survive... Well. You spoke to Rosalia of the families waiting in your world. Do you truly believe they would rather never see you again, than to see you changed but alive?”

Kirito started. “I...” If I hadn't taken up the Baneblade four months ago, PoH would've killed me. If I meet him again, and don't fight back, he'll kill me. And if he kills me, I'll... never make things right with Suguha, will I? If I make that choice, I don't know who I'll be, but if I don't... “I don't know where I am going, either,” Kizmel mused. “But I do know there is a place where I belong, within the storm my life has become. Wherever I may be going, I know I have people with whom I can rest my wings.” She held Kirito's gaze for a long moment, then looked over at the couch by the other fireplace, where Philia and Rain had dozed off. “With my friends, I know I'll always have a place.” Kizmel turned her head back to him, a smile playing at her lips again. “The future will always be uncertain, Kirito-kun. Should we not simply treasure these moments by the fire?”

Sitting by the fire, with friends... Well, this does feel pretty nice. Is that your way of telling me to let tomorrow worry about itself? ...Or reminding me some things are worth turning orange for?

Gradually, some of the tension eased out of Kirito's shoulders. Kizmel hadn't answered his worries anymore than she'd answered her own, but he thought he might at least be able to keep going. Even if he had to do the unthinkable, even if the people in his homeland would never understand why...

He'd keep going. For those who Titan's Hand and Laughing Coffin might kill, and for the families waiting in the real world. If he had to become someone Japan would never recognize, well, he had friends to help him find a way through that, too.

“This is kinda nice, isn't it?” he said, idly raising one hand to brush Kizmel's hair. “We should do this more often. Actually...” Kirito paused, watching dancing flames as he considered again a thought he'd first considered when they'd been helping the Black Cats. “Maybe we should talk to Rain and...
Philia tomorrow, about buying a house. Someplace we can all call home, as long as we're here.”

His fingers slipped from her hair to trace the tip of one long, pointed ear, and Kizmel made a soft, pleased sound. “I believe that's a wonderful idea, Kirito-kun.” She shifted under their shared blanket, and suddenly there was the featherlight touch of lips on his cheek. “Gi melin,” she whispered, settling back into the crook of his arm.

Kirito flushed. He didn't understand everything Kayaba had put into the Dark Elves' conlang, but he recognized that one perfectly well. It scared him, in more ways than he liked to think about—not least because if he hadn't been scared, he was pretty sure how he would've responded.

He couldn't say what something deep inside wanted to. Not then. But he didn't protest, either. Setting aside the future for one night, curled up by the fire, he pulled Kizmel a little closer, breathed in the scent of pine and sakura blossoms, and let the warmth of the flames lull him to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The first half of this chapter hewed rather closer to canon than I would have preferred, I must admit. That being said, I like to think the significant alterations and original events in the latter half make up for it somewhat. ...I think it's also safe to say no other event derived from canon is going to be quite so close to a direct copy. After this, changes in general are going to be a bit more significant.

As far as I'm aware, Pina has no canon gender specified. I didn't think "it" was appropriate for a treasured pet, however, so I went with "her" as it seemed more fitting.

The depiction of the Royal Capital is essentially a mix of the scraps of information so far given in the Progressive novels, and the likely-non-canon version from the mobile game Sword Art Online: Integral Factor. The game's "Moongleam Castle" in particular is cooler than what I'd originally thought of.

As for Kizmel's final line: Kayaba is a genius programmer, but the guy must have some limits. I figure it's perfectly plausible philology is not one of his strong points, so he'd just take things from the most famous fictional elf language. Points to readers who recognize--or have the Google-fu to translate--that bit of Sindarin.

Two more chapters currently written. I'll do my best to post them in fairly quick succession; Chapter 18 isn't the sort of thing with which I like to leave my readers hanging... -Solid
Chapter XVIII: Elegaia

Over a year it had been, since she first met her partner. Nine months since she joined him as a constant companion, sharing danger and loss, friends and enemies, meals and lodgings. In that time, she'd almost forgotten the dreams that first brought her to wonder about her partner's world and driven her to seek him out again. Adventure in the waking world had pushed aside the mysteries of sleep.

More, she had believed the mystery solved, that somehow she'd visited another world in her dreams. That what she had seen was merely an echo of the spell that had shown her partner her world before they had ever met. In that light, she could only be thankful for those dreams: though he had never said, she suspected they were what had guided her partner to their true meeting.

Time had turned those dreams from twisted mockeries of their meeting to an all-too-real retelling of the terrible battle that had nearly been their last together—and later still, to more pleasant fancies of what might yet be.

She had no more need of dreams to drive her quest. Her goals had changed from deciphering nightmares; the future had become what truly mattered to her, and finding a way to the future she'd come to desire so strongly.

Only in the back of her mind did she still recall the dreams—dreams of her own death, of her life slipping away under his sad gaze, snuffing out everything that could have come after. Naught but a nightmare born of another world, no longer of any meaning.

So she had believed.

March 6th, 2024

“Run! It's comin' back!”

“Holy—nothing that big should be that fast! It's—yikes!”

Boots pounding down the dusty canyon floor in what could be considered more a series of leaps than a true run, Kizmel chanced a brief glance over her shoulder at the creature pursuing them. “I believe luring it with meat has failed, Klein!”

“Hey, it was worth a try!” The red samurai of Fuurinkazan shot her an indignant look—one somewhat marred by his subsequent yelp and awkward diagonal leap to dodge their pursuer's huge, armored claw. “Not like anything else we've tried has done any good!”

She didn't particularly want to concede the point. Attempting to distract a Field Boss with food was, as she'd dryly remarked before the battle, something more apt to succeed against Kirito; hardly what she would've considered a legitimate battle tactic.

Yet Klein was right: after three days, nothing else had worked, either. This was only the latest failure to send the raid group taking flight from their attempt at conquering the canyon leading to the Fifty-
Sixth Floor's labyrinth tower, barely a meter ahead of the boss' claws.

“Less talking, more running!” Kirito advised, his black coat billowing behind him in a way that threatened to blind Lind, racing just behind. “We're almost—there!”

Ahead of them, the wooden gate of Dollarah was open, just a little. Just enough for the small party that had made the latest attempt on the Field Boss to slip through. “Over here!” the young girl holding it open called, waving to them. “Quick!”

The clearers hardly needed to be told twice. Kirito and Klein were the first through, followed closely by Kizmel; Lind and his contingent of Dragon Knights were scarcely a breath behind. The moment they were all safely within Dollarah's walls, they turned as one to help the girl slam the gate shut.

With a massive, reverberating *thud*, the Field Boss crashed head-first into the gate, only to rebound. In that clash, the gate proved an immovable object, the monster not quite an unstoppable force.

Falling back from the gate with a sigh, Kizmel could only shake her head wearily. *Would that we could turn the town's wall into a weapon. Certainly it seems to be the only thing capable of stopping that creature in its tracks.*

Turning to the girl who'd aided their escape, Kizmel favored her with a smile. “Many thanks, young one,” she said. “We are in your debt.”

The girl giggled, waving it off. “It's nothing, really! So long as the Swordmasters are trying to get rid of the monster, it's the least we can do!”

*Would that we had some success in that endeavor,* the elf thought sourly, as she and the other clearers dropped to the dusty ground to rest. Their bodies knew no fatigue, but their minds certainly did. *I've never seen such a foe, in all the years I've fought this Castle's evil.*

*[The Geocrawler],* it was called. A huge, snakelike monstrosity with an armored back and head, armed with a pair of fearsome claws, guarding the only path from Dollarah to the labyrinth tower. By conventional wisdom, it ought to have been at worst a moderately difficult foe, requiring nothing more complicated than getting around to where its soft underbelly might be reached.

Conventional clearer tactics had so far proven to fall short in such a confined space. With so little room to maneuver in the canyon, efforts to reach The Geocrawler's stomach had met with nothing but failure for three days straight. Even Klein's latest notion, luring the beast with a fine cut of meat, hadn't succeeded in giving them an opening.

“Well,” Lind said at length, dragging himself back to his feet, “unless anyone has any more… unconventional ideas, for now I'd suggest we report to Vice-Commander Asuna. Maybe she'll have a new strategy waiting for us.”

Watching the DDA guildmaster brush dust off his dragonscale cape and head off toward the log building currently being used as clearing headquarters, Kizmel found his attitude mildly amusing. He actually sounded sincere in his hope that his primary rival for leader of the clearers would have a viable suggestion If he sounded at all weary, she judged it was frustration with the boss, not Swordmaster politics.

“…Guy's got a point,” Klein agreed, sighing. “I'll go round up Fuurinkazan. You two go fetch Rain and Philia, and I'll see you at the meeting.” Exchanging a halfhearted fist-bump with Kirito, he plodded away in the direction of his own guild's temporary lodgings. “Damn, can't believe I wasted an A-class ingredient for nothing…”
“They're going to say, 'I told you so', y'know,” Kirito said with a tired chuckle. Flipping upright with a flair that did nothing to hide how weary he actually was, he extended a hand to Kizmel. “They were right to just wait and see this time, though, just like Fuurinkazan… Come to think of it, I'm surprised you came along for this wild goose chase, Kizmel.”

Smiling, the elf girl let him pull her to her feet. “Please, my friend. Would I let you rush into battle without a keeper, fool's errand or no? I thought you knew me better by now. Where you go, so also shall I.”

She meant it as lighthearted reassurance, and he did make a token grimace at her jibe. She didn't miss, though, the shadow that flickered through his eyes at the unintended reminder that one day, he would be going very far indeed.

Not today, however, Kizmel reminded herself, pausing to smile at the local human girl again as they headed off together in Lind's wake. We both have much yet to do in this world. The Swordmasters' escape is not the only cause for which we fight, after all. Thirty floors and more remain to be cleansed of evil before they're freed, for their own sake and for the Steel Castle's people.

If we can only slay this irritating beast!

“Come, Kirito,” she said aloud, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Let's set about scheming The Geocrawler's downfall once more, and then find what our companions were up to while we toiled in vain. I believe Rain said something about more 'house-hunting' before we left?”

To Kizmel's satisfaction, that put a lighter spring back in her partner's step. “She did, yeah. Philia told me yesterday they'd found something promising, but they didn't want to say what until they had a few more details. With those girls, that could be good or bad…”

There were fewer Swordmasters attending the strategy meeting than Kizmel was accustomed to. Indeed, the last time she could recall so few faces gathered around the table had been during preparations for the battle with Vemacitrin, when only the bravest had stayed the course.

The empty places around the rough-hewn table serving them this day, at least, were for a less dire reason. Those seats would be filled, Kizmel was sure, when a viable strategy was finally devised; until then, she knew, many simply saw no point.

For this meeting, the only notable faces she saw were Lind and Schmidt of the Divine Dragons, Klein's Fuurinkazan, and the leaders of the Knights of Blood. The most diligent of the clearers, willing to strive even against boredom.

Or rather, those who know that someone has to keep scheming, or The Geocrawler will never be vanquished, Kizmel thought as Kirito and Klein reported to Asuna the day's results, or lack thereof. I'm surprised Rain and Philia bothered to come, honestly.

Sitting with her and Kirito in the unofficial “nonaligned” section of the table, the other girls did have the appearance of those barely containing a pleasant surprise. From the smile Philia wore, the one which normally suggested she'd just stumbled on a particularly valuable treasure, Kizmel assumed it was not because they'd stumbled on a secret about the boss.

“…So, yeah,” Klein finished, hanging his head. “Even the tastiest steak I ever saw wasn't enough to get the damn thing to turn its back long enough for us to hit it where it hurts.”

Asuna huffed in annoyance. “Not like that's very surprising. I haven't heard of anything bigger than some tameable mobs being lured by food at all—and there's no way a Field Boss would be that easy.
I know, I know,” she added, raising a hand to silence the samurai's indignant protest. “By now we are down to the unlikely ideas. But you have to admit, Klein-san, that this one was really out there.”

“Well, yeah,” he muttered, looking away. “Not like any of you have had any better ideas, though…”

Too true. The confines of the canyon were simply too narrow to dodge past The Geocrawler in the middle of direct combat; that had been tried in the first three engagements, only for all those making the attempt to be smashed—almost fatally—into the canyon walls by its tail. One particularly unlucky tank had even been embedded in the ground, losing his high-quality armor in the process.

An ambush had also been attempted, by clearers with high-level Hiding. Kizmel and Sachi had both been part of that effort, and found out the hard way that even using their cloaks in the dead of night was not enough to hide them from The Geocrawler's other senses.

“Well,” Kirito said after a long silence, adding his input with a frown, “I suppose we could try climbing the canyon walls, and getting around behind it that way…”

Asuna wasn't the only one shaking her head, before he'd even finished. “Without some kind of distraction—which we still haven't had any luck creating—you wouldn't get in more than a few hits before it turned around. I suppose we could try sandwiching it, but we don't have enough clearers with high enough AGI to pull off the back attack.”

“Also,” Heathcliff pointed out from behind her, making a rare contribution to the discussion, “The Geocrawler's aggro range is unusually long. It would very possibly knock ambushers down from the cliffs, and the fall damage would be all too likely to finish the job.”

Folding his arms, Kirito leaned back in his chair with a grimace. He didn't disagree, however, and after that the meeting fell quiet once again.

_There must be an answer, though_, Kizmel thought, frowning down at the table’s map of the region. _One thing the Swordmasters have always been firm about is that, however monstrous he might be, Kayaba is consistently fair. We need only find whatever flaw he's left in this scenario._

...Of course, she realized with a sudden chill, _the Steel Castle has flown for many centuries. Even if Kayaba is somehow still interfering in this place, it may well be that not everything still conforms to his original design..._

Finally, Lind came to his feet. “If we're down to thinking completely outside the box, then there is one thing I can think of. A tactic we've never tried before.” He planted one hand on the table, right where the map showed Dollarah. “We know The Geocrawler will come right to the town gate. We don't have enough room to maneuver in the canyon? Then let's open the gate, and let it in here. This town isn't considered a Safe Zone, after all.”

That last was true enough, Kizmel knew. It had made many of the clearers, herself included, more than a little uneasy, before discovering the town's wall at least was fully as indestructible as most structures in Aincrad. Though there had still been some concern about orange-marked Swordmasters gaining entry...

_Wait. Did he just say—?_

Lind's tone had been so matter-of-fact that Kizmel wasn't the only one to not at first realize exactly what he'd suggested. It was about the moment she digested it that Klein bolted to his feet, wide-eyed. “Wait a second! You let that thing in here, and it'll be a massacre! The NPCs'll be sitting ducks!”

To Kizmel's utter disbelief, Lind only nodded. “Well, yes. That's part of the point, in fact. If The
Geocrawler is distracted by the NPCs, we'll have plenty of opportunity to strike its weak points. I think it's a better plan than trying to bait it with a steak like it were a dog, don't you?"

Kizmel had always known the DDA guildmaster was a pragmatic man. Ruthless, even; she remembered their duel on Christmas Eve all too well. Yet for all his pragmatism, ruthlessness, and arrogance, she'd always believed he had honor. That a man so dedicated to saving even the most helpless of his own people would be so callous toward the humans of Aincrad…!

It was Kirito's turn to leap from his chair. “You can't be serious! Lind, you're not talking about playing matador with a few trees to take the hits, you're talking about lives! You can't just—!”

“Enough.” Lind didn't raise his voice, but the sharp crack in his tone still stopped her partner mid-sentence. “This isn't some sidequest, Kirito, where we can trust you to do things your way. This is a Field Boss, it's in our way, and this is no time for role-playing. Don't you agree, Vice-Commander?”

Kizmel's gaze snapped to Asuna. She expected the chestnut-haired girl to rebuke Lind, as she often had in meetings over the past year. To point out that what he was suggesting was nothing less than sacrificing the lives of the very people the Swordmasters had been summoned to Aincrad to protect.

Instead, for a very long moment, Asuna only stared down at the table, biting her lip. Then, at last, she said slowly, “Yes, Lind-san. Though I hate to admit it, you're right. This is the closest to a viable plan we've had for this boss.”

“What⁉️”

It took Kizmel a moment to realize the outburst had been her own. In her shock, she'd come to her feet so quickly her chair had toppled over, and she was left staring at Asuna with wide eyes. She couldn't believe she'd actually heard those words from Asuna, one of her two stalwart companions in the quest to save Dark Elf and Forest alike from the machinations of the Fallen.

“What are you saying, Asuna⁉️” she demanded, when she'd regained the ability to speak. “You—of all people, I can't imagine that you would honestly say—”

“Kizmel-san.” Speaking softly now, formally, Lind looked her straight in the eye. “I'm sorry. I've respected Kirito and the Vice-Commander's wishes up to now, but for the sake of those counting on us, I cannot cater to that any longer.”

“Lind,” Kirito began, voice a low growl—one laced with fear, Kizmel thought. Sparing a glance at her partner, she saw that his face had turned deathly pale. “You can't—”

“I must, Kirito. The situation demands it—and quite honestly, I respect your companion too much to lie to her now.” Lind turned a hard look on Fuurinkazan, shutting Klein's mouth with a snap by his expression alone.

Kizmel thought she heard a squeak from behind her, either Rain or Philia, but the DDA guildmaster's glare silenced them just as well.

“I'm sorry, Kizmel-san,” he said again, gaze soft again as it met hers once more. “But I must tell you the truth. That this world is nothing but an illusion—and of everyone I've ever met here, you alone could be considered a person. The other NPCs, human, dwarf, or elf… they're nothing but automatons made to populate a game.” He hesitated. “Although, for what it's worth… that does mean the NPCs of this village will merely respawn, hours after The Geocrawler is through with them.”

Claims Kizmel had heard before, in the long months she'd lived among the Swordmasters. She had
known for a long time that many of them believed Aincrad to be only a deadly dream, and that only they were “real”. She had known just as long that even Kirito and Asuna held the world to be “constructed”, even as they held some within to be as much people as themselves.

She should have been able to shrug off Lind's words. Yet Lind, for all his faults, had never struck her as a charlatan, nor had he ever before suggested feeding humans to a monster. Since the night they had crossed swords, he had even treated Kizmel herself with respect.

And never had Asuna accepted such a proposal, as cold and pragmatic as she'd grown as vice-commander of the Knights of Blood.

Heartbeat pounding in her ears, blood turning to ice in her veins, Kizmel turned to Kirito. To her partner, to the companion who had never lied to her, even if it had meant outright admitting he was too afraid to answer a question.

Who had warned her, the day she became a Swordmaster herself, that a truth awaited her for which he was afraid he would never forgive him.

“Tell me,” Kizmel begged. “Kirito. Please. This can't be…"

*I am real. My world is real. Twisted by Kayaba's sorcery, perhaps, but this is real! No illusion could be so grand as the Steel Castle, as all the people living in it! My life, my sister, my people…*

Her vision narrowed to Kirito's face. Bone-white, that face was, with tears beginning to gather in his eyes. But his voice, when he spoke, was flat, unfaltering. “Aincrad is an illusion,” he said evenly. “This castle exists only as recorded information housed within a machine, projected into the sleeping minds of human players as the game *Sword Art Online*. It was activated for a test on August First, 2022. Nineteen months ago. It's only existed in its current form since November Sixth of the same year.

“In the sixteen months since then, Kizmel, I've only met one person in Aincrad who's 'real'.” A short pause, that felt endless. “And when the final boss is defeated, this world will end.”

Those words, from her most trusted friend, from the one for whom she cared more than anyone or anything, reverberated in Kizmel's mind. For an instant, for an eternity, she could only stare into his onyx eyes, eyes that burned with ashamed sincerity.

“Aincrad is an illusion… I've only met one person in Aincrad who's 'real'…”

“...This world will end…”

Wrenching her gaze from his, Kizmel turned, stumbled over her fallen chair, and fled from the building.

“Kizmel—Kizmel, wait!”

“Kizmel-chan!”

The elf girl paid the calls no heed. Tears filling her eyes as shock gave way to a confused tumult of emotions, she dragged the Cloak of Illusion close around her and blindly ran for Dollarah's Teleport Plaza.

Kizmel didn't know where she was going. She didn't know where she *could* go, fleeing a truth that could not be escaped. She could do nothing else, though, as her world collapsed around her. She could only run, as if her cloak could hide her from reality itself.
Kirito wasn't sure exactly how he felt, after Kizmel fled the meeting. Furious at Lind and Asuna both, definitely. Terrified of what would happen between them, now that the truth had finally come out. Hideously guilty about her entire worldview being ripped to shreds.

Even, deep down, maybe a little relieved. At last, the elephant in the room that had plagued him all the months they'd fought together, the more so since he'd realized just how deeply he truly cared for her, was out in the open. Come what may, there would be no more secrets.

Amid that tumult of emotion, Kirito didn't realize he'd taken the back of his discarded chair in a death grip until a notice popped up with an indignant beep, proclaiming [Immortal Object]. At the same moment, one of the HP bars on his HUD abruptly winked out.

He wasn't the only one to notice that. Like it was a signal, Philia finally broke the silence that had fallen on the meeting. “What are you waiting for, Kirito?!" she demanded. “Go after her!"

Very slowly, eyes falling closed, he shook his head. “No."

“No?!” she repeated incredulously. “What do you mean, 'no'?! You can't just let Kizmel run off like that! You have to—!"

“No,” Kirito said again, more forcefully. “I'm the last one she'll want to see right now.” If she did want to see me, she wouldn't have left the party. Between that and her cloak, there's no way I could find her now, anyway.

“How can you say that?” Philia grabbed his shoulder, trying to pull him to face her. “You've known her longer than any of us! How can you stand there and tell me you shouldn't be the one to see her?!"

“Because I know what she's going through!” he snapped, opening his eyes to turn a glare on the treasure hunter. “I know what it's like to have your entire world turned upside-down! I know exactly how she's feeling right now!”

Betrayed. Confused. Like every step she took was on quicksand, threatening to swallow her up. Terrified to see anyone close to her, as if at any moment they might turn into someone—something—else before her very eyes. Daylight turned to shadows, the familiar roads swallowed in fog.

Oh, yes. Kirito remembered the day he'd found that damned file. Remembered the shaking of his world, the hope that he was wrong before he tricked his parents—Suguha's parents—into confirming it. He'd hardly come out of his room for a week after that.

*And I didn't have to face the idea that no one else around me was real—or that my entire world was doomed to literally be destroyed. What I went through, Kizmel must be feeling a thousand times worse.*

He forced himself to take a deep, calming breath, realizing from Philia's wide eyes that he'd shocked her. Though beyond her, Rain only bit her lip, sadness in her eyes. Of course there would be; she'd had her world upturned once, too.

“Philia,” he said, when he was sure his voice wouldn't come out tight and angry. “There's nothing I can do for Kizmel right now. When your entire world has been turned upside-down, the last person you want to see is someone you trusted, and broke that trust. I know.”

“Think I know what he's talkin' about, Philia-chan.” Klein, of all people, stepped up and laid a hand on Philia's shoulder. “It's probably better if you guys gave her some space, at least for a day or two.”
"But... we can't just leave her alone," she protested, head drooping. "Klein, she... I mean..."

"I know. But you guys aren't what she needs right now." The samurai flashed her a gentle grin. "So how 'bout you leave this one to me? I know a little something about helping people."

Times like this, Kirito was reminded of just why Fuurinkazan put up with Klein as their guildmaster. Goofy, hopeless with girls, looks like a bandit more than a samurai... and the most reliable guy I know. Not trusting himself to speak, he gave Klein a slow, grateful nod.

He got a thumbs-up in return. "All right, guys," Klein called to his guild. "I've got a mission. Sachi-chan, hold the fort while I'm gone. got it? Don't let the guys do anything crazy."

"We won't try to take on any bosses by ourselves," Sachi promised him, with an obviously-forced smile. "Go."

The red samurai flashed another grin and thumbs-up, and sauntered out of the building.

Philia drew in a breath then, as if about to say something else—but Kirito was already turning away, facing the rest of the gathered clearers again. Worry for his partner was pushed aside, her fate for now entrusted to Klein, giving full reign to anger instead.

A couple of the clearers, the ones who knew him least—and one or two of the Divine Dragons who remembered their past clashes—glared right back. Schmidt, surprisingly, wasn't one of them, the big tank shrinking back from Kirito's baleful gaze; a couple of the unaffiliated players started to push their chairs back along with him.

Lind grimaced, feeling the full force of that glare. "Kirito," he began, "I'm—"

"I don't want to hear it," Kirito cut him off. "Everyone but Asuna, get out."

To Schmidt's left, Orochi began to stand, leaning across the table with a glare of his own. "Now just a second here, Beater, you don't get to—"

"Out. Now. This meeting is over." Voice and gaze as cold as the ice in his veins, Kirito stared Orochi down. "If I have to, I'll go orange on every one of you. Get out."

Playing the "Beater" probably wouldn't have worked again. Even those who believed he really was that selfish probably knew by then that the outright villainy he'd occasionally implied was just an act, after all the times he'd come back and fought the bosses right along with them.

*I hope* they realize *I'm not acting this time. For their sakes.*

The DDA players stirred uneasily, and turned to Lind for his opinion. Lind and the solos looked to Asuna, and Heathcliff behind her.

Asuna bit her lip, face nearly as pale as Kirito's own. Tears lurked in the stern mask of the vice-commander she'd assumed more and more in recent months, and finally she turned to look back at her guildmaster. He stared back at her, as impassive as ever; what was going on behind those metallic gray eyes, Kirito couldn't guess.

Finally, Heathcliff shrugged minutely. "We will reconvene tomorrow afternoon," he announced calmly. "As things stand, the raid party is too unsettled for effective battle, anyway. I hope Kizmel-kun will be back by then; if not, we'll proceed as planned with those who do arrive."

The room emptied quickly, once the Paladin had given his blessing. If Kirito hadn't been so angry,
he might've found it funny. Several of the solos practically scampered out, and Schmidt followed at a pace that couldn't quite be called fleeing.

Lind was one of the last out. Under other circumstances, Kirito would have given him credit for his slight bow. Just then, Kirito was not feeling so charitable as to give Diavel's would-be successor credit for anything.

After Heathcliff left, cool and calm, Philia and Rain were the very last to go. The treasure hunter looked like she wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words; the redhead only took the time to very gently squeeze Kirito on the shoulder, meeting his eyes with an expression he couldn't quite decipher.

Then it was just him and Asuna.

His old partner slumped in her chair. “All right, Kirito-kun,” she said softly. “We're alone. What do you want me to say? I'm sorry? Because I am. I never wanted to hurt Kizmel-chan.” Warily, she raised her head to look at him. “But sooner or later, it had to be said. If anything, Lind was only doing what you should've done a long time ago. If she'd heard it from you, then maybe…”

“This isn't about Kizmel, Asuna.”

She started. “What? Then what're you—?”

Deliberately, Kirito let go of the chair, finally allowing the [Immortal Object] message to vanish.

“This isn't just about Kizmel,” he clarified. “I'm angry about that, yeah. And Lind is going to pay for what he just did. But there's more to it than that.” He placed one hand flat on the table. “You're treating this as a game, Asuna.”

Weariness was replaced by confusion. “What? What's that supposed to mean?” Asuna shook her head. “Kirito-kun, you were the one who just told Kizmel-chan this world is fake! I know you're not one of those players who cracked under the stress. We both know this is a game, deadly or not!”

“I said it was an illusion. I didn't say it was fake.” It was his turn to shake his head, as he opened his menu. “Asuna. There's something you used to know, that I think you've forgotten since you started just leading the clearing itself.” With a few keystrokes, a sword materialized on his back. “I don't think you're going to understand if I just say it, either.

“So. Vice-Commander Asuna—I challenge you to a duel.” Kirito's eyes were cold, glittering. “Let me remind you what the truth of this world is.”

As she walked away from the temporary headquarters with Rain, Philia couldn't help but glance back over her shoulder. “What do you think they're talking about in there?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Rain said, shrugging. “We both joined the clearerers long after those two split up. Who knows what's going to happen now.” Though she guessed the vice-commander wasn't going to enjoy it very much. She'd never seen Kirito that angry, feigned or otherwise, but she'd heard stories from Argo the Rat.

Kirito playing the villain was frightening, if you didn't know what was really going on in his head. Kirito angry for real, supposedly, was enough to freak out Argo. The info broker hadn't sold that tale; although after what Kirito and Kizmel had privately disclosed when Rain and Philia had joined them long-term, she suspected she knew the general circumstances.

After leaving the meeting, the two of them wandered Dollarah aimlessly, no clear destination in
mind. With the strategy meeting canceled, it wasn't like they had any plans for the day; and with the other members of the party missing…

“Do you think Kizmel will be okay?” Philia mumbled, kicking at a loose stone in the dusty road. “I mean, I always knew it would be rough when she did find out, but that…”

“I don't know,” Rain said honestly. “I mean, I've heard that stupid 'simulation theory' about the real world, and I've never paid any attention to it. But how would I feel if somebody I trusted suddenly came out and told me it was true? If people I believed in did things that proved they believed it?”

“…I can't imagine it, either.”

“Worse, Kizmel's been told she's been helping us end the world, and she's always known we don't have any idea how to bring her with us when we leave.” Rain sighed, noticing absently that their wandering had taken them close to Dollarah's Teleport Plaza. “I'd like to think she'll come out of it. I know it'd kill Kirito if she didn't come back to us. But honestly, Philia, I don't know of anything we can do to help.”

That hurt, just thinking about it. Rain had joined the clearers, right before the much-dreaded Fiftieth Floor Boss no less, because she wanted to be one of the people leading everyone out of SAO. Maybe it was because she couldn't help her own sister, maybe she just had some kind of subconscious hero complex, but that was what she wanted to do.

Now her own party was broken, and she didn't have any idea how to fix it. She could only hope Kirito's trust in Klein wasn't misplaced.

Speaking of… For whatever reason, Fuurinkazan was gathered around the Teleporter itself. Klein himself had already disappeared, but Sachi was still there, gesturing to something in her menu as she talked with her guildmates.

“…Maybe there is something we can do,” Philia said slowly, giving Fuurinkazan a strange look. “I mean, maybe we can't help right now, but… Remember the place we were looking at this morning?”

Rain nodded, brow creasing in a puzzled frown. “Well, yeah, of course I do.” Unlike Kirito and Kizmel, she and the treasure hunter had actually accomplished something, and had been eager to spring the surprise. Before everything went wrong, anyway. With what had gone wrong, though, she had no idea what Philia was getting at.

“Well,” the blonde said, growing more animated, “I was thinking. We don't know how to bring Kizmel home with us when we leave, but, if Klein can help her—and Kirito can bring her back, we both know he's gonna have to go after her eventually—maybe… we can bring her 'home'? Though to have it ready in time, we'd need a little help…”

It took a second longer for it to click, and then Rain's eyes widened. “Oh!” It'd be kinda late, but—if it helped cheer her up—

“Sachi!” she called out, trotting over toward Fuurinkazan. “Hey! Could we ask you guys a favor?”

When the azure glow of the teleport faded, Kizmel found herself in the center of a huge square, surrounded by more humans than she'd ever seen in one place. Indeed, it was a larger city than she'd ever seen, greater even than her people's Royal Capital on the Ninth Floor.

Why she'd come here, to the City of Beginnings on Aincrad's First Floor, she wasn't sure. Still in shocked disbelief at what she'd learned, she supposed it had simply an instinct to go as far from the
frontline—from Kirito—as she could. Gripped by a strange terror of the thought of visiting any Dark Elf demesne, the very bottom of the Steel Castle was probably about as far as she could flee.

Another flare of blue light, a dull impact, and a snapped, “Watch it!” pushed Kizmel away from the Teleporter. Stumbling away from it and the irritated Swordmaster, she walked into the squares crowds in a daze. Distantly, she noticed far more green Swordmaster cursors than she’d ever seen in one place; ironically, most of those she saw mixed in with the crowd seemed as listless as she was.

That's right… Kirito always said most of the Swordmasters never essayed the frontlines at all, and that hundreds still lived here, despairing of any chance to escape this world. Once, I could only pity those caught by Kayaba's trap who had not the will to move forward.

I never imagined a time when I might be no different.

Still reeling from the claims Lind—and Kirito—had made of Aincrad’s populace, Kizmel used the sight of those sullen Swordmasters to pull herself together. She couldn't simply give up, not yet. Surely Lind was lying, the arrogant guildmaster using excuses to justify his ruthless pragmatism…

Kirito never lied to me.

Straightening her shoulders, she threaded her way through the city's crowds to a street vendor. His cursor was yellow, that of one of Aincrad's natives. An “NPC”, as the Swordmasters would say. “Pardon me,” Kizmel began, cursing the tremor in her voice. “Can you tell me who leads the Swordmasters here?”

It was a test, as well as a legitimate question. She’d seen several groups of Swordmasters in dark armor and green capes at the edges of the crowds, a clear sign that some organization was present. Surely the locals would know something.

The vendor glanced up from his cart of fruit, looking decidedly disinterested. “Swordmasters mind their own business, and we mind ours,” he said, tone as lacking in curiosity as his expression. “You’d know better than I would, Swordmaster-san. Can I interest you in some fresh oranges?”

Kizmel felt a chill creeping up her spine, but she refused to give up so easily. “There are so many here, you must have heard something,” she persisted. “Surely you've heard something from your customers.”

“Who knows what Swordmasters do? I sell fruit, I don't chat with heroes. Can I interest you in some fresh apples?”

Different words, but… “Please,” she tried one more time. “If there's even anything you've overheard from people passing by, anything at all…”

That only got her a shrug. “I'm not one to eavesdrop, Swordmaster-san. Can I interest you in some ripe lemons?”

Shuddering, Kizmel turned quickly and walked away. One person is hardly proof, she told herself, looking for another local to try. I've known smiths among my own people who've scant interest in anything but their craft. I may have simply had bad luck.

“Sorry, I wouldn't know anything about that. Would you like a loaf of bread, Swordmaster-san?”

“Ahh, who knows what Swordmasters think? Heroes from another world. Amazing we even speak the same language. So, which of my fine blades interests you, Milady?”
Beginning to grow desperate, Kizmel was just about to ask a local who seemed to be a guide when another voice brought her up short. “You're not going to get any answer out of them, you know.”

A familiar voice, that was. She couldn't quite remember whose, though, even as ice began to gather in her gut. Slowly, dread edging toward horror, Kizmel turned to face the owner of that cold, angry voice.

Brown hair and eyes. Brown armor, of a style not even mid-level Swordmasters would still have worn. In those brown eyes, dull anger. “Keita…”

“I'm surprised the Beater's 'partner' would be all the way down here,” the former guildmaster of the Moonlit Black Cats said, practically spitting the words. “There can't be anything worth poaching on the First Floor at your levels, right?” He asked. “But that's not why you're here. Those questions. Finally realized it, did you? That there's nothing here but dolls.”

She flinched. Once before, she'd been called a “doll” by a Swordmaster—by XaXa, one of the mad murderers among the “players”.

“I'd almost pity you, if I thought you could understand it.” Keita snorted. “The Beater's full of it, but I guess you're a bit smarter than most NPCs. Just smart enough to know you're different. But still a doll.” His mouth quirked in what might be called a smile, if it had been on a malevolent spirit. “If you're hoping for a better answer, you won't find one here.

“If you can even understand that much… I hope you understand that the Beater let a human die so you could keep ticking a little longer.”

Sasamaru. Kirito could've saved him, but because he chose me, Sasamaru was… and Hafner…

Unable to stand Keita's bitter satisfaction, Kizmel fled, running blindly back into the crowd. A humorless, contemptuous laugh followed her.

Of all the places to which she might've gone, fleeing the broken, bitter Keita, even Kizmel couldn't say exactly why she'd ended up in a human cathedral. By all rights, she ought to have finally sought a haven of the Dark Elves, away from those who might taunt her plight—or worse, pity her.

Kneeling before the cathedral's altar, bathed in the multicolored light from its stained glass windows, she supposed it was probably just as well. Visiting the places of her youth likely would have made things even worse, when she began to test the claims Lind and Kirito had made.

She'd never had much cause to speak with the native humans of Aincrad. Even after she joined the Swordmasters' clearing group, most of her time in human towns had been spent with the “players”, speaking with natives only when a task, a “quest”, abided. True, Kizmel had often found those with whom she did speak somehow… duller of wit, less vibrant than the Swordmasters, but she'd first taken that simply to be that more adventurous souls were naturally bolder.

Later, after finding an inscription in an ancient cave wall, she'd attributed it to the spell that had supposedly been placed on Aincrad's natives to impede any effort they might make to liberate the Steel Castle. That, she'd believed, neatly explained the inflexibility she had gradually begun to notice even among her own people.

Yet Kirito told me I shouldn't read too much into those words, Kizmel thought, eyes closed in pain. I should have pressed him on that. I knew even then that something was not right.

Now she knew for sure. Whatever merit Lind's other claims had, after trying to engage the
townspeople of the City of Beginnings in conversation, she was convinced few, if any, of them truly were more than automatons. After the third human had responded to queries in a stilted way, eventually repeating themselves…

That, and meeting Keita in the central square—and facing his ugly, bitter satisfaction—had driven Kizmel into the largest, most deserted building she could find. That it was a cathedral seemed cruel irony.

To whom might I pray? Kizmel thought bitterly, her head nonetheless bowed over clasped hands. I know nothing of human religions beyond a few holidays, and if those words are true, the Great Trees are themselves nothing but tales spun to give an illusory world more color.

But if they are nothing but tales, and the people here nothing but dolls given scripts… what am I? And… what does Kirito truly think of me?

Her heart clenched. Kirito had told her, the night she'd come to realize her own feelings, that he believed her to be real. Even now, she wanted to believe him. Even after he'd confirmed Lind's words, she wanted to believe he saw her as more than another “NPC”.

But… but I…

How long she knelt there, agonizing, Kizmel wasn't sure. Eventually, though, the silence was broken by the cathedral doors creaking open, and soft footsteps on stone. “He didn't mean to hurt you, y'know. None of us did. We just… never knew how to say it.”

“…Klein. Why are you here?” Kizmel didn't ask him how he'd found her. Fuurinkazan's guildmaster had been on her “Friends List” since the battle with Nicholas the Renegade; once she'd emerged from the Cloak of Illusion's concealment, tracking her would've been simple.

“Somebody had to,” Klein said simply, his footsteps halting a respectful distance away. “What, did you really think your friends would just let you go to pieces by yourself? I know you don't wanna see Kirito right now—Blackie's got his own mess to work through right now anyway—but somebody had to make sure you didn't go and do something stupid.”

“Stupid.” Now she did open her eyes, casting a baleful, tear-blurred gaze at the samurai. “Such as? Throwing myself off Aincrad's edge, perhaps?” She snorted bitterly. “I don't see why you'd care. After all, I'm only an 'NPC'. If Lind is to be believed, I would simply reappear anyway. I suppose I am only one of many made from a mold…”

“You don't really believe that, Kizmel.” His voice was sharp now, though his expression remained soft, infuriatingly compassionate. “C'mon. Don't tell me what they told you would hurt half this bad if you really thought you were just one of a bunch of copies.”

“Why not? What could possibly make me any different?” Kizmel turned her head sharply away, not willing to let him see her tears. “If this world is but a game, why should one Dark Elf be any different from any other 'NPC'?"

Because she knew, now. If she'd known to look before, she would've known long since. Others of Aincrad were nothing more than lifelike statues spouting scripts as if from a play. There was no reason, in Kayaba Akihiko's game, to breathe true life into a single one—even were he capable of it.

And yet…

“…How?” she asked, not really expecting an answer. “Klein, I… I remember. Kirito says this world
began less than two years ago, by rights I should only have come into being moments before I met him, but I remember. The war, my childhood, my sister…”

Kizmel expected him to scoff. Expected Klein to shrug, and say that Kayaba could've simply written “scripts” even for that. But the samurai only sighed, and knelt a discreet few paces away. “Honesty, Kizmel? There’s a lot about you that doesn’t make any sense. Kirito’s told me a little about it, and I know he’s been trying to figure it out since he met you. …So tell me. What’s your side of the story, My Lady?”

So she did. Everything she could think of, from her early childhood with Tilnel and their parents, to training as a Knight, to fighting in the long war with the Forest Elves. Tilnel's marriage to a lout of a Wolf Handler, her own study of her people's lore from before the Great Separation…

The battle that had claimed Tilnel's life, a month before Kirito and Asuna had charged into her life to save her from a Forest Elf.

Somewhere in the telling, they'd moved to one of the pews arrayed in the cathedral's center. Tears were slowly falling down Kizmel's face, as somewhere in the telling she'd realized something else.

“I… don't know what to think,” she whispered. “Klein… I see now what other natives of Aincrad truly are, even among my own people. Thinking back… growing up, only Tilnel and our parents had the—the depth the Swordmasters possess. Not even Queen Idhrendis was so 'real'. Even so, I remember, Klein. Can all of that truly have been written into my memories as if they were pages in a book?”

“That much history? Gotta say, it's weird.” Klein scratched at the stubble on his chin, a pensive look on his face. “This is supposed to be the biggest game ever, but that kinda detail, for one NPC? Even if it's possible, it's weird.” He shrugged, and leaned against the back of the pew with a sigh.

“Course, to hear Kirito tell it, you haven't made sense from day one.”

Under other circumstances, Kizmel might've felt insulted. Now, she was just desperate for answers—anything to give back a feeling of balance to a world gone mad. “Tell me, please. I need to know, Klein.”

He shrugged again, looking up at the stone ceiling high above. “Keep in mind, Kirito and the Rat are the ones to talk to for details, but… even I can tell you're not what an AI—artificial intelligence—oughta be, Kizmel. You're too… human. Or elf, whichever, don't give me that look… Kizmel. You sleep, right?”

She blinked at him. “Of course I do. What manner of creature would not?”

“One that doesn't have flesh and blood,” Klein said dryly. “Yeah, sure, us Swordmasters get to ignore most of those pesky limits with our SAO avatars, too—but we still have brains. Sleep catches up sooner or later. You? If your mind is data on a server, you shouldn't need sleep.”

What, exactly, a “server” was, Kizmel still wasn't quite sure. She did know in the abstract what machines were, though, so she thought she began to see his point. As well suggest that a cart needed to rest its wheels, were there no need for a horse pulling it.

“Another thing. You're not any smarter than we are.” At that, Kizmel managed a halfhearted glare, which he fended off with a brief grin and a raised hand. “Lemme try that again. A computer 'thinks' a hell of a lot faster than a human, Kizmel. If you're an AI, by rights you should find the rest of pretty slow-witted.”
“…Much as actions taken via Mystic Scribing are far faster than anything that might be done by hand,” she said slowly.

“Yep. Exactly. And one more thing.” Klein sat up straight, turning to favor her with a serious look. “Kizmel. You just dropped more history on me than the entire Elf War quest has for lore—but you couldn’t tell me conversations word-for-word. A computer never forgets. Well, data gets corrupted sometimes, but believe me, that’s not like fading memory.” He lifted both hands, slowly shaking his head. “This is one of the reasons Kirito never tried telling you the truth, Kizmel. Because you don’t make sense. You’re not what an AI should be, but you’re obviously not a player in disguise, so…”

Half of what he was telling her was still going over her head. The other half… Some of it is almost reassuring. Some only makes this more confusing. Am I somehow real? Or am I…?

Even as Kizmel wanted to believe Klein’s words meant she was different from others born to Aincrad, a hideous thought occurred to her. Kirito and Argo both said Kayaba was directly interfering with our quest. Could he have simply taken an interest in Kirito’s behavior, and added to “my” life over time?

Then, even if “my” memories are more than what any other “NPC” would have, I could just as well be such an interchangeable object, distinguished only by how long I’ve survived…

Abruptly, Kizmel came to her feet, shaking her head rapidly. “I don’t know what to think, Klein,” she whispered. “Am I real? Am I just another doll?” She remembered one of PoH’s killers, XaXa, calling her that once—remembered Keita repeating it, not so long before—and flinched. “How can this world be fake? Yet… how can a world filled with dolls be anything else? I… I…”

Klein hopped off the pew, and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “C’mon, Kizmel. Let’s take a walk.”

The thought of facing the world outside the cathedral, with its mix of the most downtrodden of the Swordmasters and dolls she had once thought were people, made her stomach clench. Even so, Kizmel let the samurai guide her toward the door, knowing there was nothing to be gained simply hiding away. “Where are we going?”

“Oh… a few places. Dunno if I can answer all your questions, Kizmel, but… maybe settling a couple of them will help. Can’t promise the truth will be the one you want, but I think Kirito would tell you it’s better to know than to wonder.”

…Yes. I cannot hope to move forward until I learn what the path is made of. Better to know I walk barefoot on thorns than to step into the sand and fall…

By rights, the very idea of the Black Swordsman facing off against the Flash should’ve drawn a huge crowd. Even those who didn’t know who Kirito was would be like moths to a flame if they heard about someone challenging Asuna, given her visibility and popularity. Some probably would’ve attacked Kirito for it, if they thought they could get away with it.

Which was probably exactly why he’d insisted on taking their duel elsewhere. The training grounds of Moongleam Castle in the Dark Elf Royal Capital were a bit of an odd choice, but it at least made sense from the perspective of staying out of sight. Even so long after the frontline had moved beyond the floors of the Elf War questline, few players had ever completed it.

Surrounded by shining black stone, lit by deep blue torches, and watched only by a handful of Dark Elf soldiers indulging programmed curiosity, Asuna stood at one end of a small arena. She wore the full red-trimmed white uniform of the Knights of Blood, rapier Queensguard sheathed on her left hip.
Across from her, Kirito was dressed like a shadow as always, long black coat shifting slightly in an unseen breeze. Just like he had from the day she’d met him, he wore a simple one-handed sword slung over his back.

This wasn't the first time Asuna had faced her old partner on the other side of a duel. Back in the days when they were the only ones who knew of PoH and his conspiracy, they'd trained extensively in PvP, trying to prepare themselves to fight the would-be murderers. Back then, though, that was all it had been: preparation to fight orange players.

Back then, Kirito hadn't looked at her with a cold fury smoldering in his eyes.

“You're really set on this, aren't you, Kirito-kun,” Asuna said wearily. “You really have to take it this far?”

“Sometimes words aren't good enough, Asuna,” Kirito replied coolly. “This is something I have to show you. Or you'll never understand.”

His voice was colder than she'd heard from him in a long, long time. This wasn't the Beater talking; the Beater was theatrical, deliberately playing up a flamboyant sense of style and arrogance to throw people off. This was real anger, like she hadn't seen in him since the day the Fallen Elf King had stabbed Kizmel with a poisoned blade.

I can't even really blame him for that. It had to be said, he should have said it himself a long time ago… but that's easy to say, isn't it? Not so easy to know Kizmel's hurting, and it's partly my fault.

...But why fight a duel over it? What's that going to do to help Kizmel?

Kirito didn't seem interested in saying anything else, though. Opening his menu, he flipped through tabs, then stabbed one finger down. A window promptly appeared in front of Asuna, indicating a request for a one-on-one duel. First Strike was the type selected, which she supposed made sense; both of them were skilled enough, strong enough, that even a Half-Finish match stood a chance of being lethal if a single wrong move were made.

She didn't have to do this. As far as she could tell, there was no reason to do this. There was absolutely nothing to be gained from indulging her old partner in a strange whim. Yet somehow, she felt no hesitation, now that it had come this far. Maybe it was a sense of obligation, after being party to what had happened. Maybe it was knowing Kirito seldom did anything without a good reason.

Maybe it was just her own stubborn pride, as a swordswoman and as someone who had come so far just to be herself.

Shoving her doubts into a locked box in her mind, Asuna tapped [YES].

A sixty-second countdown appeared in the air above and between them. She was quick to draw Queensguard, even as Kirito drew a dark-edged sword whose name she hadn't yet heard. Choosing what to do from there wasn't so quick, though; certainly not as quick as it might've been against anyone else.

Linear was a good opening move, especially with her own speed. Against anyone else, she might well have done it. But the very first thing Kirito had ever seen her do was spam Linear against Kobolds on the First Floor; he knew better than anyone what she'd do with it.

She could wait to see his first move, maybe. Like her, Kirito hadn't settled into a clear pre-motion yet, though, so predicting it would be tricky. It would also mean surrendering the initiative, something she instinctively rejected.
**Flashing Penetrator would be too obvious, and take too long to set up. I could try Linear anyway, I've always been a little faster than he is... but those crazy reflexes of his probably still know how to handle that. ...Okay, then. Let's try this, instead.**

Kirito’s stance was still neutral. Asuna, though, finally moved as the countdown reached the thirty-second mark. Lowering her center of gravity, she moved one foot back as though preparing to run, extended her free hand ahead of her, and pulled her rapier close to her shoulder.

It was faint, but she thought she saw his forehead crease at that. Her stance was similar to that of Flashing Penetrator, but her blade was too high. If he hadn’t been keeping up with Rapier Skills, it was entirely possible he didn’t even know what she was doing.

As the count dropped below ten seconds, Asuna fixated on that chance. She knew her old partner: she’d need every gram of speed and tidbit of unexpected skill to land the first strike.

Five seconds. Kirito’s sword finally moved, going down and to the left as if preparing for a backhanded slash. Asuna might’ve smiled to herself, if circumstances had been different. This pre-motion, she recognized.

Their swords began to glow, hers white, his blue, and with a buzz the count hit zero.

Asuna blazed forward instantly. In a contest of reflexes, the Black Swordsman would win every time, but when both of them were already prepared, she was first off the mark. Racing across the stone floor, propelled by the System Assist, her AGI stat, and sheer determination, she thrust her rapier forward.

Almost a Linear. Close enough to a Linear to fool the reflexes, but at just a different enough angle to get through anyway.

Which was probably the only reason the Shooting Star collided with Kirito’s upward-swinging Rage Spike, instead of her partner’s skill catching her under the arm and lopping her limb off.

If she had been using a Linear, it was anyone's guess which blow would actually have counted as the First Strike. Kirito had shifted his own body enough she might well have missed. Instead, their skills clashed and rebounded, sending them skidding away from each other on the smooth stone.

At least Asuna had the satisfaction of seeing surprise break through the cold in Kirito's eyes, if only for an instant.

Then his reflexes caught up, and she had to employ every bit of her own speed to fend off his attempt at a Sharp Nail’s inverted triangle. Recognizing the beginning from all the times they’d fought together, she blurred into a precise Linear to disrupt the skill before he could even finish the first slash.

It was her turn, then, to take the initiative, dancing in while he was still recovering to deliver the high-low double-stab of a Diagonal Sting. Unable to launch a new skill of his own yet, Kirito whirled away from it instead, using the momentum from their last rebound.

Asuna was undeterred, pressing the attack while he was still off-balance. His reflexes were the fastest she’d ever seen, but her speed once in motion had always been greater, and now she used that to her advantage. Following Kirito as he retreated, she unleashed the horizontal cousin of her previous attack, the Parallel Sting, aiming to break through his guard on one side or the other.

A startlingly-fast Snake Bite *snicker-snacked* against her Queensguard, almost tearing the rapier from her grip. It was Asuna’s turn to spin with an impact, accepting it instead of fighting it. She turned it
into a ducking pirouette, using it to slash a Streak at Kirito's legs.

He jumped it, evading the skill at the expense of being able to start another of his own, giving Asuna the time she needed to recover and start one more. Quadruple Pain, this time, four rapid stabs that could well have managed a decisive Stun even in a Half-Finish duel.

Kirito countered it blow-for-blow with a Vertical Square—yet countering was the best he could manage, and Asuna perversely found herself starting to smile.

When they'd first met, over the course of the months they'd been a team, Asuna's goal had been to reach Kirito's level. To be able to fight as he did, to understand the world of Sword Art Online well enough not to need his help to survive. She'd swiftly reached the point of pulling her weight, but when she'd joined the Knights of Blood she'd still been left with the question of just where she stood, compared to him.

Now I know. Whatever happens, I know I have that strength now. I won't lose, not to this world, and not to him!

She kept the momentum for a good thirty seconds after that, an eternity in a duel. His reflexes were as blinding as ever, but that did no good when she didn't give him time to swing his sword. He countered her, again and again, never letting the decisive blow through, yet he never had the time to launch the kind of skill that would break right through her own guard.

There was a bad moment when Kirito unexpectedly switched to using entirely basic attacks, eschewing Sword Skills entirely, but even there Asuna's speed was a match. More than that, really, without the System Assist bolstering his, and without post-motion slowing hers.

He mixed things up with a few Martial Arts skills in the middle. If anything, that did him even less good; there weren't that many skills in that category, and she knew all of them. She fell back from the Gengetsu's backflip, spun aside from Suigetsu's roundhouse, and peppered him with thrusts as he turned those skills' backlashes into impressive acrobatics.

A fleeting glance at the timer hanging above them showed Asuna the count was running short. Soon it would end in a draw, if nothing changed, and something in her rebelled at that. At the same time, she noticed that the cold anger in Kirito's eyes never flickered—until the moment the time remaining hit twenty seconds.

Then his eyes narrowed, and he abruptly launched another Gengetsu. It did nothing but catch another Linear with the sole of his boot, leaving her to frown in consternation as he backflipped away again. In that flip, though, she saw his left hand gesturing rapidly, as if bringing up his menu mid-acrobatics.

Landing neatly on his feet, light flared by Kirito's left shoulder. Asuna's eyes widened, even as his left hand flashed up—and with a loud “Kiai!” that broke the duel's silence, he launched himself at her one more time.

Out of all the floors of Aincrad that the Swordmasters had so far cleared, Kizmel would never have expected it to be the Fifty-First Floor to which Klein led her after inviting her into a temporary party. Considering it was on that floor that Kirito had been perhaps the most relaxed she'd ever seen him, and its nature as speculated by the Swordmasters, she had no clue how it might hold relevance to her quest.

As she and Klein separated briefly to change into attire more appropriate for the floor's conditions, she darkly hoped the samurai had a good reason for taking her there. She was depressed enough as it
was, without tainting the happy memories she had of the Fifty-First Floor's beaches and calm waters.

She kept her peace, though, until they reached Ousetta Island's docks. Fuurinkazan's sailboat, Kusanagi, was waiting for them, though there was no sign of the rest of the guild. “What are we doing here, Klein?” she asked at last, as she followed him aboard.

“You want to know for sure the truth of this world, Kizmel, there's one way I don't think will leave you with any doubts.” Despite the lack of extra hands, Klein went about readying the boat for launch with a competence that reminded her again there was a reason he was guildmaster of the only frontline guild with no casualties. “Sorry, I know it's a long trip, but this is best option I can think of.”

Ominous. And Kizmel didn't care for the idea of a long journey with nothing to do but brood, reminded constantly of happier voyages. So far, though, Klein had been surprisingly insightful, so she chose to trust that he knew what he was doing here, as well.

*Insofar as I can trust anything—or anyone—at all, she thought miserably, settling into a watchful position by Kusanagi's mast. Yet I have no choice. I can't trust my own senses now. I can only hope that with the “truth” out, the Swordmasters will have no further need of lies.*

As Klein turned Kusanagi toward the northwest, Kizmel couldn't decide which worldview she truly wanted proven. One way or another, she'd been lied to, either before or that day. If the new “truth” was reality, she was just a part of a dreamworld rushing to an inevitable end; if it was the old, she was trapped in a world that was real, but had felt emptier with every month she spent among the Swordmasters.

*Kirito never lied to me.*

Watching the waves go by, her only distractions the occasional lethal fish leaping up to be skewered by her saber, she tried not to think about Keita's spiteful words. Either possibility of her world's nature was now miserable enough as it was, without pondering a more personal existential crisis at the same time.

Though deep down, she knew this journey would only postpone it. Distractions, Kizmel had learned the hard way, only lasted so long.

It was mildly interesting when, two hours into the voyage, Klein took one hand from the boat's wheel long enough to open his menu and materialize an item. It was surprising enough to rouse her from her dark thoughts to realize it was a familiar compass. “Klein…?”

“Keep an eye on that for me, will ya? Kinda hard to steer and watch the compass at the same time.” Klein kept his gaze ahead, doing his part to watch out for unexpected monster attacks. “And try not to lose it, Fuurinkazan hasn't completed that questline yet. The Rat tells me it's not as crazy as what you guys went through, but we kinda need to know where we're going.”

Confused, Kizmel complied, watching the arrow on the compass and occasionally calling out course corrections. *This leads only to Kobayashi's mooring at Haze Point, she thought. That ship was destroyed. What purpose is there now in going there? Is there something in the wreckage he thinks I should see?*

By the time Kusanagi approached the deep fog surrounding Haze Point, though, something began to itch in her mind. There was a connection, she was sure, something about the Swordmasters' behavior that had always puzzled her, but she'd never quite given conscious attention. Something so basic she’d ignored it—or perhaps, something she knew deep down would shake her world.
After all, part of me knew months ago something was wrong with this world. I just thought it was from Kayaba's meddling, not fundamental. …Or maybe I just didn't want to see it.

The fog parted abruptly, just as it had when she'd last come to Haze Point. Even though she'd been expecting that much, Kizmel still took a step back in shock, as Kobayashi's bow loomed into view, hale and whole.

Considering she'd last seen the ship exploding into burning debris, she thought she was entitled to her surprise. “What… How…”

“The Kobayashi you saw was just the one this world created for your party's quest, Kizmel.” Klein stepped away from the wheel, tossed Kusanagi's anchor over the side, and stepped up onto the deck with her. “Even we can't turn back time, but anything that exists in this world, Kayaba can just make again. And more than one at a time, some places.”

“What… do you mean?” Kizmel couldn't look at him. Couldn't tear her gaze from the irrefutable proof that something in her world was not right. No charm left to anyone in Aincrad could simply conjure up an entire ship that way, after all. Not a perfect copy.

“We call 'em 'instances'. Maps separate from Aincrad's regular floors, tailor-made for a given party. Mostly so big events can happen different ways at the same time—like ships blowing up. A game wouldn't be any fun if only the first player could do something, right?” Kizmel could barely see, in the corner of one eye, Klein gesturing toward the surrounding mist. “That fog? It's to hide the transition from the shared map to an instance. …You can probably remember a few others.”

Swallowing hard, Kizmel could only nod. The Dark Elf camp where she had first stayed with Kirito and Asuna came to mind at once, as did Yofel Castle. Charms of my people, I was told growing up, she thought bitterly. Lies from long before I ever met the Swordmasters… if those memories are even real.

Another part of what Klein had said clicked into place then, and as had happened all too many times that day alone, she felt a chill in her veins. “So that's how Argo makes her living,” she heard her own voice whisper. “I always wondered what relevance much of her information had, beyond tales for scholars to collect. Everything we've done… can simply be done again.”

“ Mostly, yeah.” It was a mercy, perhaps, that Klein just said it straight out. A cold, cruel mercy, but still better than prevarication at this late date. “Field and Floor Bosses don't come back, but regular quests? Yeah. There's always another time. …Truth is, Fuurinkazan's probably done most of the ones you and Kirito did, back in the day.”

Strength left Kizmel's limbs, and she sank to her knees. One thing for Lind, for Asuna, for even Kirito to tell her. To see with her own eyes, to put together the facts that had always been just barely beyond her reach… “It's true, then,” she whispered, vision clouding with unshed tears. “If everything in this world is just a game that begins anew for every 'player', then to others my people are still at war. And if they are, then somewhere, I, too, must be…”

Lind was right. Keita was right. Even that murderer, XaXa. In the end, I'm nothing but a doll like the others. Were I to die, doubtless another “me” would simply take my place. If this vast world is a construct, then how much harder is it to give one “NPC” these memories?

No wonder she remembered so many times she'd fought beside Kirito, different from their waking encounter. By whatever accident or machination of Kayaba's, she'd simply inherited the memories of “other” Kizmels who had come before.
Eyes falling closed, Kizmel wanted to weep—only it seemed there was no point. Why cry over such a meaningless existence, after all? Her despair, too, was only an illusion, after all…

A hand on her shoulder made her jump, and she looked up to see Klein staring at her with a serious expression in his eyes. “Don’t give up yet, Kizmel,” he told her. “Don’t you dare give up yet. You have to keep going long enough to smack Kirito for not telling you this sooner. Hell, you need to pick yourself up and hit me, too. I’m supposed to be the reliable goofball, and all I did this time was goof.”

She almost—almost—chocked out a laugh at that. Instead she only coughed, and tried to blink her eyes clear. ‘Why should I bother? If I’m gone, surely Kirito can just go and find another 'me'. I'm just a disposable game piece, am I not?’

He surprised her with a glare. “Okay, now I'm gonna get mad, Kizmel. You… ahh, I guess I can't blame you that much. But I'm not gonna just let that one slide. I'll show you.” Klein squeezed her shoulder, almost hard enough to trigger the “anti-harassment code”, and turned back to the wheel. “I didn't come here to break you. You wanted truth, Kizmel, and this is one of them.

“Now let's go and see another one. I told you, didn't I? You don't make sense.”

Usually, when night fell, Asuna was safely back in the KoB's new headquarters in Granzam, on the Fifty-Fifth Floor. The days when she would be out questing at all hours had ended with her partnership with Kirito; her responsibilities as vice-commander of the Knights of Blood demanded a more regular schedule.

In the wake of her duel with Kirito, she instead found herself back in Dollarah. He had left for parts unknown; she was too distracted by the day’s events, and what she’d learned from the duel, to even try to sleep yet. Under the moonlight reflecting off the underside of the Fifty-Seventh Floor, she sat on the edge of a log cabin’s porch, lost in thought. The things her old partner had told her…

Six Hours Ago

When the duel ended, turned from a stalemate to a decisive victory by Kirito’s last resort, they silently moved to the sidelines of the Dark Elf training grounds, leaving them for the NPCs to practice their scripted routines without interference. Only when they’d found a place to sit and watch did Asuna finally speak.

“How did you do that?” she asked him, eyes still wide with surprise. “There's never been anything about that in the Skill lists floating around. And I've never seen you use anything like that before. So how… why…?”

“I wanted to keep it a secret as long as I could,” Kirito answered, calmly manipulating his menu to once again conceal his trump card. Now that the duel was over, the anger seemed to have drained out of him, leaving only weariness. “I'm not like Heathcliff, Asuna. You of all people should remember what it's like for me when people find out I've got something they don't.”

She opened her mouth to retort, then closed it unhappily. Yes, she remembered all too well. He’d been the scapegoat too many times, in the months they’d been partners, all for the sake of keeping the clearing group from falling apart. Over time he’d faded from the public eye enough to mostly go about unnoticed, but it never took much for it all to flare up again.

Though she'd never told him, that was part of why Asuna had agreed to join the KoB in the first place. She'd hoped, back then, that she might have enough influence with the clearers from that
position to finally put an end to the “Beater” nonsense. …Sometimes she thought it had almost worked.

“You still shouldn't have been surprised by it, though.” Kirito leaned back against an obsidian pillar, gaze drifting idly to the sparring Dark Elves. “Heathcliff has his Holy Sword skill, and nobody's figured out how to unlock it, either. If you'd thought that through, you might have beaten me today.”

Asuna huffed, tacitly conceding the point. She actually had considered, back when Heathcliff first revealed the skill to the KoB, that there might be other skills that hadn't been discovered yet. After five months with no new developments—as far as she knew—though, the question had honestly faded from her mind.

Kirito’s point did nothing to answer her current questions, however. “All right, Kirito-kun. You've got a new trick, and I shouldn't have been so surprised by it. Fine. What exactly does that have to do with today? Unless you're planning to use that on The Geocrawler.” Not that she thought it would do any good. Even he, whatever tricks he'd come up with, had never taken on a full-on boss without backup.

He shook his head. “Asuna,” he said, turning enough to look at her sidelong, “you're not thinking. Don't you see the implications of skills like that? Skills no one else has, or knows how to get?”

Now Asuna was starting to get irritated. First a duel without explanation, now the Socratic method? At a time when any sane person would be doing something to help Kizmel, after what had happened?

Clenching her hands, she turned narrowed eyes on him. “No, I don't,” she said flatly. “If there's something obvious I'm missing, can't you just come out and say it, Kirito-kun?”

He raised his hands, palms up, looking exasperated. “…Well, maybe you wouldn't notice. You know SAO as well as I do now, but not regular games… Okay, okay,” he said hastily, when she opened her mouth to snap at him again. “Asuna. Unique Skills don't make sense. Not from the perspective of gameplay balance.”

She started to open her mouth again, to demand a clearer answer—then snapped it shut with a frown. “…That's just like quests that can only be done once, isn't?” she said slowly. “Like you told me back when we first met Kizmel. It's not fair to other players.”

Kirito turned to face her fully, a glimmer of a smile on his face now. Even if no trace of it reached his eyes, which were still cool and flat. “Exactly, Asuna. There's been limited-edition skills and items in MMOs as long as the genre's been around, but there's always a fair chance for anybody to get them as long as they are available. Nobody would make a game where only one person out of thousands—or millions, in a normal MMO—could get something.”

One piece of the puzzle fell into place, and Asuna found herself nodding. She really didn't know much about games in general, even after over a year trapped in SAO, but it didn't take a hardcore gamer to understand that point. But still… “So how does that matter here? What does it mean for SAO—and why is it so important you had to beat the stuffing out of me over it, Kirito-kun?”

“It means that anyone who thinks of Sword Art Online as a game is wrong, Asuna. And sooner or later, that's going to get us all killed.” He swept out his arm in a wide gesture at the castle around them, and the Dark Elves going about their scripted lives. “Oh, sure, SAO is built on gameplay mechanics. But that's a consequence of the medium. Kayaba said it straight out, before SAO was ever released: 'This might be a game, but it's not something you play.'
“Kayaba created a world, Asuna. We’re not players—we’re characters in a story.”

“Characters in a—” Asuna broke off, inhaling sharply, eyes widening. If she looked at it as a novel, one that just happened to use virtual reality instead of paper as a medium and living people as the characters, then…”A narrative doesn’t have to worry about character balance, just making sure it all fits the plot. …Even if you look at this as Kayaba creating a world and letting it play out by itself, reality doesn't have 'balance', either.”

“That's it, exactly. Kayaba's consistent about giving players a fair chance to win—but in this world, you have to look at it as him being fair as a writer, not a game designer.” Kirito gestured again to the Dark Elves. “You remember as well as I do what happened when we stormed the Twilight Citadel. The threat we found there makes no sense in a game, but stories don't follow the same rules. Neither does reality.”

We stopped that plot, she thought, shivering at the memory. I thought back then that it couldn't be real—but something in me wasn't sure. And if Kirito's right, if we keep acting like that's just flavor text when we know there are things in this world that don't make sense as a game…

Shaking herself free from the memories of that nightmarish battle to end the Elf War, Asuna took another look at the Dark Elves, the people from whom Kizmel—the single most unexpected part of the entire game—had come. Okay, so that means we should be thinking even more outside the box. If this isn't meant to be a “game”, maybe we're supposed to find a different solution to The Geocrawler. We haven't fought a boss that way before, but then Unique Skills didn't start showing up until almost a year in.

Which means Lind might just have the right idea, she thought unhappily. There's an outside-the-box tactic if I ever heard one. …But Kirito wanted to fight me over it, and he said this wasn't just about Kizmel-chan…

“You think there's another way to stop The Geocrawler.” She turned back to Kirito, looking at him thoughtfully. “I know why you don't want to hurt NPCs, even if it doesn't make logical sense. But… there's more than that, isn't there?”

“If this is a story, and we're the heroes… what kind of heroes sacrifice the people they're supposed to protect?”

Simple. To the point. At first it only gave Asuna a sense of chagrin, realizing she hadn't quite followed his point to the obvious conclusion. After letting it sink in for a moment longer, though, she stiffened, remembering another time players had done something “outside the box”.

“If we let The Geocrawler loose,” she said, speaking as much to herself as to Kirito, “it could be that the system would punish us for 'betraying' the NPCs. Or… it might force the system to improvise, and…”

“…Who knows what might happen from there,” Kirito finished. “We can usually predict what happens, at least generally, in clearing. But when we broke the Elf War starter quest by saving Kizmel, all sorts of unexpected things happened. And let's not forget what happened when Morte and Joe killed that town lord back on the Sixth Floor.”

Asuna wasn't likely to forget those events any time soon. The Elf War had done a lot to shape her into who she was as Vice-Commander of the KoB, and that particular incident on the Sixth Floor had nearly gotten them both killed. Both were only sidequests, at that; who knew what might happen if they broke regular progression of floor clearing.
“I know we still haven't found the right answer to fighting The Geocrawler,” Kirito said, turning his attention back to a pair of Dark Elves practicing Saber skills in the center of the training ground. “But I'm sure there is one. We just have to look at this as something other than as a game.” He quirked a small, fleeting smile. “Or maybe more like a single-player RPG. If you're going to think of SAO as a game at all, it's more like that than a regular MMO.”

She'd have to take his word for that one, but she thought she got his general point. It was possible that she might even manage to convince Lind of it, once she made it clear to him that Kirito hadn't just gone native on them. The DDA guildmaster was arrogant and insensitive, but he could usually be made to see logic.

Though speaking of logic, and an apparent lack thereof…

“So why did you have to fight me over it?” Asuna demanded now, dragging things back to the original question. “I would've believed you if you'd just said all that, Kirito-kun.”

“Maybe so.” Kirito shrugged carelessly. “Though if you ask me, my way was more to the point…” He coughed as she drove an impatient fist into his side, just lightly enough not to count as an attack. “Asuna. Used to be, you'd hesitate at the idea of a duel, remember?”

“Of course.” Back when they first learned of Morte, and PoH, and the mad conspiracy to disrupt the clearing. “I got used to it. I had to.”

“Exactly.” When she blinked in confusion, Kirito sighed. “Asuna. You got used to aiming your sword at people. To striking people with it. Now ask yourself what happens if you get used to treating things that look and act like people as disposable… and what happens when you go back to a world where you're surrounded by millions of people you'll never get to know as more than faces in a crowd.”

Asuna's blood ran cold. Much as she hated SAO for trapping her, she'd come to love some things about it, and its incredible simulation of the real world was part of why. There had been NPCs, once upon a time, that she'd treated as real, besides Kizmel. They'd been so real, it was hard not to.

Then she'd gotten used to the idea that, however real their faces, they really were nothing more than automatons running on scripts too limited to even be called AI. Put that together with a willingness to draw her sword even on other players, if the need arose…

As she pondered the chilling implications of the way the lines between reality and VR were blurring, Kirito abruptly pushed away from the obsidian column. “Think about it, please,” he said, quietly but earnestly. “You always said you didn't want to lose to this world, right? So… don't. Please.”

“…I will. But,” she called, as he started to walk away into the castle's halls, “about Kizmel-chan… Bring her back, Kirito-kun. Please. Just… bring her back.”

Kirito hesitated for a long moment. “I will,” he said finally. “I don't know how yet, but I will. One way or another…” He turned his head, letting her see half a bitter smile. “Truth is, Asuna, I've already lost to this world. I'm going to have to find my own way. And… I have to give Kizmel my answer.”

Huh?

Before Asuna could begin to figure out what that was supposed to mean, he started off again. He left her with one more parting statement before he disappeared, though, calling back, “Oh, the other reason I insisted on the duel? You really did make me kinda angry today, Asuna. Sorry, but this one
I couldn't let go.”

Present Time

Hours later, Asuna was still trying to work through the implications of everything she'd learned in that duel and its aftermath. Fourteen months since he dragged me out of that dungeon, and sometimes I still think I'll never understand this world as well as he does, she thought, idly watching the few NPCs scripted to be out and about so late. Some things never change, I guess.

She still didn't agree with Kirito on everything. In a way, she wasn't sure if he wanted her to. The way he'd said he had “already lost” to Aincrad… But she couldn't deny he'd raised some important points. At the very least, she'd been reminded not to be complacent about what she—and the other clearers—thought was confirmed fact about gameplay.

Kirito-kun may be right about the risks if we let The Geocrawler in here, too. If there's anything that Kayaba would react to, it's that. I'll have to bring that up at tomorrow's meeting. …We still need a strategy, though. We've been stalemated for three days now as it is.

Asuna sighed, turning her gaze to the stone floor high above. It certainly didn't help that they were probably down a minimum of two clearers for at least the next couple of days. Maybe more, on both counts; Kirito's party wasn't likely to come back while one was still missing, and who knew what Klein was up to. That was quite a hole in their frontline.

“Is something wrong, Swordmaster-san?”

She jolted, dropping her eyes to find a village girl looking at her curiously. Did I really look so down an NPC noticed? …Well, the system does seem able to pick up on moods sometimes, that's how the emotional expression stuff works. “Um, kind of,” she said aloud. “I've just got a lot on my mind, I can't get to sleep yet.”

Whether that was something a regular NPC could understand, Asuna wasn't sure. Probably not. A couple of NPCs among the Dark Elves had shown unusual insight, if nowhere close to Kizmel, but she hadn't seen any in a long time, and they'd been few and far between then.

Surprisingly, though, the girl nodded, smiling sympathetically. “That's too bad. But… maybe I can help? There's this lullaby that always works for me.” Without waiting for a reply, she took a deep breath, and began, “The southern traveling bard, with a lute in his hand, with a brush of silver threads, sleep awaits…”

Asuna blinked. Stared. Sat back with another sigh, as she realized what must've happened.

I triggered a minor singing event. Flavor text… that's just so fitting right now. …Eh?

“Even the serpent armored in iron…”

Eyes widening, Asuna's attention was suddenly riveted to the “lullaby”. A lullaby that just happened to mention something that sounded an awful lot like the very boss whose armored hide—and the clearers' inability to pierce it—had set off the day's mess to begin with.

As the village girl continued on into a second verse, Asuna did her best to catch every word. I'm an idiot! We're all idiots! We've gotten boss info from minor quests before; why didn't any of us ever think to just ask regular townspeople? Sure, I don't know regular RPGs, but practically everybody else on the frontline does!

When the girl finished the song, she favored Asuna with another smile. “Did that help, Swordmaster-
san? I know it wasn't much, but it always makes me feel better when my mom sings it!”

“You've helped me a lot, actually,” Asuna told her sincerely, giving her a deep, seated bow. “Thank you very much.”

Giggling, the girl skipped off, leaving the Vice-Commander of the KoB to sag with released tension. If she understood that right, she'd just stumbled on the key to defeating The Geocrawler, completely by accident. That, finally, was one problem she had a handle on.

Climbing to her feet, she set off for the inn the KoB leadership was using. It was too late to tell anyone then, but as soon as everyone was up in the morning, she'd lay out her own plan.

Deep down, though, she wasn't as buoyed as she would've liked by the development. With that much out of the way, Kizmel's crisis was looming larger in her heart than ever. Her elven friend's crisis—and what Kirito had said to her as he left. What she'd seen, though she was sure he hadn't meant for her to.

...It's been a long time since I've seen Kirito-kun cry...

After burning out his fury in his duel with Asuna, Kirito had returned to the inn his party had been using in the central town of the Fifty-Sixth Floor, Eastwood. Though he knew better, deep down he'd hoped to find that Kizmel had returned, to find her waiting for him in the room they shared by habit.

Of course, when he opened that door on the second floor of the Tumbleweed Inn, all that had greeted him was silent emptiness. There was no sign she'd been back for even a moment, in the endless hours since they'd left that morning.

In his partner's absence, Kirito was just as glad to see no sign Philia or Rain had returned to their room, either. He didn't know what they were up to, and just then he didn't care. If they weren't there, then there was no one to see him sit heavily on the edge of his bed, hang his head, and cry.

He'd failed more times than he liked to remember, since the day Kayaba Akihiko trapped them in his twisted death game. Recognition of Illfang's change in weapon had come just a second too late for Diavel; the Black Cats had died because his instincts were just a little too slow on the uptake. Hafner had sacrificed himself to protect him and his partner. By now, he was almost used to losing people to Aincrad. But this time was different.

All those deaths, Kirito could at some level acknowledge weren't entirely his fault, that no one could predict everything SAO would throw at them at every moment. At the most basic level, while his actions could have saved them, it was the game that had killed them.

Staring down at clenched fists through his own tears, Kirito didn't have even that comfort now. Kizmel was alive—but she was broken, and it was all his fault. However angry he was at Lind and Asuna for pushing the issue, in the end he knew it was his own fault.

I did it to her, he thought miserably. I was too scared to tell her the truth. Scared she couldn't handle the truth. Scared she'd hate me for it. I was so scared of being honest that I did to her exactly what was done to me.

No. No, what he'd done was worse. In his more honest moments, Kirito had to admit his parents—Suguha's parents—had had no way of anticipating how he'd take the news that he was adopted. He had no such excuse. He'd had a pretty good idea of what it would be like to suddenly learn such a devastating truth, and so for over a year he'd led Kizmel on.
Okay, yeah, early on, I didn't know for sure if she could even comprehend it. I damn well knew by the time we met the Black Cats, though. I should've told her then. I should've told her... before things got so far.

I never lied to her. I told her as much truth as I could, and I dodged, and I outright said I couldn't answer sometimes, but I never lied. Except by not saying anything, I told the biggest lie of all.

Kirito lifted his head to look at Kizmel's empty bed, and remembered when it had been Asuna who'd been his constant companion. Everything he'd said to her about why he'd dueled her was true—but he'd also done it to distract her, so that she wouldn't say what he knew she would, and he didn't want to hear. Asuna had always demanded he tell her the truth, however painful.

None of it was as painful as knowing Lind was right to call me out for not telling Kizmel the truth. Of all people, he was the one who had it right this time...

None of it was as painful as seeing the hurt, the betrayal, in Kizmel's eyes, before she turned her back on him.

The hours passed as Kirito wallowed in depression. By the time night had fallen on Eastwood, he was seated at the room's desk by the window, finally coming to the conclusion he really had no idea how to handle his own emotions. When he'd gone through what Kizmel was now suffering, he'd run away until detachment built a wall against the pain. When SAO trapped him, he and Asuna had managed to steady each other. Since she'd joined the KoB, Kizmel had always been there to support him.

Her empty bed mocked him. So many nights they'd shared a room, chatting together—just the two of them—even after Philia and Rain made themselves a permanent fixture. After Asuna had left, Kizmel had kept at bay the loneliness he'd lived with ever since he'd learned that terrible truth.

More than that. Somehow, over the long months it had been just the two of them, Kizmel had filled a void he hadn't even known was there.

Kirito uttered a dry, bitter laugh; the first sound he'd made since the crying stopped hours before. I really am hopeless alone, aren't I? I'm not specced for handling emotions. If I was, I'd have known what to say when Kizmel said... that... when we spent the night in Moongleam Castle.

...No. I knew what to say. I just couldn't say it. Not when we weren't on equal footing. When I was still lying to her. Now she knows, but it's too late, and I really don't know what to do anymore.

I... need her.

A soft knock at the door roused Kirito from his misery, and with a fleeting stab of hope he turned to face it. That hope was quickly dashed, though, when the door opened to let in Philia and Rain, not Kizmel. Where they'd been, he couldn't guess. Why they were both wearing swimsuits, he didn't have the energy to wonder about.

“Thought you'd be here, Kirito,” Philia said quietly, moving to sit on his bed. “Um... have you been here all day?”

“Not quite.” He summoned up a hollow smile. “I tried beating the stuffing out of Asuna and told her what-for, before I came back here.”

Easing herself onto Kizmel's bed, Rain lifted one red eyebrow. “Funny, when I saw her on the way here she looked like she just had some kind of revelation. Doesn't sound like somebody who just had their ego crushed, if you ask me.”
Kirito shrugged wearily, letting the forced smile fade. “It was hours ago. Maybe something I said gave her an idea. Probably better than anything I’ve managed today.” He hesitated, knowing the answer to the question he was about to ask. “Have either of you heard…?”

“Not a word, sorry,” Philia replied, shaking her head. “We were with Sachi part of the day, and she didn't hear anything from Klein, either. …Sorry.”

“Not your fault. This one's on me. Lind was right about that, at least.”

“Yep. He kinda was, Kirito.” Rain's words drew a sharp look from Philia, but the redhead's raised hand cut the treasure hunter's retort short. “Sorry, guys, but he was. If anybody should've made an effort to tell Kizmel the truth, it was you, Kirito. She loves you, y'know.”

Kirito flinched. That was the first time anyone had flat-out said it in plain Japanese. Even Kizmel had used Sindarin, and he was pretty sure he knew why. *She knew I wasn't ready, so she didn't want to force me. She just… wanted me to know she was waiting for me.*

“Doesn't matter now, though, does it?” he said, hanging his head. “I screwed up. I promised Asuna I'd bring Kizmel back, there's something I need to tell her myself… but it's too late for that, isn't it?”

He heard a sigh. Two quick, light footsteps. Then there was a hand on his collar, lifting him bodily from his chair. He had just a brief moment to see Rain glaring at him, before her palm slapped him across the face with every gram of her STR stat.

In VR, even in the death game *SAO* had become, it didn't actually hurt, and within a safe area it couldn't do any damage. It did spin him around hard enough to knock him off his feet, sending him tumbling onto his bed ahead of a hastily-retreating Philia.

“Too late?” Rain spat, as angry as Kirito had ever heard her. “Don't give me that! Yeah, you screwed up, you stabbed her in the back, but guess what?! You, of all people, should know what she's going to want when she gets her head on straight again!”

Shaking his head in a vain effort to pull out of the Tumble she'd put him in, Kirito did manage to get her back in his peripheral vision. “Rain…?”

“I don't know what really went down with your family,” she said, talking right over him. “But I can tell you want to get back to them more than almost anything. Well, y'know what? We—you—are all the family Kizmel's got right now. If there's any stability left in this world for her, it's you.” Rain reached down and yanked Kirito back to his feet, holding him there when the Tumble still didn't let go. “So let me tell you something, Kirito: if you're okay with how things are now, just leave her be. Prove you really are just a coward and a liar.

“But if you want her back? If you want to give her that answer? *Go get her.*” Red eyes bored mercilessly into onyx. “Even a knight needs their own knight sometimes. If you ever want to face your sister again, go bring back Kizmel. Or you really *don't* deserve to see either of them again. You hear me?”

From the Fifty-First Floor and the reality she had been forced to confront there, Kizmel could not even have guessed where Klein next intended to lead her. This was a day where nothing went according to her expectations; by then she'd more or less given up on having any.

Whatever speculations she might've had certainly had not included a visit to Zumfut, however. The central human town on Aincrad's Third Floor, it was a place she hadn't seen in over a year. At first, it didn't even seem relevant.
Klein quickly headed outside of the town, though, taking her into the forests that led back to where the Second Floor's labyrinth opened onto the Third. The realization that they were going to the Forest of Wavering Mists... that struck her with a sense of nostalgia strong enough to be painful even through the Swordmasters' numbness. That Forest was, after all, the very place she had first met Kirito and Asuna.

As she followed the samurai deeper into the misty, confusing woods, Kizmel felt a sense of growing dread. There was only one reason she could think of to go to that place, and it was one that had haunted her nightmares long before she had any glimmering of the truth.

“I know you don't really wanna see this, Kizmel,” Klein said softly, not looking back. “But trust me. It's important.”

She supposed it was. There was little question in her mind what they were going to see, but one way or another she knew she needed to. Even if it was only the final blow that sent her into despair.

Seeing Kobayashi, still afloat despite having last seen her blown to pieces, had already finished her doubts about the nature of Aincrad. How she felt about it, she wasn't even sure; as horrifying as it had been, there was undeniably a sense of relief at having the question answered.

She feared she would have no such relief after this. After all, Kobayashi proved Aincrad always reset to what had come before, to the tiniest detail. As Lind had said, even the dead returned exactly as they were.

Kizmel found it perversely irritating she couldn't even distract herself with the monsters they fought along the way. The treants that menaced those reaching the Third Floor for the first time couldn't even truly be called a nuisance for two warriors just back from the Fifty-Sixth Floor. Between them, Sword Skills were hardly necessary at all.

That left their attention free to listen. Not for treants or wolves, or even spiders, the strongest of which would be hard-pressed to even scratch them. Not for monsters, no, but for...

There, Kizmel thought, long ears twitching. That sound. It could be anyone... but I fear I know all too well what I'll truly see. She abruptly sped up, passing Klein in a silent dash toward a nearby clearing. Despite her heartbeat hammering in her ears, she heard the clash of sword on sword all too clearly.

What she would see, when her vision passed the last trees, she feared would destroy her. Every instinct she had told her not to look, not to confront the doppelgänger she knew in her heart was waiting for her. But she could no longer look away. She couldn't live like this, forever unsure if she was one or many.

Kizmel feared she wouldn't survive it. Yet she had to know. Slowing enough so that even elven ears couldn't hear her passage, she pressed up against a tree, and with a final deep breath, peered around it to see the warriors clashing steel.

Time and again, she'd seen this battle. More than she cared to recall in her dreams, in which she died under Kirito's sad eyes; one awake, as he and Asuna saved her life. Yet another, she was sure would be no different—and indeed, the first thing to come into view was a Forest Elven Hallowed Knight. Tall and muscular, pale-haired and clad in golden armor and green cloth. Kizmel knew that face well and armor well, as often as she'd fought that duel in her dreams.

With a familiar roar of fury, the Forest Elf swung his longsword, battering at his foe, who wielded a saber from just out of sight. He pushed forward, stepped to the side, and spun as if to change places...
with the other. The saber's wielder swept into Kizmel's field of view—

Lilac hair. Dark skin. Black-and-purple armor with heavy saber and kite shield.

A tall figure, with muscles that spoke of brute strength more than elegance and endurance. A face which Kizmel had never seen before. Not even in a mirror, or reflected in Kirito's eyes.

Tall, proud—and male.

*It's... not me...?*

Chapter End Notes

"Elegaia", for the curious, is the Greek root of "Elegy". It seemed appropriate, for a chapter which so painfully smashed the status quo.

The general scenario at the start is taken from Material Edition 2. All place names on the Fifty-Sixth Floor are out of my own head, and yes, blatant references to Westerns in general and Clint Eastwood in particular. It seemed fitting.

I will admit Kirito's discussion with Asuna about the nature of SAO is partly an author tract. So often I see the series' detractors complaining about how this aspect or that would never happen in a "real" MMO--but SAO is not, and was never intended to be, a "game". It only needed to look like one until the trap was sprung. When considering what makes sense in SAO, it must always be remembered Kayaba was creating a world, not a game. Unique Skills aren't "fair" to individual players, as would be the focus in a game, but looking at them from the perspective of saving the playerbase as a whole paints a rather different picture.

This marks the point where Duet officially departs from canon with its backstory, incidentally. Basic rule of thumb is that it is roughly compliant with Progressive through most of Volume 5, but does its own thing for most of the Sixth Floor and beyond. With, of course, a few stops at canon events along the way (Black Cats, Silica, etc.).

One minor curiosity, which I'm not certain I did on purpose: I appear to have somewhat based Kirito's reaction to what he'd done, deliberately or otherwise, to Kizmel on aspects of the Vorkosigan Saga novel A Civil Campaign. Odd, but perhaps fitting.

So. One heck of a downer chapter, I know. I will therefore endeavor to get the next chapter up within the next couple of days, rather than leave people hanging. -Solid
March 6th, 2024

There was something deeply surreal about watching the battle between Dark Elf and Forest play out once more. Whatever her dreams had shown her, Kizmel had always believed that only once had the confrontation truly occurred: only the time Kirito and Asuna had suddenly come to her rescue, saving her from a battle she had expected to lose.

This time, the clash proceeded more the way it had in her dreams. The party of Swordmasters was completely unfamiliar, and in the end the Dark Elf called upon the Holy Tree of Lyusula and sacrificed everything to save the lives of the humans.

Yet even her “dreams” did not match what she saw there, over a year after she had lived it. Kirito was not among the Swordmasters, and the Dark Elf was not her.

Afterward, in a room high up in one of Zumfut's hollow-tree inns, Kizmel sat on the edge of a bed and stared into a mug of hot chocolate. She been sitting there for several minutes, just trying to take in what she'd seen, when she finally spoke. “All right, Klein,” she said softly. “Seeing Kobayashi convinced me of the nature of this world, and those who live in it. But now, seeing that battle once more… I find myself confused again. If 'quests' reset themselves for each Swordmaster, why was that not me?”

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Fuurinkazan’s guildmaster shrugged. “To be honest, that’s something we’ve been wondering for a long time. Well, Kirito, the Vice-Commander, and Argo the Rat, anyway; I didn't hear anything about it until months later. Seems this was one of the first clues Kirito had something was weird about you, though: he and the Vice-Commander stumbled on that not long after they met you, and found the Forest Elf was the same… but the Dark Elf wasn't.”

Kizmel bit back frustration. Or tried to, anyway; she couldn't help a note of impatience when she said, “And? I could see that much for myself. What does it mean?”

Klein raised a placating hand. “Sorry. The point is, from a programming standpoint it would make sense to have them the same every time, or generate both randomly every time. Keeping one but not the other?” He shook his head. “Kirito did some digging… around the time you joined up with him on the Twenty-Sixth Floor, I think. From what the Rat could find, in the beta it was always you—but nobody ever ran into you in the retail version. Except Kirito and the Vice-Commander.”

The term “retail version” wasn't one she was familiar with, but in context with “beta”, Kizmel grasped the essential point. Most importantly, it meant that, at the least, she was “unique” in the current Aincrad, whatever her precise nature truly was.

“They saved me,” she murmured, as much to herself as to Klein. “That… changed something, then. But if it was always 'me', why do I only see Kirito's parties in my dreams? Surely he wasn't always there when I was encountered.”

He flashed a brief grin. “That, I can maybe take a guess at, Kizmel. You only started having those
dreams after meeting him for real, right? Doesn't it make sense you'd dream about the guy who made the biggest impression? As far as I know, nobody else ran the quest more than once, after all.”

Frowning, Kizmel took a long sip of her hot chocolate. *That… does seem plausible. Especially as I remember nothing else from the “beta”. If I experienced it as a kind of dream, well, dreams are seldom remembered with true clarity, are they?*

For the first time since the shattering revelations hours before—a lifetime before, it seemed already—she felt just the tiniest flicker of hope. Everything Klein had shown her supported Lind's words—Kirito's words—about the nature of Aincrad, and those who lived within the Steel Castle. Yet everything also suggested she herself was an anomaly, an exception to the rules.

Kizmel set her mug aside, stood, and walked to the room's window, overlooking Zumfut and the surrounding forest. “So it may be that I truly am… unique,” she whispered. “But even if I am… what does that make me?”

“That's the big question, and it's why I can't say for sure you're not just another NPC, Kizmel.” Klein joined her by the window, a discreet few paces away. “Kirito and Argo have done a lot of digging and brainstorming, and any way you slice it you don't make any sense. Hell, for the first day or two Kirito was afraid you were an accomplice of Kayaba's in disguise.”

Surprise, and no small offense, jolted the elf girl out of her ruminations. “Me, an ally of Kayaba?” she demanded, affronted. “The first I ever heard of the man was when Sachi told me the Swordmasters expected a game. I certainly would never have aided such a treacherous—!”

“Easy there!” The red samurai raised both hands as if to ward her off—an effect marred by the fact that, for whatever insane reason, he was grinning. “He figured out pretty quick you weren't. Somebody on Kayaba's end of things would've known Kirito didn't have his real face in the beta. Those ‘dreams' of yours only made sense if you were for real, or the worst spy ever.”

Mollified, and more than a little surprised by the strength of her own reaction, Kizmel relaxed. As much as she could just then, anyway. If Kirito's mistaken impression had been that early, before they were even truly friends, she supposed she could forgive it. *This once.*

“Anyway,” Klein continued, when it was clear she wasn't going to throw him out the window, “that got ruled out quick. But that didn't exactly answer the question, either. Now, I don't know the technical stuff that well, that's more Kirito and Argo's area, but I do know sapient AI shouldn't be possible yet.”

Lifting one lilac eyebrow, Kizmel inclined her head toward the view out the window, of the deep forests of the Third Floor. “Your people can casually create something on the scale of the Steel Castle, and you think making one doll believe she is alive is too fantastic to be real?”

“Aincrad's just things, Kizmel, one way or the other. Even the animals and mobs might as well be puppets on strings. This is the biggest virtual environment ever created, but that's just information. Put enough books together, you get a library nobody could read in a lifetime. A person?” Klein shook his head. “That should be more processing power than the Steel Castle, and that's if we knew how we ticked. Which we don't, yet. Not nearly well enough to duplicate it, anyway.”

More questions than answers. Kizmel hardly knew what to think at this point. A small part of her found it oddly comforting that the people of the so-called “real” world were hardly gods. A larger part was, slowly, starting to feel hopeful.

Mostly, she was confused. Terribly confused. While she had a growing surety of the nature of
Aincrad, it was scarcely a comforting one, and the more she heard of her own situation, the less she understood. That even the Swordmasters were in the dark didn't help, either.

_Although… maybe it does. At the least, knowing that he had some reason for holding back all this time, for not telling me the truth…_

“I can't tell you what you are, Kizmel.” Klein's words drew her out of her thoughts again, to find him looking at her with a serious expression. “All I can say is that as far as anybody can tell, there's only one of you. And if Keita tries to say you're just a doll one more time, he can go take a flying leap off the edge.”

Kizmel's eyes widened. “You heard…?”

“A bit of it, yeah.” He shrugged uncomfortably. “I was afraid that was gonna happen, when I found out where you went. That little brat's been an obnoxious bastard ever since the Black Cats went down. You won't be hearing anything else out of him.”

She was afraid to ask what he meant by that. Obviously Klein hadn't killed him, but what he might've threatened… _No, on second thought, I don't care. Just his neglect of Sachi warrants whatever Klein did. …And it feels... warm, somehow._

“Anyway. Whatever other NPCs might be, there's no question you're different, Kizmel. What that means? Only advice I can give you is an old saying: _Cogito ergo sum._” Displaying an admirably somber expression in response to her raised eyebrow, he added, “I think, therefore I am. Basically means, if you can even ask if you're real, you must be.”

Three words. Three simple words that cut right to the heart of Kizmel's dilemma, and gave her something to which to cling. _Although… “That's remarkably profound, coming from you, Klein,” she couldn't resist saying._

“Okay, so I got that one from Kirito,” Klein admitted with a sheepish grin. Scratching the back of his head, he said, “Think he might've gotten it from Argo or the Flash… But you know what I mean, right?”

“I do,” she said softly. “Thank you, Klein. That… helps.” She hesitated. “But… what about my memories? Thought might be inexplicable, but surely that could just be data. And if my memories are fake, what does that say about a person built on them?”

“…That's not an answer I can give you. I think that's one you're going to have to find for yourself, Kizmel.” Klein shrugged. "If I were you, though? I'd go back and find stuff from those memories, and see how it feels next to the ones we know you had for real.”

March 7th, 2024

Dawn was one of only two short times of day where the sun could be clearly seen in Aincrad. This morning, it painted Dollarah in light that reminded Asuna of old Jidai Geki movies she'd seen, the kind she'd heard were similar to Hollywood Westerns. Appropriate, she supposed, given the apparent inspiration for the Fifty-Sixth Floor's setting.

Some appreciated that dawn more than others. Of the clearers who'd assembled in the temporary headquarters that morning, it was a tossup who was more annoyed: the various solos, or the Divine Dragons Alliance. Quite a few of them looked like they'd been dragged out of bed way too early.

_Fair enough, I suppose,_ Asuna thought, taking her place at the head of the table, Heathcliff silently
taking his spot behind her. *Everybody was probably expecting to get more sleep today.*

Among the DDA, Lind himself seemed reasonably awake. His fatigue was only betrayed, she thought, by the unusual grumpiness making it through his preferred cool confidence. “All right, Vice-Commander,” he said, when the meeting room's doors had been closed. “It looks like everyone who was going to be here today. May I ask why the time for the meeting was changed? I understood we were going to reconvene this afternoon.”

“That's true,” Asuna acknowledged. “However, things have changed since yesterday, and we need to begin preparations as soon as possible.”

“Preparations for what?” The DDA's highest-ranking tank, Schmidt, frowned. “Don't tell me this is about that solo and his NPC friend. Due respect, but that has nothing to do with us.”

Asuna had to restrain herself from frowning at him. After all, it was the DDA's own guildmaster who had triggered the previous day's events, whatever role she herself had ended up playing in them.

Interestingly, from the wince he almost managed to cover, Lind realized it, too.

She only shook her head, though, refusing to be drawn off-topic. “This has nothing to do with them,” she said firmly. ‘I'm confident Kirito-kun and Fuurinkazan can handle that situation. No, I called you all here early to discuss the new plan for defeating The Geocrawler.”

“New plan?” Now Lind did frown—but it was a speculative one, she thought. “If you say this has nothing to do with Kizmel-san… Did the Rat find something? I assume she's been looking.”

“Not her, no. In fact, I stumbled across the information myself, late last night. Something I need to address first, however.” Asuna paused, mentally reviewing her approach; some of the evidence she had, she wasn't willing to use. Logic, though, she felt should be good enough. “To be honest, part of this is from Kirito-kun. Something he pointed out to me after our duel.”

Something she was more sure than ever he was right about, after what had happened later. If they had used Lind's plan when he'd first suggested it, she never would've found the clue they needed.

“Kirito-kun had a lot more to say,” she went on, “but I'll keep it simple: what do you think Cardinal would do, if we used NPCs as bait?”

She could see more than a few of the other clearers looked skeptical at that, especially among the DDA, but also a few of her own KoB. A couple of the solos, though, were frowning thoughtfully; Asuna made a mental note to look into them later. Anyone who'd run into the odder things in *SAO* probably had useful stories of their own.

It was Lind who gave voice to the questions. “I don't see why it would do anything, Vice-Commander,” he said slowly, tapping his fingers on the map table. “What I suggested yesterday didn't involve any system exploits. Presumably Cardinal's programmed to take that into account, no adjustments needed.”

“You may be right,” Asuna admitted at once; she thought that surprised him, just a little. ‘I'm not so sure. But think about it this way: in Kayaba's story, we're supposed to be liberators of this world. What do you suppose happens if the 'heroes' turn on the people they're supposed to protect?”

A couple of the Divine Dragons scoffed; Orochi in particular rolled his eyes. “Oh, please,” he muttered, just quiet enough to pretend it wasn't meant to be heard. “This game doesn't have karma meters, it doesn't care about things like that…”
“You'd be surprised, Orochi,” Asuna told him coolly. “You weren't on the frontlines back on the Sixth Floor, were you? Ask your guildmaster sometime about what happened when PKers attacked a few quest NPCs in the field. You can go orange for actions that aren't against players directly.”

She wondered why Schmidt paled at that. Her attention was more on his guildmates, though, and the solos; Shivata and Liten, she was glad to see, exchanged uneasy looks. They'd been around for that, and from the look of things so had some of the unaligned clearers.

“You make a compelling argument, Vice-Commander,” Lind said after a moment. His face was a few shades lighter than usual, too, if not nearly as white as Schmidt. “Something that should be tested at some point, if possible—but this is probably not the best time.” He squared his shoulders. “You said you had a plan. What have you found out?”

Her primary rival for tactical command ceding the question quickly settled even those most inclined to disagree, and Asuna smiled thinly. Kirito-kun is right, isn't he? You do like to play the hero, even now, Lind. Aloud, she said, “I heard something very interesting from a local NPC last night. About a lullaby, that can supposedly put even 'the serpent armored in iron' to sleep.”

“What, we're supposed to sing at it?” She didn't recognize the solo who spoke up, beyond him being another of the regulars in boss raid. “What is this, a Zelda game? I mean, there isn't even anything—”

“The 'Chant' Extra Skill.” The voice that interrupted came from the KoB side of the table; Uzala, that was, one of the guild's individual party leaders. Snapping his fingers, he glanced back at the rest of his team. “You remember, right, guys? The guy who dropped out last October, he was talking about Chant.”

It was Asuna's turn to frown. Things had been busy enough back then, with enough of a turnover rate in the guild as the PKer problem started getting attention, that she'd missed a few details. That sounded familiar, though; something about one of the lower-ranked Knights who'd had problems fighting on the frontline…?

“Yeah, I remember now,” another Knight, Sanza, confirmed. “Dunno what happened after that, though.” He directed a shrug at Asuna. “Uzala's right, Vice-Commander. Chant is probably what we're after, here. But where do we find somebody who has it? Even Cooking is more popular a skill than that.”

Asuna very carefully controlled her expression, and after a moment projected another thin smile. “That, ladies and gentlemen, is why I called this meeting early. I don't care if it's a member of one of the guilds here, or the solos. It can even be some low-level player; if this works out, we can protect them well enough. Just find someone, more than one if you can, who knows Chant.

“Then we're bringing this boss down.”

Klein's advice was well-taken. When dawn broke the day after her world was shattered, Kizmel left Zumfut for the Royal Capital on the Ninth Floor—but this time, not to see Moongleam Castle. She had a different destination in mind, in the city's outskirts. Klein came with her as far as the entrance, but left once they'd confirmed one crucial fact.

She was grateful to Fuurinkazan's ever-reliable guildmaster. The rest of the journey, though, would have to be her own.

It had been a long time since Kizmel visited that house, in the commoner district of the Royal Capital. She hadn't been able to bear the thought of returning, after Tilnel's death. The months between the defeat of the Fallen Elves and her departure to join Kirito in the Swordmasters' war,
she'd stayed in the barracks of Moongleam Castle itself.

This, though, was the home in which the two of them had grown up, before service in the Pagoda Knights elevated their station. Only now did Kizmel have the courage to return, a courage bolstered by Klein's confirmation that it was not an instanced map.

Deliberately ignoring the passing Dark Elves on the street, whom even she could now see were only acting by rote, she nervously opened the front door and slipped inside.

Nothing had changed since she last saw it. A house of sturdy stone, paneled on the inside with pine, the wood painstakingly gathered over years from fallen trees. Furniture largely of dark oak, which she had been told in times long past were heirlooms, and she now recognized as simply having been created as they were in place. All of it was the same as she remembered.

_of course it is. Were this “instanced”, it would have hardly existed in the time I was away. If it is “public”, there still has been no one here to disturb anything in many months._

Her mother had died when she and Tilnel were but children; their father, not so long after Kizmel had attained her knighthood. Twenty years and more since, it had been only her and her sister—and then had come the news that the Forest Elves sought the Sanctuary. The theft of the Jade Key, and the fateful mission to the Third Floor, where everything had truly begun.

Kizmel passed through a living room full of memories, glanced wistfully at a kitchen that had never quite produced the variety of food she'd come to take for granted among humans, and climbed the stairs to the second floor. With a pang in her heart, she passed by Tilnel's old room, and came to the door to her own.

It was as she'd remembered it. Mostly; she realized with a start that she'd forgotten the carved wolf that sat on her desk, so long a fixture she hadn't paid it much notice in a long time. Oddly comforted by the discovery—by the reminder of Klein's words of how “machine” memory was flawless, while hers was not—she took in the rest of the scene before her. Her father's old longsword, set on a stand on that same desk; his tall shield, hung carefully on the wall. The bed in which she had not slept in so long.

Going first to her desk, Kizmel gently lifted her father's sword, and drew it from its scabbard. Andvar, a blade he'd told her had been in the family since before the Great Separation. She could remember, distantly, trying to hold that shining blade as a young girl, and her father's wry smile when she could barely even draw it.

_”We had a very strict grandfather, who insisted on passing on the family's kendo style to us. I wasn't really into it, though, and dropped out when I was about ten. He… didn't take it well…”_

A masterwork of Elven smithing, she'd thought then. Now, the only value it held for her was in memory. The second time she'd met Queen Idhrendis, her sovereign was passing on the sword and the shield that went with it as the only remains of her father. Killed in battle against unknown foes, only later found to be Fallen Elves, her father had left her nothing but arms and childhood experiences.

_“Everything I know about really fighting, I learned here…”_

She breathed in nostalgia, allowed herself to revel in the pang the bittersweet memories brought, and carefully set Andvar aside. The reaffirmation of her own memory was welcome, yet it brought with it the question of who, or what, her father truly been. On that, she had begun to harbor dark suspicions.
From the desk and the sword, Kizmel turned to the bookshelves beside her bed. The books on them had been acquired gradually, over most of her childhood and young adulthood; her family had hardly been destitute, but books—especially those she’d come to favor, of things long passed away—were a luxury among their people.

Kizmel had to fight back a thrill of anxiety, reaching for the first book on the shelf. If this world was the illusion it increasingly seemed to be, then this would be a strong sign of whether her own memories were, as well. With hands she couldn’t quite steady, she took down a history of the time of the Great Separation, and slowly lifted the cover.

Such a simple thing as a book that wasn’t empty should have been expected, not something to make her knees buckle with relief. But seeing the histories and legends of Aincrad’s past, as she’d related them to her friends, in fully as much detail as she recalled soon had her sitting heavily on her bed, trembling.

*Klein told me every book in Aincrad was full of detail, but almost all in “English”, the language used in Mystic Scribing. But this… this is a complete book in Sindarin, just as I remember it. Some of these passages I don’t recall, but if anything a lapse in memory is a comfort right now.*

Kizmel flipped through tales of the ancient order of dragon riders, whose relics had driven two of the more memorable quests she had taken on with her partner. Through the legends of their rise and their prime, and the treachery that had ended them even as the Steel Castle took flight. Nothing but stories, she knew now, tales written to give an illusory world a sense of history, but the mere fact of their existence was what she needed.

When she had the strength to stand once again, she put the history book back, and took down another favored tome: a book detailing the constellations of Aincrad’s world, most of them now invisible beyond the Steel Castle’s towering bulk. As she’d told her partner, the stars had fascinated her, however few of them could be still be seen.

*I wonder now, are they truly there? Up above, at the very top, can these stars be seen from the Ruby Palace?*

She wanted to know, Kizmel decided. After everything, she still wanted to see it with her own eyes. The stars, and… many other things.

“I don’t know how it is in this world, but my people find pictures in the patterns of stars. To find our way, and to find something recognizable in a part of the world we hardly knew…”

At length, as the sun rose too high to shine through the window over her bed, she slowly stood once more. There were still many questions she had, about the world, about herself, and about those around her—but she had found at least some peace. Whatever she truly was, it seemed she at least was only one, not a single copy among thousands, and she had found some hope that, however impossible, her existence had not begun the moment two humans had stumbled across her doomed battle.

*I think, therefore I am,* Kizmel mused, stepping over to look out the window at the snowy streets of the Royal Capital. *Someday, I need to find the answer of what, and why, I am. But for today, knowing that I am is enough. The other questions I have… I cannot answer.*

She glanced back at her desk, at the sword Andvar, the sword so like the Anneal Blade that had helped save her life over a year before. It wasn’t just memories of her father, and the questions she now had about him, that made her heart clench at the sight. It left her with a deep longing, a reminder of the ache that had, as much as anything, made her flee from the clearers.
He never lied to me. He evaded, and prevaricated, and told me that I couldn't understand—and that he was afraid I would hate him if I did. But he never, ever lied. Was it because he knew, deep down, this would happen someday? Did he want…?

Reaching a decision, Kizmel crossed to the desk, took up Andvar, and tucked it into the Swordmasters' wonderful “inventory”. Then she moved to another tab in the menu, typed up a short message, and sent it.

There are so many memories here—but those memories stand on a precipice. Whatever I may be, whether what I remember is truth, what does it matter if the world in which I live is fated to end if those I count as friends are victorious? …There are answers I still need, before I can move forward.

Resolved now, shadows of doubt still warring against the faint flame of hope in her heart, she strode out of that room of memories.

It was probably a good thing he'd long been in the habit of keeping odd hours in the interest of finishing quests and keeping up with leveling, Kirito reflected. Without that, spending an entire night without sleep would likely have done him in. As it was, he was tired, but ready.

Ready for what, he still wasn't sure. After Rain had tossed him around the room and torn a verbal strip off him, he'd spent most of the night at the desk in the inn room, thinking. She was right that he needed to go after Kizmel himself, he knew; the only thing worse than what he'd already done to her would be to leave things as they were.

That would be a betrayal of its own. One way or another, Kirito knew he couldn't just leave it with their last meeting. Even if she broke off ties with him completely, first he had to say his piece.

But I've never been any good with words. I'm not specced for that. And even if I was, first I have to find her. This isn't the kind of thing I can do just with a private message.

He'd been able to locate his partner occasionally, since she'd fled the clearers. Kizmel's Cloak of Illusion hid her even from his Friends' List location tracking, but she clearly hadn't had it up the entire time. Except for a long trip across the Fifty-First Floor, though, she hadn't been in one place long enough for him to even try catching up.

For now, Kirito thought, he'd have to wait and see if Klein made contact. The wannabe-samurai might look, and act, the goofball most of the time, but he was far more reliable than the “Black Swordsman” had ever been.

It was nearly noon when a knock at the door startled him out of the light doze he'd finally fallen into. He turned in his chair, but Rain—who, along with Philia, had ended up spending the night on one of the otherwise unoccupied beds—beat him to the knob. She hesitated, frowning faintly at the knock's cadence, but quickly sighed and pulled it open.

Kirito had figured it wouldn't be Kizmel. Asuna had been a possibility, given their duel the previous day. He'd kind of hoped it would be Klein, bearing some, any, news. Somehow, though, he didn't expect the one who actually strode in like she owned the place.

“Argo?” Philia said blearily, rubbing at her eyes as she sat up on Kizmel's bed. “What're you doing here…?”

“Morning, Phi-chan, Rain. Got some messages to deliver.” Argo nodded to the girls, but when she closed the door and leaned back against it, it was Kirito who got the full force of her gaze. “Kii-bou. First thing I should tell ya is that I got word from Aa-chan, about the Field Boss.”
He blinked. Quickly checking his messages, he confirmed what he'd already thought: there was nothing from Asuna at all, not since the previous morning at least. “That's… weird. Why didn't she contact me?”

“Don't think she wanted to disturb ya if you were busy.” The Rat shrugged, flipping back her hood. “Anyway, she figured out the secret to The Geocrawler, so the raid group is gonna make another try as soon as they've got hunted up a coupla people with the Chant skill. You an' Kii-chan are invited, if you're up to it, but Aa-chan said not to worry if you're not.”

The Chant skill? I've never heard of that being useful in a real fight. Didn't I hear something about it drawing too much aggro to be worth it? …Well, whatever. If Asuna has it figured out, I'll trust her judgment. She's the raid leader, not me, and for good reason.

“Rain and Philia are welcome to go, if they want,” Kirito said, shaking his head. “I… still have something I need to do. So what was the other message, Argo?”

The brunette info broker locked her eyes on his, as dead serious as he'd ever seen her. “Kii-chan asked me to meet her. Said she had some things she needed to ask me, privately.”

That snapped Philia wide awake, distracted Rain from her usual wariness of Argo, and sent Kirito's heart racing. On the one hand, it was a huge relief that Kizmel had reached out to anyone. On the other…

“So why tell me?” he got out, past a suddenly-dry throat. “If you're the one she wants to talk to, shouldn't you be going?”

“I thought about it,” Argo admitted. “Not to brag, but I am the best info broker in Aincrad. She wants answers, I prolly got 'em. But…” Her eyes narrowed, gaze piercing him in a way that was uncharacteristically completely devoid of mischief. “I dunno, Kii-bou, I kinda think there's some questions you got better answers to than me. An' maybe I'm wrong, but I think the only reason you're still here is that you don't know where to go. That it, Kii-bou?”

All three girls were watching him closely, Kirito knew. He would've been able to tell with his eyes closed, just as he was increasingly able to tell when someone was out to get him even without Searching. Not that he needed that strange sense, either.

Not when he knew the answer they were expecting—demanding—from him.

“Okay, then,” he said softly, pushing himself to his feet. “Where did she say to meet, Argo?”

Slowly, the Rat smiled. A warm one, with as little mischief as her stare had been. “She didn't gimme directions, just a clue: The hands of the king are the hands of a healer. 'Ring any bells, Kii-bou?’”

Rain and Philia both looked blank. Kirito hardly noticed; for a moment he was seeing not the inn, but dark stone that drank light rather than reflecting it, a laughing figure that was more shadow than flesh, and an HP bar dwindling far too rapidly above a face that was more a terrifying gray than dusky.

“…Yeah,” he said, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. “I remember, Argo.” I remember that I was almost too late. Thinking back... I should've known, even then, that that wouldn't be the last time we fought together. We were already such good friends. If I'd thought Queen Idhrendis had the capacity to understand, I'd have asked her to let Kizmel come with us…

“Thought you would, Kii-bou.” From the look on her face, Argo knew what he was thinking. She hadn't been there, but she'd certainly gotten the full story afterward. “Might be my imagination, but I
gotta wonder if maybe Kii-chan was thinkin' o' you, not me, with that one.”

_I hope so. After everything... I can't lose her now. I can't._

“You're going, Kirito?” Rain asked, arms folded, one eyebrow raised expectantly. “You're going to go get Kizmel back, aren't you?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding firmly. “You said it yourself, didn't you? If I don't, I really am a coward and a liar.” _And I've lied to her enough, even when I told the truth._

“Good!” Philia gripped his shoulder, hard, and grinned as Rain grabbed the other. “Then while you're on your treasure hunt, Rain and I'll do our part. Let us know when you're on your way back, okay?”

Kirito watched, bemused, as the two girls headed for the door. “Uh... sure. What exactly are you two...?”

“Why spoil the surprise?” Rain flashed a smile over her shoulder. “You'll find out when you bring Kizmel home. Trust me, you'll like it.”

When they'd gone, leaving him alone with Argo, he could at first only give the door a blank look. _Just when I think I'm finally starting to understand girls, this happens. ...What just happened?_

“Worry 'bout that later, Kii-bou,” Argo said, bringing him back to the present. “Tell me something. What're ya gonna say to Kii-chan, when you find her?” There was another of those curiously intense looks in her eyes. Like she was gauging his worth based on whatever he said next, he thought.

“I'm going to tell her the truth,” Kirito told her. Opening his menu, he equipped his coat, long, heavy leather landing on his shoulders with a comforting weight. He followed up with his sword, and finished with his half-gloves. He didn't expect trouble, but for this, he was taking no chances. “I'm going to tell her all the truth this time.”

_Including just how much she means to me. I should've done it weeks ago. Now that she knows everything else, I've got nothing else to hide behind._

Argo surprised him, then, by pulling him into a tight hug. “I told ya you were a hopeless romantic, Kii-bou,” she said into his shoulder. “An' y'know what? That's what I like about ya.” Pulling away, she shoved him at the door, smiling brightly. “Go on! And don't come back 'til you've got Kii-chan with ya!”

Kirito almost made a sarcastic comeback, but drew up short at the look in her eyes. “I'm bringing her back,” he said instead, the words a solemn promise. “Count on it.”

The north of the Ninth Floor of the Steel Castle was home. The southern edge, the territory of those she had long believed to be the enemy, before journeying with Kirito and Asuna had brought her to the truth.

Far to the east, hidden behind a mirage, lay the bastion of what Kizmel had learned were the true architects of the war she'd fought for so long. On the other side of what appeared at a distance to be nothing more than a faint haze, a dead forest marked the path to the Twilight Citadel. Capital of the Fallen Elves, so near to the Royal Capital of Lyusula, yet concealed so well neither Dark nor Forest had ever realized it was there.

Until Kirito and Asuna had gradually uncovered the Fallen Elves' plot, that was. Over the months
they'd aided the Dark Elves, the two humans had brought the truth to light, and finally joined the Royal Guard in a last assault. Through the blackened yet still standing trees of the Forest of Demise, along the twisting paths up the tor on which the Twilight Citadel sat, at the very edge of Aincrad's Ninth Floor.

Passing through what she now knew was a gateway to a place apart from the Steel Castle in which some seven thousand trapped Swordmasters still lived, Kizmel walked the trails of the Forest of Demise with mixed feelings in her heart. The twisted monsters the Fallen had set to guard them were long dead, leaving only silent stillness among those trees, yet she remembered them vividly. The warped living creatures, and skeletal creations of necromancy like those she and her friends had encountered not so long ago in Hyrus Fortress.

Many Dark Elves of the Royal Guard had fallen, just passing through that Forest.

On the other side, up the slopes that had once borne witness to screams but now were disturbed only by the eerie keening of the wind, Kizmel went on. She remembered the desperate struggle against the Fallen Elves themselves, up Midnight Tor. Barely half the force that had set out from the Royal Capital had survived to reach the top.

Atop the tor, raised high enough no wall or railing guarded against the open sky, the Twilight Citadel still stood—but only in ruins. Crumbled stone, darker than black, tainted by the Fallen Elves' dark rituals in ancient times; it was barely a shadow of the imposing fortress it had once been. Now not even its massive gate, itself a trap that had crushed several of her fellows, could be recognized in the rubble.

Kizmel had nearly died in that place, the only Pagoda Knight to reach the Fallen Elf King. First when the twisted monarch's eldritch blade pierced her, its terrible poison countered only by Kirito's knowledge of an ancient healing herb. Again when, with the King's death, the entire Citadel had collapsed, very nearly killing all three of them.

She had ill memories of the place. Terrible nightmares had plagued her, once upon a time, taking her back to that battle again and again. Yet it had also been proof of the bond she had forged with her human friends—perhaps the most powerful moment they'd had, before a certain night at Yofel Castle.

It wasn't entirely whim or nostalgia that brought her back to the desolate place. As an “instanced map”, it was somewhere she could count on a private meeting. Argo had not been there for the final battle of the Elf War, but she'd been involved in the long campaign more than once before that; Kizmel was reasonably sure that would allow the info broker to come to the same “instance”.

But will she? Kizmel wondered, settling down on a relatively smooth rock by the path leading to the Citadel. She hasn't replied... Does she not know what to say to me, either? Or is she afraid, as Kirito was? Argo's always been so hard to read, behind the mask of a mercenary.

There was nothing to do but wait, though, and listen to the mournful wind. She knew the truth of the world now, and had hope that her own existence was not so meaningless as some had suggested, but without one more question answered, none of it mattered. She couldn't move forward until it was answered, one way or the other.

How long she sat there, cloak gathered close to ward off the chill, Kizmel wasn't sure. The sun's movement could be gauged only vaguely from the east, this long after dawn, and she deliberately ignored the clock floating the corner of her vision. This, she felt, was not a time to be concerned with time's passage—or perhaps she was afraid to know.
She wasn't sure, and wasn't sure she wanted to be.

“So, now you know the truth. Don't you?”

The voice, completely unexpected, nearly made Kizmel tumble from her perch. Not Argo's. Nor Kirito's, despite her suspicion—hope?—that he might be the one to answer her call. Not a familiar voice at all—but one she did recognize, when she turned to see who had spoken.

Standing at the very end of the path that led back down to the Forest of Demise, a pale girl some years younger in appearance than Kizmel herself. Dark hair, pale blue eyes; blue dress and white skirt, with a Swordmaster's rapier on her left hip. Above her head, a green cursor, with the words (NPC).

Kizmel felt a chill that had nothing to do with the wind. She'd seen that girl before, on the Fifty-First Floor. There, the girl had spoken… of Aincrad's destruction…

“…Who are you?” she whispered, slipping off her stone seat to stand before the strange “NPC”.

“I am Tia,” the girl said, her voice an eerie monotone. “You know the truth of this world now, don't you? Of what you are? I, too, am an NPC. Like you, but different.”

Chill turned to a shiver at the declaration. Kizmel had spoken to several NPCs since learning the truth, and not one of them had had any awareness of note, let alone awareness of what they were. Any more than she herself had had. “What do you mean… different?”

“I was made in imitation of you,” Tia told her, cool and collected despite her unnerving declaration. “The way you and your sister were made was something our father couldn't repeat, so those like me were born of another method. Not as alive as you, yet more so than the dolls Cardinal controls. We are your younger sisters.”

Kizmel had a thousand questions. It seemed Tia knew how she'd been created, what made her different; it sounded as if Tilnel had truly existed as well, and been like her. The elf girl wanted to drag the answers out of the childlike NPC—but caution brought a more important question to mind first.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked, left hand drifting to the hilt of her saber. Not to draw, not yet; merely to make certain it was loose in its scabbard. “Why did you appear to me before?”

“I told you, on the Fifty-First Floor, didn't I?” Tia tilted her head, and gestured vaguely at their surroundings. “This world will end when the Swordmasters escape. Now you understand yourself why that is. You know now that Aincrad, that Sword Art Online, exists only to be their battlefield.”

“…Yes. I know that, now.” Truth, nothing more and nothing less. Yet Tia's calm only increased Kizmel's unease. “I ask again: why are you here? I already know this world is a passing dream.”

“Then you know that when it ends, you'll die.” Tia was still cool, matter-of-fact, as she pronounced the doom Kizmel had been grappling with. “All of us who have even a shade of life yet are still part of this world will die, when the Ruby Palace is conquered.”

*If she's telling the truth, then there are others born of this world who are more than just automatons. Did Kayaba create so many just for his “game”, to die a guaranteed death when the surviving Swordmasters escape? ...Such a cruel man, indeed.*

Still, Kizmel didn't lower her guard. Something about the girl was raising her hackles, her instincts telling her to draw her saber. She didn't know why—but she hadn't survived so long by not listening
to herself. “One more time I must ask you, Tia: why are you telling me this? What do you want?” Her eyes narrowed. “If you've come to make me despair, you've made a fair start.”

“No.” Tia shook her head. “I’m here to deliver a message: that now that you know the truth, there's no reason for you to continue to help the clearers. That if you want to survive, there is another path, among Swordmasters who don't wish for this world to end any more than you do.”

Kizmel had faced death many times in her life. Just since becoming Kirito's permanent partner, she'd watched two Swordmasters die so she might live. But only one time in her life, as she lay helpless under the assault of Fallen Elf poison, had she felt the sensation she did now. Tia's words brought with them a feeling she could only describe as the fingers of Death itself tapping her spine—because there was one group of Swordmasters she knew of whom Tia's words might describe.

“Who sent you?”

“The only Swordmasters who ever showed a wish to save my life,” Tia replied, tone as eerily cool and dispassionate as it had been from her arrival. “Those who wish to prolong Aincrad's existence as long as possible, and fulfill its creator's intentions.”

Even before the girl said them, Kizmel knew what the next words out of Tia's mouth would be, and every muscle in her illusory body tensed.

“I come as an emissary of Laughing Coffin.”

Whew. I haven't done this in a while…

Darting through the Ninth Floor's forests on his way to the place he knew Kizmel's message meant, Kirito felt just plain weird. He hadn't gone on a solo run like that since… he wasn't actually sure how long it had been. Maybe not since Asuna had gotten a handle on how SAO worked. Definitely not since Kizmel had found him in that guard post on the Twenty-Sixth Floor.

In a world where a single mistake could be lethal to a solo but only a minor inconvenience with backup, those strange people who decided he was worth something didn't like to let him out alone. At first that had frightened him, worrying about just his own life was easier, didn't have the terror of being responsible for someone else.

Now, I feel like I've got a target painted on my back. Maybe I got too used to having someone to watch my back.

Running under birch trees in a perpetual autumn, heading straight for the wavering distortion that marked the boundary of the Forest of Demise, Kirito wondered if that meant he'd lost some of his edge. But if he had, he didn't care. He was going to take back that backup, one way or another.

Weird place for a meeting, though, he thought, passing through brief darkness into the instanced map that was his party's personal copy of the Forest of Demise. I know I still have nightmares about this place. …Then again, maybe it's not so strange. Asuna was the one who really saved Kizmel back in the Forest of Wavering Mists, but the Twilight Citadel was where I—

A faint prickling of the hairs on the back of his neck. The chilling sensation of a blade at the top of his spine, just waiting to pull back and take off his head. The tightness of a bowstring, held in someone else's hand, with the surety the arrow would find its mark.

An indefinable sense of dread. The absolute certainty that someone wanted him dead.
Kirito skidded to a halt, yanked the sword Duskshard from his back, and batted aside the sliver of metal that would've taken him right in the throat. Then the next—and before a third could come, he snatched a throwing spike from his own belt and flung it into the dead trees to the left of the path.

A *clang* told him that his attack had failed, but struck its mark. That, and the low chuckle that followed, confirmed—if there'd been any doubt—that his assailant was human, not some bizarre plant mob.

“Well, well, Blackie,” a voice drawled, coming closer. “You haven’t lost your touch one bit. My Hiding should’ve been perfect this time, but somehow I knew you’d find me anyway.”

The figure that emerged wore dark gray scale armor, with boots and gloves of the same material. A one-handed sword like Kirito’s own hung at the other’s left hip, and his face was concealed in the shadows of his helmet. Or rather, the chain coif that he used in place of a true helmet.

The armor was higher quality than Kirito had last seen; probably made from the scales of Lesser Dragons on the Twenty-Sixth Floor. But the style was as unmistakable as the voice, even if it had been the better part of a year since they’d last met.

“Morte,” Kirito growled.

“Aw, you don't sound happy to see me, Kirito! Is that any way to greet somebody you haven't seen in so long?” Morte chuckled again, sardonic smile barely visible under his coif, and stepped out to stand in the middle of the path some ten meters away. “I figured you'd be here sooner or later, so I thought I'd meet you on the way.”

So, it wasn’t a random accident that had reunited them. Not that Kirito had thought otherwise even for a moment. None of PoH’s band of killers did anything “by accident”, much less an encounter almost fifty floors below the frontline. *Least of all now. ...What do they know about Kizmel? Are they after her?*

Dread coiling in his gut, he kept his sword up to ward off any more thrown spikes. He knew from experience that Morte favored poison. “How did you even get here?” he demanded, eyes narrowing. “This is an instanced map, and I don't remember inviting you into a party.”

“Oh, did you forget?” Morte’s grin showed teeth. “The boss had us running quests for the Fallen Elves, way back. What, it never occurred to you that opposing players might get linked quests? There’s no conflict between our storylines, no reason we’d need separate instances for something like this.”

Kirito’s mind raced. He hadn’t heard of anything like that before, either in the beta test, from pre-release material, or even in the year of the death game. *But I don’t see any reason it couldn’t be possible, technically,* he thought. *And it would fit a “story”, wouldn’t it? Something let him in here, anyway...*

It didn't matter “how”. What mattered was that a known murderer was standing between him and Kizmel, and if Morte was there, who knew what was happening beyond the Forest of Demise. His hand tightened on Duskshard’s hilt, and he ran over his mental list of Sword Skills, looking for the best one to start the fight he knew was about to begin.

Morte, though, raised his hands, empty. “Hey, now, Blackie, I'm not here to fight you. Take it easy, man.”

“You said that the first we met,” Kirito said, not fooled for a second. “You’re going to stand in my
way, aren't you? Between me and Kizmel.”

“Well, yeah.” The PKer shrugged. “Sorry, Kirito, but, boss' orders. One of ours is having a chat with your friend, and, well, it'd be rude if you interrupted, right? So let's just settle down and wait—”

“No.” Kirito stalked forward. “You're going to get out of my way, Morte. Right now.” Because he could guess what a member of Laughing Coffin would want with Kizmel—and he had no doubt at all what they'd do if her answer wasn't the one they wanted.

“Whoa, whoa, you can't be serious, man.” Morte took a step back, waving his empty hands. “You try to force your way through, and you'll go orange! You wouldn't want that, would you?”

Improbably, the man's own cursor was indeed still green. Apparently he'd been careful enough, since the incident on the Sixth Floor, not to break the anti-criminal code enough times to go permanent orange.

Kirito didn't care. He'd gone orange himself once. A second time was nothing, not for a cause this important.

“If you want to stop me, you'll have to draw that sword,” he told Morte, advancing two more meters. “So, which is it, Morte? Let me through, or go orange? Kizmel's that important to me. Is whatever you're planning important enough to you?” He smiled; the kind of smile he'd given the clearers, the day he'd claimed the title of Beater. “Let me guess: one more crime, and you'll never be green again.”

It was a wild guess, backed by nothing but intuition. Kirito hadn't heard any news of Morte in months, and only knew for sure of one time the PKer had gone orange. The way Morte's smile faltered told him he'd hit the mark, though.

“I can live with it,” Morte said, after a short pause; the gap was down to five meters. “But do you really wanna push it, Kirito? This won't be a duel. I'll kill you for sure this time. If you want to get past me, you'll have to do the same. You really think you're up for that, Black Swordsman?”

Kirito's response was to sheath the Duskshard, taking advantage of the PKer's willingness to waste time talking. Then he swept his hand down to open his menu, and stabbed at several commands in his equipment tab.

When the light faded from the scabbard on his back, he drew the shining Baneblade.

From the way his smile vanished completely, Morte knew exactly what the sword was. “Easy there, Blackie,” he said softly. “That's not a nice bluff.”

“You should've paid more attention to what happened to Titan's Hand, Morte. I'm not bluffing.” Kirito's smile thinned, showing teeth. “You've got two options: get out of my way—or make the first move, and accept the consequences.”

Two meters. Easily within range of some Sword Skills. One and a half…

“On your own head be it, Kirito!”

Morte's sword leapt from its scabbard, aiming for Kirito's neck—but he'd expected the move. Expected that the PKer would try to end the fight with a single blow, before his orange status could become a hazard.

Kirito deflected the blow, reducing it to a glancing hit to his shoulder. A gamble of his own, allowing
a light attack, one without the backing of System Assist, to hit, yet one that paid off. At once, Morte's cursor flickered from green to orange, and the Baneblade took on a bright blue glow.

Both of them leapt back an instant later, taking stock of how the situation had changed. Kirito's HP had only dropped a sliver, he was relieved to see; nothing compared to what it would've been had the other's blade struck true.

“Bastard,” Morte spat, losing his composure completely for only the second time in Kirito's experience. “You're awfully attached to the doll, aren't you?”

“She's not a doll!” Kirito snapped back. “Last chance. Get out of my way!”

“Like hell! You're gonna die right here, right now, Blackie!”

That was the only warning he had, before Morte lunged in. Their swords clashed, neither of them using a skill; for a second they ground against each other, producing only a shriek of tortured metal. Then with a grunt of frustration, Morte leapt back, swung his blade up over his shoulder, and sprang back in with a Sonic Leap.

Kirito stopped it short with an Uppercut and a snarl. You're between me and Kizmel. You're not standing in my way! When the rebound ended, he dashed in with a Slant, aiming to cut down Morte's shoulder to his heart; at full HP, the PKer wasn't likely to die from just one blow, even from the Baneblade.

He still hoped to end this without killing, if he could. But he'd fought Morte before, knew how skilled the killer was; under these conditions, holding back was not an option.

Morte canceled out the Slant with a Horizontal, and used the rebound to spin a Serration Wave. Kirito was forced back, stumbling; in that opening, Morte drove his sword straight in for a heart-strike of his own. Unguided by the system, but aimed right where it would still do noticeable damage.

Kirito fell away, riding his stumble, turning it into a Gengetsu. The Martial Arts extra skill had once taken Morte completely by surprise—and this time, though he avoided the boot to the face, he dodged far enough for his own thrust to miss.

Good enough! Kirito landed from the backflip, back in a stance from which he could attack, while Morte was still over-extended. He took that chance, charging a skill as fast as he could, and slashed a Horizontal as Morte brushed past.

A hit. Stronger than it should've been, from such a basic skill; outside a duel, there was no way to see Morte's HP, but the flash effect and scattered red particles told Kirito the Baneblade had performed exactly as expected. The PKer's bitter curse only confirmed it.

The roundhouse kick that caught Kirito in the side of the head was a surprise.

As he stumbled back, Morte twirled his sword and bared his teeth. “Not bad, Blackie,” he bit out. “But you're not the only one with new tricks since last time. It's showtime!”

“That's not fair,” Kirito spat. “I didn’t ask for this!”

“Laughing Coffin,” Kizmel repeated numbly. It was exactly the answer she'd expected, yet that didn't make hearing it any easier. “Why… are you working with them?”

Tia tilted her head, forehead creased in a puzzled frown. “What other Swordmasters would I ally myself with? Of the ten thousand humans who entered this world, only they fight to maintain it, not
escape it. Only PoH treated me as a person, not a doll. If those of us born to Aincrad wish to live, it's the only logical choice."

As horrible as it was, Kizmel took those words like a punch to the stomach. After Keita, and for a long time Lind, she knew well what it was to be regarded as a mere “thing”. To the Swordmasters at large, there was probably no difference between the two of them, and the thousands of soulless NPCs they met on a daily basis.

*If Tia knew all along her nature, and PoH was the first Swordmaster who recognized that, I can see the “logic” she speaks of. Even Kirito once doubted me, if Klein is to be believed, and he and Asuna have always been kinder to NPCs than most.*

*And even Asuna, in the end, chose to sacrifice NPCs for the sake of Swordmaster lives. If there were others like Tia among them, then Asuna would doubtless seem quite the monster to them. …Even so…*

“Laughing Coffin has killed many Swordmasters, Tia,” Kizmel pointed out carefully. “They're murderers. Can you truly support them, even knowing that?”

“Yes.” Tia's response was quick, calm. “Whether they know it or not, even the Swordmasters who have done nothing to us yet will inevitably kill us just by escaping. They are the enemy.”

Kizmel was chilled by the cool, logical answer. In many ways, Tia disturbed her far more than the Fallen Elves who had owed the fortress they stood near. The Fallen had wanted the other races of elves and humanity dead from pure, selfish malice; Tia's decision was one of self-preservation, based on cold fact.

*Except those aren't the only facts, and logic is not everything. Not to a choice like this.*

“There can't be that many like you,” Kizmel said. “You would sacrifice thousands of people for the sake of a few?”

“Can lives be weighed based on pure numbers?” Tia retorted. “Is it right to sacrifice a smaller number for a greater number? Why should the Swordmasters have any more right to live than we do?”

More than logic. If Kizmel had had any doubts left that the girl was a person in her own right, that would've ended them. She remembered a time, not so long before, that she'd made such a case of her own. Indeed, she suspected it was that same reasoning that had led Lind to recognize *her* as a living being.

“How much you may care for them, helping them will only lead to your death,” Tia said now. “They've already betrayed you, by keeping the truth from you for so long.” She lifted a hand, extending it to Kizmel. “If you come with me, you'll be with those who understand you. Who truly want to help you.”

For a long moment, Kizmel looked at that hand. There was truth in Tia's words; even now, she was deeply hurt by how she'd been treated. It was true, too, that she was frightened of the inevitable destruction of Aincrad. And she recognized that the only way to delay that end would be to disrupt the Swordmasters' efforts.

*But that isn't why Laughing Coffin acts as bandits. Their interest in prolonging this world is to keep on killing, as long as they can. If Tia believes they want to help her, she's naive. …And even if she was right about them…*
“Even if your allies weren't Laughing Coffin, I couldn't go with you,” Kizmel said, slowly shaking her head. “Whatever they may have done, I cannot sacrifice the Swordmasters for my own life.”

There was real confusion in Tia's eyes, now. “Why not? You can't claim they have any more right to live than we do. There's neither logic nor morality in throwing away your life, our lives, for the sake of people who will kill us without even knowing we exist.”

“You're right,” Kizmel agreed, smiling sadly. “But you fail to follow your own logic to its conclusion, Tia. No, the Swordmasters have no more right than we do to live—but nor do they have any less. Both sides have equal moral standing... and so I must follow my heart.” Feeling another kind of chill prickle down her spine, she slowly drew her saber. “I'm a knight, Tia. It would be dishonorable of me to try to save my own life at the expense of thousands of innocents.”

“But—”

“You're also assuming that I will die with the Steel Castle. But Tia…” Her smile turned warmer, remembering words spoken in the past. “I never intended to remain here when the Swordmasters left.”

Long before, she'd made a decision. Before she ever learned the nature of Aincrad, of its people, Kizmel had chosen her path. Becoming a Swordmaster, losing the right to call herself a subject of the Queen of Lyusula, she had known exactly where she intended to go, even if she had no idea how. Even now, knowing the truth, her goal remained unchanged.

No. Especially now. Not because this world is doomed to end—but because, while I may be tied to it, that very tie means I'm also connected to his world. The truth only makes my dream more likely, not less.

“I will not fight the Swordmasters. I will not betray my friends. And I will not die here—and not to you!” Whirling, Kizmel deflected the knife that she had sensed coming for her ribs, knocking it back with a Reaver.

“Tch! Not bad, not bad! Maybe I'll at least get some fun out of this!”

Her assailant landed on his feet, spinning a dagger—dripping an ominous green from its tip—in his hand. Clad all in black, much like Kizmel's partner, he wore form-fitting leather all over rather than a longcoat. Concealing his face was a mask, one that looked more like a sack with two eyeholes than the elegant metal favored by the Fallen Elves.

The cursor over his head was pure, ominous orange.

Kizmel had seen him before, from a distance. At the time, she had found him obnoxious. Later events had led her to desire his death, very strongly. “Joe,” she bit out.

“Nah, nah, that's just what they called me when I had to pretend to be a nice guy for that idiot Kibaou!” The orange player laughed; a high, piercing sound. “I don't have to play that role anymore, so call me… Johnny Black!” Cackling again, the eyeholes in his mask turned to Tia. “Told ya she wouldn't play nice! She's been with that goody-two-shoes too long. So how about you get out of here, and let me have my fun?”

Tia's expression was difficult for Kizmel to read. Disappointed, she thought; but apparently unconcerned with Black's behavior. Which, if anything, was even more chilling.

“...I will report to PoH,” she said. Producing a Teleport Crystal, seemingly from thin air, Tia lifted it high. What she said, Kizmel couldn't quite make out over another cackle from Black, but in a
moment she was engulfed in an azure sphere and vanished.

“That's better. The girl's fun, but she might get hurt—that'd be fun, too, but the boss would be mad!”
Black gestured wildly with his dagger. “That's okay, though—you'll be good enough! It's showtime, doll!”

“Come and try, then!” Kizmel shouted back, even as Black leapt toward her with a Fad Edge. “We'll see who falls today!”

Fighting Morte was like no other battle in Kirito's experience. He'd known from their first encounter,
back on the Third Floor, that the PKer was a skilled duelist; it seemed he'd only gotten better since.

Morte favored a one-handed sword, whose moves Kirito knew intimately. Here, he was forced to
parry a Savage Fulcrum with a quick Horizontal; there, Kirito's left-right Snake Bite was cut short by
a Vertical Arc, whose V-shaped blows neatly countered his own.

A pair of Sonic Leaps rebounded off each other, sending Morte spinning through the air off one side
of the forest path, while Kirito desperately caught a branch on the other side. He flipped himself up
and around, back onto the trail, just in time for Morte to come charging back out. The PKer's sword
was swung low to one side, as if he were preparing a Sharp Nail, and Kirito moved to counter—

The flash of light that came next wasn't the glow of System Assist. That came a split second later,
after Morte's sword flickered and was replaced with a different weapon entirely. The Double-Cleave
smashed in from a different angle than Kirito had expected, gashing him across his ribs from one
side, then the other, catapulting him back into the trees.

That was the real danger of fighting Morte. The Baneblade was the superior weapon—already, the
PKer had lost some twenty percent of his HP, by Kirito's estimate—but Morte's style was utterly
unpredictable. As in their first duel, he switched from one-handed sword to axe as necessary, gaining
a small shield in the latter setup; now he was mixing in Martial Arts skills, as well.

Aces, Kirito still didn't know very well. Martial Arts he did, and so he ducked under the Jump Kick
Morte used to close the distance. Still off-balance from the Double-Cleave, he only changed the
impact point, but a kick to the shoulder was definitely better than one to the face.

Snarling, Kirito chose to respond in kind. Twisting with the blow, he spun upright again and threw
the Baneblade straight up in the air, freeing his right hand to slam forward in a heavy punch. The hit
staggered Morte, giving Kirito time to catch his sword and bring it down in the Composite Skill
Meteor Fall's second strike—only to have it rebound against the killer's shield.

“But good enough, Blackie! You'll never kill me with those moves!” In an instant, the shield had
vanished, and Morte thrust the sword that had returned to his hand into the opening of Meteor Fall's
post-motion.

This time, it was a clean stab to Kirito's heart, and he swore as a full ten percent of his HP
disappeared in an instant. It went down further a moment later, as with a yell he grabbed Morte's
sword, its edges biting into his hand. He accepted the damage, showing the blade aside, and rammed
his shoulder into Morte's chest.

Sword and axe, hand and foot; Sword Skill and raw, virtual muscle memory. Statistically, Kirito's
Baneblade had the advantage, but Morte's sheer versatility kept the fight a whirling stalemate, a battle
of attrition with no clear victor in sight. The last time Kirito had fought anything like it had been
Vemacitrin, the Fiftieth Floor's brutal boss.
“Give it up, Kirito!” Morte shouted, when Kirito's HP had just hit the fifty-percent mark. “You'll never finish me in time to save your doll! By now, Johnny must be almost finished with her!”

Johnny—what?! Kizmel is already—

The shock slowed Kirito's reflexes just a fraction. Just enough for Morte to switch weapons one more time, and launch into a series of axe-chops that alternated with punishing punches from the PKer's shield arm. One, twice, three times Kirito rocked back; until a seventh blow launched him clear into the branches of one of the dead trees.

A variation of Meteor Break, a corner of his mind noticed. A high-level Composite Skill—one strong enough to knock him clear down into the red. The tide had turned in the war of attrition. Decisively.

His own HP hardly concerned him, though. The realization that the fight had taken so long that Kizmel’s “meeting” had probably already finished, and Morte hadn't been called off... There was only one thing the orange player could've meant by his confederate being “almost finished”.

They're going to kill her. If I don't stop Morte, she'll die. ...I can't beat him this way. Not fast enough. Maybe not at all.

If I do this, there's only one way this battle will end. The Baneblade's strength guarantees that. And I... can't let anyone know about this. Not in Laughing Coffin.

There was a terrible choice in front of Kirito. One that could never be undone. But his partner—the one who mattered to him more than any other—her life was on the line. Where Kizmel was concerned, it wasn't a choice at all. It never had been.

His back impacted on the trunk of the dead tree, and he fell toward the ground. In that moment of freefall, Kirito tossed his sword in the air, dragged open his menu, and stabbed one command. He caught the Baneblade on its way back down, and landed in a crouch.

His free hand reached up as light flared on his back, and drew the Duskshard from the scabbard that appeared on his left shoulder.

Morte had regained his grin when Kirito took the Meteor Break. Now it vanished again in pure shock. “What the hell?!”

“Get out of my way,” Kirito breathed, sweeping his blades wide to either side. “I won't say it again, Morte.”

“Not a chance! You still can't kill me, Blackie!” Shaking off the mental stun effect, Morte was suddenly a flurry of movement: a flash of light as his primary weapon changed again, a throwing spike sailed out, and he followed it with a Vorpal Strike.

Kirito blurred, ducking under the poisoned metal dart, and swung both swords up in a cross to catch the Sword Skill. Vorpal Strike was possibly the most powerful single-hit skill available to one-handed swords, and doubled the blade's reach—but Kirito's Cross Block caught it easily, flinging it up and away without a scratch.

Morte swore viciously, riding the knockback to switch back to his axe one more time. “Damn you, Kirito! You should've just given up like a good boy, you—!” Descending into incoherent fury, he danced back, snatching out an item from a belt pouch.

A Healing Crystal. Not half as rare as Corridor Crystals, but precious enough; another day, it might've been enough that he was driven to use it. Against anyone else, the HP he restored would've
given him a decisive edge against an opponent in the red.

_Enough_! Letting out a wordless scream, for himself, for Kizmel, and for what the Pker was forcing him to, Kirito lunged forward. His twin swords blazed pure azure, and he brought them both down on Morte before the killer could even begin the pre-motion for another skill.

Backhand from the right sword, thrust from the left, a whirling strike from one blade and then the other. Another spin, slashing with both swords at once. Four strikes—as long as most one-handed skills ever got. Past that, Kirito's paired blades bit into Morte again and again, whirling from every angle. A ninth hit, a tenth, hilts reversed in his hands; Morte began to scream.

"Stop it! You can't do this! _Stop it! Stoooppppp!_"

Kirito couldn't have if he'd wanted to. Gripped by the System Assist, by his own rage, Kirito only screamed back, spinning into the eleventh hit with his own strength added to the system.

Twelve, thirteen; three strikes more than the longest skill a single sword could deliver. Morte shrieked as the fourteenth struck home, lopping off his axe-wielding arm. The fifteenth took off his shield arm—and Kirito reared back with Baneblade and Duskshard both.

The sixteenth hit of Starburst Stream plunged both swords straight into Morte's heart.

Pinned on the two blades, Morte's shrieks died to silence. Slack-jawed, he stared down at them. Looked up at Kirito. "You... you seriously...?"

His whisper faded, drowned out by the sound of breaking glass as his body shattered into a thousand azure polygons. Only the deep silence of death remained to mark the passage of the first man who had ever tried to kill Kirito directly.

The first life Kirito had ever taken.

Poisoned steel skittered off clean once, twice, three times, the Tri-Slice neatly deflected by the kite shield. A saber licked out, biting at the dagger-wielder's wrist; crimson dust scattered into the air from the shallow cut, accompanied by a shrill curse.

Kizmel had fought Swordmasters before, and counted herself fortunate Johnny Black wasn't the most skilled of them. Though his dagger was poisoned, his talent with it wasn't half what PoH had displayed, when the red guildmaster had attacked in the Reliquary. He didn't have PoH's frightening ability to slip within a swordsman's reach to plant his dagger where it would do the most damage.

Very fortunate indeed, Kizmel reflected, as she pressed the attack with a leaping Helmsplitter. In the brief time they'd been fighting, Black had gotten in perhaps three solid strikes, none of them striking vitals—but with the poison in his blade, those were blows she could not simply ignore.

Her health was not yet even close to critical. That, she knew, would change in short order, if the battle continued. Her lifebar was draining, and as he proved again by nimbly leaping away from her descending sword, Black was devilishly light on his feet.

Quick, she thought, snapping up her shield again to fend off a quick Bleeder aimed for her ribs, _but more used to ambushing the helpless, I think. Not to engaging a knight in a fair fight!_

"Damn, it's a shame you're not coming with us!" Black said, spinning back and away from the wide slash of her retaliation. "You're good, for an NPC! XaXa would _love_ this!"

Remembering the face that name belonged to, Kizmel bared her teeth in an expression no one could
call a smile. The skull-masked PKer had been possibly the most skilled swordsman she'd ever clashed swords with in anger. Had he been there, she was sure, the fight would've been a very different proposition.

“You'll have to be quicker than this, though! That poison'll get ya sooner or later, and nobody's coming to help you!” His expression couldn't be seen behind his sack of a mask, but Kizmel had the impression of a wild grin. “Dunno who you were gonna meet here, but Morte'll keep 'em away!” Cackling, he leapt in for another Fad Edge.

This time, Black's dagger cut a shallow arc along her stomach, just below her breastplate—but at the same time, Kizmel's saber, driven by sudden fear, struck a solid blow across his chest, flinging him away.

Morte is here? Then, Argo is…!

The Rat could take care of herself, Kizmel knew. She also knew, though, that just like Black, Argo's strength was in avoiding a direct fight, not taking a skilled duelist head-on.

“If Argo dies here, so do you,” she snarled, drawing back her blade. “And so will Morte!” Her saber began to glow white, as she steadied herself for one of the strongest skills she knew.

“Good luck with that, girl! Morte and I'll—” Black cut off abruptly, eyes widening behind his mask. “Wait—what's happening?!”

Kizmel held her position, keeping her skill ready to be unleashed with just a tiny change in posture. She didn't know what her foe's sudden hesitation meant, nor even if it was genuine. If it was a lure to bring her into reach of his dagger—she was all too conscious of her health ticking down from the poison already in her system—she had no intention of falling for it.

If it was a trap, though, it was a good one. Black didn't even seem to be looking at her anymore. “No, no, no, keep it together, man, heal yourself—yeah, that's good… Huh?! No! This can't be— what the hell's happening over there?!”

Morte, she realized. He's watching his comrade's health. Which means… that's not Argo coming here at all, is it? Nothing she has could turn the tide so quickly.

I know what—who—could.

“Damn it, no! Get out of there! Mamoru…!”

The shrill scream would've hurt Kizmel's ears, if she still felt pain. As it was, they only twitched, while she kept her focus firmly on Black. He seemed completely oblivious to her, now, but it was all too possible for that to be a ruse of its own. If unlikely.

“That bastard killed him,” Black whispered. “He killed him… he killed him!” His gaze snapped back to Kizmel. “You'll die for that! Both of you will!”

“If you'd care to make the attempt, please do,” she said coolly, still holding her Sword Skill ready. “But my friend is coming, and we'd both like to settle accounts with you. Or did you think we've forgotten what happened to the Black Cats?”

He stared at her, hate burning in the eyes behind that mask. His free hand clenched tightly enough for his glove to creak, and she heard his teeth gnashing even from several meters away. The dagger in his other hand began to move back—then stopped.
“This isn't over,” Black growled. “You haven't seen the last of Laughing Coffin. I'll make sure to finish you and your friend, personally!”

With that declaration, he whirled and darted toward the ruins of the Twilight Citadel. Just after he'd gotten out of the reach of even Kizmel's ears, he was engulfed in blue light, and vanished.

Then, and only then, did Kizmel let her Sword Skill's charge fade, straightening from her crouch. She heaved a shuddering breath, letting out some of the tension of the past few minutes, and sheathed her saber. Then she quickly reached into her belt pouch, pulled out a bottle, and downed the antidote in a single gulp.

Heh. That may be the first time I've missed my knighthood for practical reasons. My ring's poison-cleansing would certainly have helped here...

A healing potion on top of that set her health climbing again, ending the physical danger of the day. That left Kizmel's attention free to watch the path leading up the tor, and wait to see who it was that had answered her message. If it was who she suspected it to be… Well. She wasn't sure if the rapid beat from her heart was left over from the battle, from anxiety...

Or from hope.

Dashing down the last stretch of the Forest of Demise as fast as his AGI stat would allow, Kirito was fairly sure he was in shock. Between the adrenaline still coursing through his real body's veins and the sheer unreality of the situation, what he'd just done hadn't quite sunk in yet.

That's going to hurt, later, he thought, as the dead trees began to thin out around him. Morte was a murderer, not an innocent, but that's not going to make it any easier. …I hope it's not going to make it any easier.

Chilling as it was, Morte's death wasn't Kirito's primary concern then. As soon as the battle was over, he'd checked his Friends List, and was deeply relieved to find Kizmel's name still on it, her HP in the blue. “Alive” wasn't the same as “all right”, though, and he knew it.

Heart pounding in his throat, he raced up the path on Midnight Tor. There, waiting for him at the top, stood the beautiful elf he'd been looking for, lilac hair and dark cloak drifting in the breeze. That cloak was tattered, her armor scratched and stained with sickly green, but she was there, hale and whole.

It had only been a day since he'd seen that face. It felt like years. When she turned to look at him, the faintest trace of a smile on her lips, Kirito came right up to her and caught her up into a tight hug. He didn't care that she was still wearing armor, which dug into his chest. He only cared that her arms went around him without hesitation, and the scent of pine and sakura blossoms as he rested his chin on her shoulder.

I lost to this world, he thought, losing himself in the feel of the elf girl in his arms. Everything I have now, came from here. Whether we ever get out of here or not, this is what matters. …I can live with that.

At length, he heard Kizmel draw a deep breath. “I meant that message for Argo,” she murmured in his ear. “But… somehow, I knew you'd be the one to come here, Kirito.”

“I had to,” he said softly. “I couldn't leave things the way they were.” Reluctantly, Kirito pulled away, stepping back a discreet few paces. Kizmel's expression was unreadable now; and then he couldn't see it all, as he bowed deeply. “I'm sorry, Kizmel. I tried not to lie to you, ever. I never said
anything that wasn't true—but I never told you the biggest truth. I was afraid, afraid that you couldn't handle it, afraid that you'd hate me for it.”

It wasn't as hard to say as he'd expected. Maybe because he hadn't been able to think about anything else, since Lind had dropped the bombshell. Maybe just because, in the end, this would be the greatest burden off his shoulders. Whatever the outcome, everything that needed to be said, would be.

“'I was wrong,’” Kirito continued, looking at the barren ground of the tor. “Even if you did hate me for it, you had a right to know. Keeping the truth from you just made things worse. …I'm sorry.”

Every muscle in his virtual body was tense, and his heart was pounding in his ears. He had no idea how she'd respond—but even if she rejected his apology, even if she decided she never wanted to see him again, at least he'd said it.

For an entire minute, the only sound was the keening of the cold wind that always haunted the Twilight Citadel. Then, just barely above that wind, Kizmel said, “Look at me, Kirito.” When he did, straightening from his bow to meet her inscrutable gaze, she went on, “What is the truth? What is it you truly believe about this world?”

The words came easily now. Some of this he'd said to her before. Some of it was just so much easier to say, with the nature of Aincrad made clear to her. “This world is an illusion, but that doesn't make it fake,” Kirito said firmly. “People live here, and we can die here. I've met people I never would have in the real world. I've made friends, when I couldn't as the person I was in the real world.”

He'd been a virtual hermit, before Sword Art Online had trapped him. He hadn't had a “friend” in longer than he could remember. He hadn't even made enough of an impact on anyone to make enemies. After the day he learned the truth of his family, even they had been nearly strangers to him.

The Steel Castle had brought him to Klein, and Agil, and Sachi. To his first partner and still dear friend, Asuna. His actions had made such an impact on the clearing effort that even at their worst, Kibaou and Lind had been forced to acknowledge him.

Living in Aincrad had brought Kirito to the girl who stood before him now.

“I don't know what you are, Kizmel,” he said frankly. “I don't know what Kayaba could've done to bring someone to life in this world. But I know you are alive, and that… I can't imagine life without you. I don't want to imagine it. I…”

Kirito forced himself to stop then. To give her a chance to respond, before he said the words that would change everything. What happened next wasn't just up to him, after all; it wasn't his world that had been that had been thrown into chaos, this time.

Kizmel looked at him wordlessly, violet eyes seeming to weigh his admission.”To be honest,” she said finally, “when I finally heard the truth, I didn't know what to think. Of you, of Asuna, of the other Swordmasters… Of myself. I went searching, trying to disprove what had been said of the people of this world.” Her lips twitched in what might've been a bitter smile. “Speaking with some humans in the City of Beginnings… didn't give me the answers I'd hoped for.”

Kirito winced. A lifelong gamer, it wasn't hard for him to imagine what must've happened when someone who had, up to then, believed NPCs to be alive had tried to have a genuine conversation with them. What it must've been like for someone born of that world… Even with his history, he couldn't quite wrap his mind around it.
“Klein found me after that,” Kizmel continued, shaking her head as if to cast off unpleasant memories. “He told me… things about this world, and the mechanisms behind it, that gave me hope even as they disturbed me. He showed me Kobayashi, proving to me the constructed nature of Aincrad—and then he showed me that I was not simply one of many, as that ship was.”

“The beginning of the Elf War,” Kirito murmured, uttering a silent thank you to Klein. “Ever since Asuna and I saved you, it's always been a different Dark Elf there…”

“Yes. Which gave me just enough hope to move on, and think.” She turned to the ruins of the Twilight Citadel, idly reaching up to hold her hair out of face against the breeze. “I visited my old home, the house in which Tilnel and I grew up, to confirm my own memories. And then… I came here.” She glanced back at him, dark eyes unreadable. “Do you know why, Kirito?”

“…I can guess.”

The barest hint of a smile crossed Kizmel's face again, before she turned to look at the ruins again. “Yes. I came here to remind myself of our grandest battle together—of how desperate you were to save me, as I fell to the King's poison.” She took a deep breath, let it out, and went on, “Kirito. I still have so many doubts about who and what I am, and what will happen from here on. But I remember. You and Asuna saved me, the day we met, when I'd died time and again before. You chose to save me, leaving Sasamaru to die. And… I know what choice you made, to come to me here.”

She knew he'd killed Morte, then. Kirito supposed that explained the apparent departure of whichever PKer “Johnny” had been. She knows… and she understands. Of course, if anyone would, it would be her. “It wasn't a choice, Kizmel,” he said quietly. “It never has been. Not with you.”

“I know it hasn't. Just as I know, now, that you have never lied to me. You never told me the truth of this world, but you only evaded, never lied.” She faced him one more time, meeting his eyes levelly. “So tell me, Kirito. The truth that brought you here, now.”

Just for a second, the words caught in Kirito's throat. He'd never said anything like it, and if he did say it, everything would change. Whether she accepted it, or rejected it.

But she already said it to me, and she's the one who taught me to speak up when it really matters.

Kirito swallowed, boldly took one step closer, and reached for the elf girl's hand. “I came back for you because I had to,” he said. “Because I love this world… and I love you, Kizmel.”

Silence, for a long, long moment. Then, very slowly, her lips curved in the deepest smile he'd ever seen from her. Accepting his hand, Kizmel let him pull her into another tight hug. “Finally,” she whispered, breath tickling his ear. “I've been waiting for those words, Kirito-kun. My friend. My love.”

Giddy relief filled him at those words, and this once, Kirito took the initiative. Pulling back just far enough to look into her eyes, he drew Kizmel into a kiss. Chaste at first, just feeling the lips that tasted of moontear wine against his; then, as those lips parted against him, he deepened it. Holding her tight against him, he tried to put every bit of feeling into that kiss, expressing with lips and tongue every emotion he wasn't eloquent enough to put in words.

Only when they were on the verge of suffocation damage did Kirito pull back, gasping for breath; something in him was proud that Kizmel was doing the same. She was as flushed as her dusky skin could allow. He had a feeling he was at least as red.
He also very much wanted to do it again, but there were still things that needed to be said. Withdrawing a bare few centimeters, to place his hands on her shoulders, Kirito said, “Kizmel. I don't know how yet, but I promise you, I'll find a way to bring you out of this world when the Ruby Palace is cleared. I won't let you die with Aincrad. So... will you come with me? To my world?”

Kizmel smiled at him again, an expression he decided he wanted to see as much as possible. “Why, Kirito-kun... That might just be mistaken for a proposal of marriage, you know.”

“Of course I know that.” It wasn't something he would've seriously contemplated, not so long before. By the standards of his home society, Kirito was years too young for that. But Aincrad was a world, and a law, unto itself; a place more like the Sengoku era, when marriages at only fifteen had been common among the samurai.

It was a world he'd come to call home. To love, even as it tried to kill him. Where a single sword could carry a young man from hikikomori to self-confident swordsman. To places, and people, he could never have imagined in the waking world.

“Of course I know,” Kirito said again, meeting Kizmel's eyes. “Because it is, Kizmel. Will you marry me?”

“Of course I will.” Her smile was blinding, her eyes shining. “I've waited for those words since that night at Yofel Castle... Yes, Kirito-kun. I will be yours—here, and in the world from which you came. I want to know that world, just as I want to know everything about you.”

Then it was her turn to pull him into a kiss, long and desperate, and right then, nothing else mattered.

Happier than she could ever remember being in her life, Kizmel wanted nothing more than to spend the day in private with Kirito. Now that she had finally coaxed the truth of his feelings toward her out of him, there were many things that needed to be said—and done. Affirmations of her own existence, and how their life together would be from then on.

As she'd told Tia, though, she was still a knight, whether she was with the Pagoda Knights or the Swordmasters. With word that the raid group was about to make one more assault on The Geocrawler, this time with the expectation of winning, she could hardly refuse to return to the frontline at least that long.

“Asuna's message said the battle should be pretty short,” Kirito murmured to her, when they materialized in Dollarah. “Then we can go find out what 'surprise' Rain and Philia have for us.”

“I'll hold you to that, my love,” she breathed in return, clasping his hand briefly in hers. “If we're to be wed, there are things that must be done properly.”

She suspected he didn't know exactly what she meant by that. As far as she could tell, her partner—her husband-to-be—remained ignorant of certain things in Aincrad. Introducing him to them was something to which she was very much looking forward.

Alas, duty first, Kizmel thought, accompanying Kirito through Dollarah's dusty streets to the clearing group's temporary headquarters. Duty—and a settling of accounts.

Much the same assortment of clearers waited inside the meeting room as the day before. Klein had rejoined Fuurinkazan, and the usual assortment of Divine Dragons and Knights of the Blood were there, along with various unaligned players. At least two of the last, Kizmel realized, she didn't even recognize, and wondered absently what they were doing in a strategy meeting for a Field Boss.
Philia, she noticed curiously, was entirely absent. Rain was not, and indeed the first to notice her return. “Kizmel!” the redhead called, heedless of the way she interrupted the meeting. “You're back!”

Laughing, Kizmel caught Rain's embrace, returning it in full measure. “Yes, I'm here, Rain. Kirito brought me back—as I'm sure you knew he would.”

“Well, he does come through when it counts. Usually.” Rain pulled away, latching onto Kirito to give his arm a brief squeeze. “Good work, hero.”

He laughed sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. Kizmel found herself hiding a chuckle behind her hand, seeing him so awkward after his boldness with her. “Well, I didn't really have a choice, did I?” he said. “…There's something I need to tell you and Philia, but it can wait 'til later…”

Many things, Kizmel thought. Good and bad. Tia, her words about her “sisters”, what happened with Morte… But today has not been all bad. Not at all.

She was interrupted in her musings, and Kirito saved from his embarrassment, by Asuna coming around from her place at the head of the table. The KoB's Vice-Commander—one of Kizmel's closest friends—stood there silently for a moment, biting her lip. Then, bowing deeply, she said, “I'm sorry, Kizmel-chan. What I said yesterday… It may have been true, but it was the wrong way to say it. And… our strategy then was wrong. We should never have even suggested it—”

Kizmel pulled the other girl into a tight hug. “It's all right, Asuna,” she whispered into chestnut hair. “I… am not exactly what I'd call 'all right' myself, but I will be. More than ever, now that I know the truth. All the truth.”

“…I'm still sorry. But I'm glad you know, Kizmel-chan. And I'm so, so glad you're back.” Asuna pulled back, brushing a sleeve across her eyes. “I'm sure we have a lot to talk about, but we've got a boss to take out. I got a tip last night—from an NPC—and it turns out Rain-san and a couple of lower-level solos have just the tricks we need. If you and Kirito-kun are up for it—”

“A moment, Vice-Commander? I'm afraid there's one more thing that needs to be said.”

All eyes in the room, even Heathcliff's dispassionate gaze, turned to Lind. The guildmaster of the Divine Dragons Alliance had risen from his chair, and now approached the newly-arrived pair.

Kizmel watched him warily. She was much recovered from the shock Lind had inflicted on her, but that by no means meant she’d forgotten it. With the proper context, his methods did seem marginally less horrific, to be sure, yet her encounter with Tia had left her questioning them once again.

Aloud, though, she merely said, “Yes, Guildmaster Lind?”

At first, he only stood there, visibly struggling to put thought into word. Finally, Lind said, “I won't apologize for yesterday, Kizmel-san. As it turns out, my proposed strategy may have been a flawed one, but what I said was still something you needed to hear.” He hesitated. “I am sorry that you had learn under such conditions.”

Kizmel gazed into the would-be knight's proud eyes for a long moment, then slowly nodded. “Fair enough, Guildmaster. To be honest, I wouldn't have accepted your apology in any case.” It was her turn to pause; in her case, for effect. “Neither Kirito nor I will ever contemplate joining the Divine Dragons, for any reason.”

“…That's fair enough,” Lind echoed. He hesitated again, pressed his lips in a fine line that wasn't quite a grimace, and turned to Kirito. “As to you—”
He was interrupted by the sound of an item being drawn from a Swordmaster's inventory. Before he—or anyone else—had a chance to even wonder what, Kirito's hand flicked toward him.

Anything else Lind might've tried to say was cut off by his gasp of shock, as an entire glass of ice water hit him full in the face.

“Right or not, that was still a jerk move yesterday, Lind,” Kirito said conversationally. “Honestly, I'd like to punch you for it, but we're not in a Safe Zone, so... I figured that was the next best thing.”

Flashing a quick grin, he took Kizmel's arm and led her past the sputtering guildmaster to the table. “So! What's the new plan, Asuna? If you think this is going to be over that quick, you must've found some big secret.”

Amid snickers from around the table, Kizmel heard Shivata choke out, “Y’know, Guildmaster... you kinda had that one coming.”

Quietly, so quietly only Kizmel's elven ears likely caught it, Lind muttered, “I suppose that was fair enough, as well...”

Returning to the head of the table, Asuna's ears were turning pink from an obvious effort not to join in the laughter. “It turns out, Kirito-kun, that an Extra Skill is the key to this battle,” she said, voice just a little higher in pitch than her usual Vice-Commander sobriety. “Would you believe we need to sing it to sleep...?”

Settling into a chair right beside Kirito, close enough to discreetly take his hand under the table, Kizmel smiled to herself. Bickering Swordmasters, insane plans against bizarre foes... Yes. This is home. This is where I belong. With these strange, infuriating, wonderful people.

Somewhere, Kizmel was convinced, some higher power was laughing at her. After all the heart-wrenching turmoil The Geocrawler had instigated—after all the trouble involved in several days of fruitless struggle—the battle that finally led to its demise was the most absurdly one-sided in her memory. Even the Fifty-First Floor's Tower Guardian, Agreus The Wind Fish, had put up more of a fight.

*Three Swordmasters sang a child's lullaby at it, while the rest of us hacked it to pieces. I'm surprised the lullaby did not put us to sleep.*

To have such a pathetically easy battle, after such chaos, surely meant something was having fun at their expense. Probably Kayaba. The more she learned of the man, the more she believed him to be diabolically capricious.

Deep down, though, Kizmel was forced to concede she couldn't object too much. A swift conclusion to the raid meant she and her comrades could promptly abscond from the frontline, and finally learn what, exactly, Philia had been up to during the day's events.

Returning to the Fifty-First Floor for the second time in as many days wasn't quite what she'd been expecting. As Klein led her party, his own Fuurinkazan, and Asuna toward Ousetta Island's docks, Kizmel leaned in close to Kirito. “Do you have any idea what's going on, my love?”

He blushed at her choice of address, but shook his head. “Those two wouldn't tell me, either. I think Fuurinkazan knows, but otherwise... Well, I'm pretty sure Argo is involved, somehow.”

That was ominous, considering the occasion. Kizmel found herself grateful that it was at least late enough in the day that swimsuits weren't required for safety. For what was coming, she didn't think they would be quite appropriate attire—certainly not with Argo guaranteed to be taking pictures.
“I don’t know your other party members very well,” Asuna put in, smiling softly. “But if I know Fuurinkazan, they won’t be too embarrassing. Not today.”

Probably true. If there was one thing concrete Kizmel had learned in the past months, it was that Klein knew quite well when to be perfectly serious. If Asuna had not taken the reins of clearing leadership, the samurai would certainly have been Kizmel’s choice.

At least Asuna made no complaint about taking time away from the front for once. I couldn’t imagine this day without her.

Realizing that her own party’s Black Cat was missing from the docks when they arrived was enough to lift both of Kizmel’s eyebrows. Klein, spotting the expression, laughed. “I promise you, no funny stuff tonight, My Lady,” he said, gesturing for the group to follow him aboard Kusanagi.

“Everything for the happy couple—even if I do kinda wanna strangle Kirito right now, the lucky dog…”

The last statement was low, but not quite enough to escape human ears, let alone elven. It earned Klein a cuff on the shoulder from Dynamm, and from Kirito a muttered, “You’d have better luck with girls if you didn’t talk like that, Klein.”

“Give ‘im a break,” Rain advised, leaning casually against Kusanagi’s rail as the sailboat cast off. “Not his fault there’s practically no girls his age in SAO. Think I’ve seen one or two back on the First Floor, and I remember one lady guildmaster in the mid-levels, but that’s about it.”

Ah, yes, the Swordmasters’ skewed gender proportions. At least I understand that better now.

Kizmel settled in beside Kirito on the deck, leaning against him more openly than she would have before. Kirito’s propensity for ending up entangled with half the women of Aincrad is still more of a mystery… but at least from today on, my claim will be clear.

The sun was low enough to see again by the time Kusanagi began to slow. More curious than ever, as she couldn't remember anything of any significance in that region of the Fifty-First Floor, Kizmel turned to look toward the bow. Just coming into clear view was small patch of land, so small she wasn't even sure it was on the map. On the tiny island was a dock, where Black Cat was already docked; and beyond it…

“A bungalow?” Kirito said, frowning. “Wait… Rain, don’t tell me…?”

“It’s a cabana, actually,” the redhead told him, smirking. “But yeah. Philia and I found it while the rest of you were running around trying to kill The Geocrawler. We did kinda blow the entire house budget, and maybe a little extra, but… Here’s our own private island, just for us. Well, sandbar, anyway, but who's counting?”

A dock, a small house, and enough beach to stretch out on. Kizmel knew exactly how much Cor they’d all allocated to the fund for their own private home, and wondered just how much more Philia had added from her treasure hunting. Even with all four of them contributing, such a purchase could not have been an easy one.

However much it was, she found herself deeply grateful. She'd been born to forests and dark stone, yet settling with Kirito and her friends in such a place would've felt wrong. Being able to rest at night on the floor that held some of her best memories with them—with him—was enough to make her eyes shimmer.

Waiting for them by the cabana, when they'd disembarked Kusanagi, were Philia, Sachi, and Argo the Rat. Kizmel and Kirito had barely stepped off the dock before they found themselves caught up
in a tangled hug by all three. “I'm so glad you're okay,” Sachi said, into the confused pile. “I was so worried… After everything you've both done for me, I couldn't stand it if I lost you, too.”

“I know,” Kizmel murmured back. “That's part of what brought me back. Thank you all, for caring.”

“Hah! 'Bout time ya realized it, Kii-chan. You're worth more to us than a buncha other players I could name, I can tell ya that.” It was almost a relief to hear the mischief in Argo's voice—another sign that everything was back to normal. “If ya hadn't come back, I might've had to do something drastic!”

Too normal, perhaps. I shudder to think of her definition of drastic. “Perish the thought, Argo. Please.”

It was Philia who scored a direct hit on her heart, though. “Welcome home, Kizmel,” she whispered. “Welcome home.”

Tears beginning to run free now, Kizmel returned the group hug as well as she could. “I'm home,” she said, returning the traditional Swordmaster greeting of “tadaima”. “Truly, I'm home.”

What wedding traditions there were for the culture from which her betrothed came, Kizmel wasn't sure. Kirito had expressed an ignorance that she judged was only partly feigned, and she hadn't had a chance to ask anyone else she trusted to answer honestly. Her own people's, she judged unfit for the situation, and truthfully had never studied in-depth. Aincrad's own, built into the “system” that governed the world, seemed quite minimal.

It was Asuna, in the couple of hours between The Geocrawler's defeat and the departure for the Fifty-First Floor, who had put together an improvised event. Simple, Kizmel thought, but elegant—especially for something devised on such short notice.

So, as the sun began to dip below the rim of the Fifty-First Floor, Fuurinkazan stood in full armor on one side of the island's narrow beach. Red lacquer gleaming like blood against the sunset, even the most unkempt of them looked the part of noble warriors.

On the other side, a collection of independents. Asuna, in her full red-trimmed white KoB uniform. Rain in her knee-length coat, and Philia concealing her revealing armor under a cloak borrowed from Sachi. Argo, somehow managing to appear solemn in her typical brown cloak. Even Agil had arrived at some point in the preparations, wearing polished armor and a broad grin, hands clasped on a huge battleaxe as if it were a ceremonial blade.

Between the rows of witnesses, Kirito stood waiting, his adventuring garb replaced with the tailored suit and tailed coat he'd worn for the Yule Festival.

As Asuna had insisted, only when the others were in place did Kizmel come down from the cabana. Her own armor had been exchanged for the rose-accented tunic, tights, and long gloves she'd worn for that fateful dance. The way Kirito blushed, swallowing hard at the sight of her, brought a smile to her face as she walked down the sand toward him.

There was no provision for ceremony in Aincrad's marriages. All there was, was Kirito silently taking her gloved hand in his, and drawing her to the water's edge. There he opened his menu, nervously touching a precious few commands, and a small window appeared before Kizmel.

Such a simple thing, for a moment of such import. It said only, [Kirito Proposes Marriage: Yes/No?]
Too simple, perhaps. Someday, Kizmel hoped, they could do this properly. For now, she only smiled softly, and carefully pressed her choice.

Later, she would learn of the large, bright [Congratulations!] notice that appeared above them. At that moment, Kizmel cared only for the indefinable yet unmistakable change that had just occurred, and the way Kirito smiled and pulled her into his arms.

She didn't even care about the bright flash from Argo's Recording Crystal, as her lips met her husband's against the setting sun.

Between the coffers of four Swordmasters, buying an entire small island—or sandbar, whatever—was just barely possible. Barely. Kirito suspected they would all need to be frugal with expenses for a little while, and he'd soon found the furnishings in the island's cabana were a bit lacking. There were just enough chairs in the common room for their little party, and one of the two bedrooms only had one bed in it.

He didn't grudge the purchase, though. It was right, he thought, that Rain and Philia had found them a home on the floor where they'd come together. The floor where he'd been forced to confront the feelings he'd come to have for his partner.

*My wife,* Kirito corrected himself, looking into the mirror set over the dresser in his and Kizmel's room. *That's... going to take some getting used to.*

So much had changed in just a couple of days. Kizmel had finally learned the truth of *SAO,* grappled with it, and somehow come out the other side without hating his guts. For the first time, he himself had been forced to kill another human being. Now he was *married,* something that would've been unthinkable to him even in this world, not so long ago.

Waiting for Kizmel to emerge from their bedroom's attached bath, Kirito found himself just looking at himself in the mirror. Shirt unequipped to deal with the heat that lingered into the night, he thought it was the first time he'd really *looked* at himself since... maybe since the death game had begun. By rights, he ought to have had dozens of scars from all his battles, and a good deal more muscle from daily effort with a sword, but his virtual body showed no sign.

He did think, looking closely, that his body had changed some since the day Kayaba trapped them all. A little taller, his face a little more mature; he wondered if Kayaba had taken into account growth of the younger players, when he gave them their real faces. Whether that was a kindness or a curse, Kirito couldn't quite decide.

Otherwise, the only changes he could see were the simple silver band on his left ring finger, which would only come off now in death, and a darkness in the onyx eyes looking back at him that hadn't been there before. The knowledge of what it was to take a life, he supposed.

One thing he knew for sure: that was no longer the face of the boy who'd entered *Sword Art Online's* beta test some nineteen months before. The otaku whose real name even he barely remembered was gone. The swordsman Kirito, someone who more closely resembled what his grandfather had tried to make him, was all he saw now.

“Thinking deep thoughts, my love?”

Turning from the mirror, Kirito saw Kizmel emerging from the bathroom and swallowed hard. In place of the formal tunic she'd worn for their wedding, she was clad only in the thin nightgown he'd first seen the very night they met. Very sheer, it was, doing very little to hide the curves beneath. Back then, his own shyness and Asuna's insistence had kept him from looking too closely.
Now, as Kizmel strode over to join him by the mirror, he couldn't do anything but stare. Now, there was no reason for him not to.

From the smile on her face, she knew exactly the effect she was having. But then, he suspected she always had; certainly she'd known perfectly well what she was doing by the time she'd tricked him and Asuna into joining her in a hot spring back on the Sixth Floor.

Her gentle nudge of his ribs shoved thoughts back on track. Mostly. “Just thinking about how much I've changed,” he said honestly. “I have to admit, back when we first met I never would've imagined… well, this.”

Kizmel chuckled. “Says the man who suggested marrying me when we'd known each other perhaps three days.”

Kirito blushed. That moment of foot-in-mouth idiocy he remembered perfectly well. He was still surprised Asuna hadn't done more than shout at him over it. “Um, I didn't actually mean that one,” he mumbled. “I'd just been wondering what you were, and I couldn't exactly say that, so… I just said the first thing that popped into my head.”

He also distinctly recalled wishing VRMMOs had save files. If ever he'd wanted to reload a previous save outside of a life-and-death scenario, that had been it.

“Oh? That's a shame.” She chuckled again, a low, throaty sound that Kirito's hormones greatly approved of. Deliberately brushing against his arm, Kizmel stepped to the open window by the bed, gazing out at the Fifty-First Floor's sea. “By the time you met Queen Idhrendis, if you'd asked for my hand, I don't believe I would have objected.”

“Really?” He turned to watch her, a part of his mind noticing her gown clung to her back just as well as her front. “I mean, by then we were all good friends, but I didn't think, well…”

“I don't know that I loved you as man, then,” she said, resting her arms on the windowsill. “I believe it was after you saved me—again—in the battle that claimed the Black Cats that I began to wonder. I was only certain after our first kiss, at the Yule Festival. But after we'd fought so long and hard together, against the Fallen Elves, and you saved me from the Fallen King's poison… Yes, I think I could've accepted being your bride then.”

Blinking, Kirito tried to imagine himself asking an NPC queen for the right to marry one of her knights, especially with the even more limited social skills he'd had at the time. Then he imagined Asuna's reaction if he'd done so then, when they were still partners, and blanched.

Kizmel turned to face him again, saw his expression, and laughed. “Truly, I'm glad you waited,” she said, leaving the window to rejoin him. “I admit I grew… frustrated… with your refusal to acknowledge my feelings, but knowing what I do now… Yes. It's better this way.”

“I think so, too,” he said, reaching out to wrap an arm around her shoulders. “It's still going to take some getting used to, and I'm still sorry I took so long to tell you everything. But I'm glad I did, finally.”

“Good.” Leaning into him, her smile took on a new quality as she looked up at him. One that made his heart race, and for the life of him he couldn't tell if he was excited or frightened. “Now that we are married, Kirito-kun… I believe a husband has certain duties to his wife, hm?”

Urk. Kirito was socially inexperienced, not totally ignorant. He didn't think it was possible for a computer otaku not to understand what she meant, by his age. But still, she couldn't actually
mean…?

“Uh,” he said, when he regained some capacity for speech. “Um, Kizmel, I don't know that that's even possible here! I mean, the age rating for SAO was—”

“I believe we've established whatever conventions for your 'games' that might ever have applied were thrown aside by Kayaba when he began his crime, Kirito-kun.” There was a definite edge of fond exasperation in the elf girl's smile now. “If this was meant to be experienced as the world I always believed it to be, do you truly think such a thing would be left out? Let me show you what Argo told me of, the day I became a Swordmaster…”

As Kizmel set her menu to visible and led him through the maze of options, Kirito finally learned what it was that had managed to embarrass even her, that October day. So that's what an “Ethics Code” is, he thought numbly. How in the world did Kayaba sneak that past the ratings board?

Probably the same way he snuck in programming to fry brains. And he was avoiding the issue, which was getting a lot harder to do with Kizmel looking at him like that…

“Kizmel,” he got out, “are you sure about this? I…” He glanced away, face flaming as hot as it ever had since he'd been in the game. “…I'm fifteen…”

“Is that warrior who came into his own in this world I hear, or the boy who had never fought a battle in his life?” Her acerbic tone drew his gaze back to her, to find her rolling his eyes at him in a very human gesture. “My love, I asked Argo months ago. I'm perfectly well aware you're above your homeland's 'age of consent'. Considering that you are not at your legal 'marriageable age', I hardly think you should be worried about your homeland's standards at all now.

“So tell me, Kirito-kun: are you truly going to hold back now? After everything you've done in this world, is this too much for you?”

Kirito forced himself to stop, and think, and remember his own thoughts when he'd looked into that mirror. Remember the face not of a Japanese schoolboy, but a Swordmaster of Aincrad. The Black Swordsman, the first Beater, Kirito.

…That world isn't what matters here, is it? This is where I live now. There's no sense holding myself back now, is there.

He gave Kizmel his answer then, pulling her into his arms and kissing her again. She made a wordless sound of approval against his mouth, and started moving them away from the dresser.

Emboldened by the feeling of her soft body against his, he made a decision. Breaking the kiss, he traced his lips up to one of her long, pointed ears, traced the edge—and lightly bit down on the tip.

The room spun around him with startling abruptness, accompanied by a soft flash and quiet swish. When everything settled again, Kirito found himself flat on his back on the bed, Kizmel kneeling over him, her hands braced on either side of his head. Her gown was gone, leaving nothing but dusky skin filling his sight. Skin, and her half-lidded eyes and sultry smile.

“I believe I warned you, my love,” she whispered. “That there would be consequences if you did that again.” She licked her lips. “Are you prepared for them?”

Heart racing, Kirito reached up to cup her cheek. “I am,” he said, with only the slightest stutter.

“Good.” Then she was pressing against him, a desperate embrace, and all that mattered in his world was the Dark Elf in his arms.
In Aincrad, there was no true darkness at night. Though the moon and stars could only be seen at the
very edges of a floor, there was always some illumination; not the harsh white of the big cities of the
real world, but a soft blue glow with no real source. A concession to the nature of SAO as a “game”,
Kirito had always thought, even if that nature was only stage dressing.

Lying in bed beneath an open window, some starlight did reach Kirito now. His party's little island
was close enough to the edge of the Fifty-First Floor for that; earlier, moonlight had cast Kizmel in
an ethereal glow even as they moved together. Mostly, though, their bedroom was lit by that
omnipresent blue.

As much as he'd enjoyed the effects of moonlight, just then Kirito was glad for that blue glow. The
way it lit up Kizmel's dusky skin as she lay across him, only half-covered by the sheet in the tropical
floor's heat, helped ground him in the world that was his current home, not the one he was trying to
return to.

Listening to Kizmel's soft breathing, feeling it on his chest as she slept in his arms, he mused to
himself that there was another way in which people back in the real world would probably never
have understood him. No doubt to the people of Japan, Kayaba Akihiko was nothing but a mass-
murderer, who had trapped ten thousand people in a deadly game for his own amusement. Yet
Kirito, honestly, couldn't help but feel just a little bit grateful.

It was a horrible thought. Over three thousand people had already died, some of them because of
him, and he was sure the deaths were far from over. Even still, thinking back, he had the feeling that
that moment wouldn't have been so nice, if he'd never entered SAO. The person he would've become
if the past year had been in the real world, he suspected, would've been far less… fulfilled.

I'd be alone, Kirito told himself, stroking Kizmel's soft, smooth back. More than anything else, I'd
still be alone. I don't want that anymore. Not even after...

The elf in his arms stirred. “Kirito-kun?” she whispered, lifting her head to look at him. “Are you all
right?”

“I'm fine, Kizmel,” he told her, hand drifting back up to touch her face. “Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“Mm-hm.” She stretched, the motion sending a shiver through him, and shifted to better meet his
eyes. “I don't mind… Right now, reality is better than my dreams.”

Kirito would've liked to think that was a positive, and he was pretty sure it mostly was. After a year
and more of watching what he said, though, he picked up on her phrasing easily enough. “Bad
dreams?”

“Not all of them. Some of them were of us, the nights we spent together before.” A smile crossed
Kizmel's face, then faded. “Some… Well. I suppose I'm not going to recover from everything I've
learned overnight.” She hesitated. Sighed, and lowered her head to rest on his shoulder. “…I'm still
frightened, Kirito-kun.”

Well. He certainly couldn't argue with that. What they did on a daily business in clearing was
dangerous enough for him, and he only had to worry about dying in combat. His own bold promise
aside—however sincere he was in keeping it—they still didn't know how to save her from Aincrad's
inevitable end.

“We'll find a way through, Kizmel,” he murmured, running his hand down her back again. “If there's
one thing I know besides swords, it's computers. All I need is a hint, some kind of access. I'm sure
there's something, somewhere.”
Those weren't just empty words, either. Argo had already brought Kirito rumors of admin consoles, failsafes in case of exactly the error everyone had originally thought the missing log-out option to be. She was still trying to track down details about supposed Argus employees among the playerbase, and he was confident she'd find something. She always did.

“I believe you, my love.” Her smile returned; smaller, but genuine. “You've never lied to me, after all.” One lilac eyebrow lifted. “And what is your excuse for sleeplessness, Kirito-kun? Surely you should be tired enough by now.”

Kirito flushed. “Well… I was just thinking about how hard it'll be to go back home,” he admitted. “Just today, so much happened. I've crossed some boundaries I never expected to. I… killed someone. And, well… Um. Earlier tonight.” He sighed, turning his head to look out the window at the slice of night sky. “I don't even recognize myself in the mirror now. I mean, my old self. I kind of wonder… what will my family see, when they look at me now? What will my sister see in my eyes?”

“A man,” Kizmel said confidently. “Perhaps others of your people would not, but I believe any family of yours would see through to the truth.” Her brow creased in a frown; not angry, he judged, just thoughtful. “Do you regret any of it?”

He thought back to the events of the day. Cutting down Morte—for his own life, for Kizmel's, and as cold as it was, for anyone who might be saved by keeping his Unique Skill secret a while longer. Confessing to Kizmel, and marrying her. Taking her to bed.

The good, and the bad. Would I do it all again, if I had to? ...Like I even have to think about it.

“No,” Kirito said finally, sadly. “I think I'm going to have a nervous breakdown sooner or later… but no. I don't regret it.”

“Good. Because you have nothing to be ashamed of, Kirito-kun—and I've no intention of letting you go, now.” She smiled again, cuddling closer. “I still need to meet my husband's family, after all.”

That was possibly the most frightening thing he'd heard since the whirlwind of events had started. Still, something about it appealed to him, and holding Kizmel close, enjoying her warm softness, he let the thought of bringing her home—truly home—carry him into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. That was very nearly the longest chapter I've written in a decade. Even for me, 20,000-plus-word chapters aren't exactly standard.

Definitely the most plot I've packed into one chapter. Maybe ever. Technically I could've ended the chapter at least three different places earlier than I did, but the remaining scenes simply fit best narratively at the close of a chapter. (As it is, there's several loose ends to be tied up in the next chapter, leaving aside the plot threads that are far from finished here.)

One thing I feel I should clarify, for those who know the SAO gameverse: despite Tia's presence here, and her comments about "sisters", Premiere will not be in the fic. As I may have mentioned previously--and definitely have over at FFnet--I'm not exactly a fan of Yui, and I consider Premiere to be essentially Yui, but even less interesting. Tia's
"sisters" are canon characters, but Premiere will not be among them.

So. Here ends, more or less, the first full arc of Monochrome Duet. The Aincrad arc is far from done, of course, but the focus of the overarching plot shifts from here on out, with one of the driving points--Kizmel's journey to the truth--complete. Everything changes from here.

This is also the final completed chapter, so I'm afraid there'll be more of a delay before the next one is posted here. That being said, Chapter XX: Ballad of Twilight I--yes, for once I'm accepting from the start it'll be a multi-chapter arc, instead of naively assuming I can finish it in one--is in progress. Hopefully it'll be complete within the next couple of weeks. Can't say it'll be as epic as this chapter was, but I think there's one or two twists that will be make it reasonably entertaining. -Solid
March 8th, 2024

The calls of seabirds were what gradually drew Kirito out of a sound sleep, instead of the usual wind instruments of his system alarm. Seabirds, and the smell that heralded rain—or maybe a storm.

Kayaba really went all-out, if I can smell that, he thought groggily. Mm… I should get up and close the window before it hits. And why didn't I set my alarm last night…?

Despite the open window and the coming storm, though, he was too warm to really want to move. Warmer than the tropical air of the Fifty-First Floor could account for, now that he thought about it—and then as he reluctantly came closer to full wakefulness, he registered more than just sound and smell.

Soft, warm breath brushing over his neck. A comfortable weight stretched across him, tangled in his legs and reaching clear up to his shoulder. Warm softness pressing against his chest, rising and falling with gentle breathing, thumping with the comforting sound of another's heartbeat. Smooth skin and toned muscles under his hands.

Blinking sleep out of his eyes, Kirito looked down to see lilac hair and a peaceful smile on the face of the Dark Elf slumbering in his arms. He couldn't see much below that, at some point in the night he'd apparently pulled up a blanket against the coming storm, but he didn't really need to. His hands told him plenty. Memory told him enough for his face to burn.

It wasn't the first time he'd woken up to find Kizmel in his bed, by any means. She and Asuna had dragooned him into sharing as far back as the Sixth Floor, and since then the elf had made something of a habit of it after particularly bad days—once on that very floor—and eventually just if she felt like it. That much he'd gotten used to, and even secretly come to enjoy.

Kizmel in his bed naked? That was new. Though he wasn't sure if it was her state of undress that was more of a shock to his system, or the realization he had no reason to be concerned, and every reason to just appreciate it.

Everything had changed in the past two days. Kizmel knew the truth, finally. He'd finally been able to come clean with that, and then with his feelings for her. He'd married her. Slept with her. Killed for her.

Remembering the look on Morte's face as his blades shattered the PKer gave Kirito a chill worse than the wind coming in through the window. Cold enough that even the warmth of Kizmel's bare skin on his couldn't chase it away. The whirlwind of emotion and passion the previous night had kept what he'd done from sinking in for a few hours, but now that he was at peace…

Coper died because his own trap backfired. Sasamaru because I could only save one. I killed Morte with my own hands. My own swords.
Odds were good that if the players ever succeeded in beating *Sword Art Online*, all the deaths would be legally attributed to Kayaba Akihiko's deathtrap. No one else, not even Laughing Coffin, was likely to shoulder any responsibility, so far as society was concerned. Kirito knew his home culture well enough to be sure they'd just want to sweep it all under the rug.

He knew better. He'd told Rosalia the deaths she'd caused, the lives she'd taken, were her own responsibility. What he'd done had been self-defense, not cold-blooded murder, but one essential truth was the same: Morte's blood was on his own hands, and he knew it.

Maybe it was the chills that understanding brought that stirred Kizmel, if *SAO* was able to simulate that. More likely it was the shivers, which the game engine communicated perfectly well. Either way, her breathing changed, and her eyes fluttered open. Lifting her head from his shoulder, she turned half-lidded violet on him, and a smile that managed to chase away the chill again.

The way she pulled herself up to kiss him, gently but thoroughly, definitely distracted him. Thoroughly.

When the elf girl finally broke away, she settled back into the crook of Kirito's arm with another smile, not bothering to pull the blanket back up. “Good morning, my husband,” she murmured.

“Good morning, Kizmel.” Still coming to grips with the idea that he was someone's husband, let alone this amazing girl's, he pulled her a little closer. Trying not to stare at her chest—well, not too much, anyway; she'd made it clear she'd be insulted if he didn't look at all—he added, “Did you sleep well?”

“Better than I ever have before,” Kizmel replied, leaning into his embrace. “…I do suspect I'll be having nightmares soon enough, but I believe last night's events kept them at bay quite well for one night.”

He blushed. Now he remembered why he hadn't set his alarm; “sleep” hadn't exactly been on his mind for much of the night. Neither of them had really known what they were doing, but there certainly hadn't been any lack of… enthusiasm.

*Maybe* because *of what else happened yesterday*, Kirito thought, idly letting one hand stray farther down from her shoulder than he would ever have dared before. We were both glad to be alive, and after she had her world turned upside-down and what I had to do to Morte… We both needed the distraction.

“What troubles you, Kirito-kun?” Kizmel asked, shifting to allow his wandering hand better access with a pleased hum.

For a second, he was torn between cold logic and the promise of warm skin. Logic won out—though he didn't stop his hand, either. “…I killed Morte. On purpose.”

She let out a slow sigh, breath tickling his chest. “I suspected as much,” she admitted. “Truthfully, I'm still struggling with understanding that what I had believed reality is illusion. I can't imagine that taking a real life for the first time, after so long fighting nothing but dolls, is any easier.”

“Not really, no.” Though the fact that she understood helped. Probably no one else in Aincrad, player or AI, could understand what Kirito was feeling as well as his partner. *My wife. How weird is that?* “I thought I was prepared, that after getting the Baneblade I'd thought through what it would be like.” He chuckled; a bitter sound, ironic more than amused. “My grandfather always said it would be like that. That's why he taught kendo, he told us, not kenjutsu.”
Years after the stern old man had died, years more since Kirito had fled the dojo, and now he finally had a glimmer of understanding. Some power in the universe was laughing at him, he was sure of it.

“I doubt either of us will find easy answers to our problems, Kirito-kun,” Kizmel said then. “All I can say is this: if you’d known from the start that you would have to kill Morte, would you have done the same?”

“Yes,” Kirito said at once, closing his eyes. “He was trying to kill me. He was probably responsible for more than a few of the deaths the players have suffered, directly or indirectly. And he was between you and me.” Behind closed lids, he could still see Morte shattering, like so many before him. “I couldn't make any other choice.”

“Then hold onto that, my love. It was terrible thing to have to do—but it was Morte's own choice to be in that position.” Her hand began to stroke along his chest, tracing what muscle he did still have after years away from the dojo. “When others turn to evil, it would be more evil yet for us to turn away.”

“...I can't argue with that.” That, right there, was one reason he was inclined to believe what Klein had relayed to him the previous day: that somehow Kizmel had lived a full life, improbable as it was. He just couldn't believe that kind of experience could be programmed.

Though Kirito was starting to have a little trouble concentrating on that, between the softness under his hand and the touch of her fingers roaming his body. Tragedy was only part of the previous day's events, and Kizmel suddenly seemed quite determined to remind him of the fact.

*Impossible* to concentrate, a few moments later, when she straddled him, pressed her torso tight to his, and pulled him into a burning kiss.

Reason was on pause for a bit after that. Only when the elf girl broke away for air, panting for breath—not that he was any better off—did Kirito catch a glimpse of the time display in his HUD. Some trace of sanity managed to get the upper hand over hormones, and he gripped her shoulders to hold her off before she could dive in again.

“Kirito-kun…”

The pout on that flushed face was just *not fair*, and it almost won out over good sense. “I wish we could stay in bed all day, too, Kizmel,” he managed. “But it's getting a little late in the morning.”

Kizmel's eyes flicked toward her lower-right, where her own time display would be hovering in her vision. Her pout turned to a grimace when she saw, as he had, that it was already ten in the morning—well after their usual wakeup—and after a moment she relented and leaned back.

“I suppose we shouldn't keep Philia and Rain waiting any longer,” she said with a sigh. “But truly, Kirito-kun, we must find some time to have our own—what did Argo call it? Ah, yes—'honeymoon' when we can.”

“That'd be nice, yeah. Maybe the next time we hit a breather level.” Still, part of Kirito was relieved when she climbed off him, sliding off the bed entirely. If she'd pushed it, he didn't think he would've been able to refuse.

Hormones nearly won out again anyway, watching Kizmel walk over to the open window with a casual disregard for modesty. He didn't think she was even trying to be seductive now—which if anything made it worse. She was just herself, and “herself” was a combination of exotic beauty and the lithe muscle and graceful motion of a swordswoman.
He almost went deep into his menu to reactivate the Ethics Code out of sheer self-preservation. Would have, in fact, had Kizmel not confessed to him in a brief moment of sanity the previous night that she always had it off when they were in private. Had, in fact, since months before she'd realized she was in love with him.

That gesture of trust was one Kirito couldn't bring himself not to reciprocate. Even when he was hanging onto rationality by his fingernails.

Leaning her head out the window, Kizmel sniffed at the growing wind. “A storm is coming,” she said after a moment. “I fear we'll need to dress more warmly today, Kirito-kun.”

He shrugged, firmly squashing his inner conflict about whether that was a good or bad thing. “We'd have to after breakfast, anyway,” he pointed out. “It's not quite spring, up on the Fifty-Sixth Floor. Even if most of it's a desert.”

That in mind, he finally opened his menu, skipped quickly through the sub-menus, and with a few keystrokes equipped his usual black clothes. Even without the coat, it was enough to keep away the chill Kizmel's absence had left on his skin. Not to mention gave him a much-needed buffer between hormones and good sense.

“You have a point,” the elf girl mused. Stepping back from the window, she closed it against the wind, turned to face him, and swept two fingers down to bring up her own menu. “Besides, I believe I saw Black Cat coming in, with Asuna as a passenger.”

Asuna's coming? Must be business; she never gets two days off in a row.

Kirito was distracted from that, and the pang of disappointment when dusky skin vanished from view, by Kizmel's choice of attire for the morning. He'd been expecting the tights and tunic she normally wore out of armor, or maybe her nightgown if she wasn't through teasing him.

What shimmered into place over bare skin was instead tights, a black skirt that reached midway down her thighs, and a purple tank top eerily similar to something he'd once seen on her mirror image.

Seeing Kizmel dressed in a way that wouldn't look out of place on the streets of his hometown in the real world, Kirito found himself at a complete loss for words. Just then, maybe for the first time, he could clearly picture her in Kawagoe, coming home with him…

Without realizing it, he'd come to his feet, and now stood in front of her. Swallowing against the abrupt dryness in his mouth, he reached out to cup her cheek, suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of sheer unreality. “Kizmel...”

Kizmel pressed his hand closer with hers, smiling. “Well,” she murmured. “I don't believe I need ask what you think of Asuna's wedding present.” She leaned into his touch a moment longer, then pulled away. Turning him to the door leading back into the common area of the cabana, the elf girl wrapped her arm around his. “Come, my love. Let's not keep the others waiting.”

For all the many things that had gone wrong of late, Kizmel still felt she had reason to be pleased with herself. It had taken two months and world-shattering revelations, but she had succeeded in fulfilling, as Argo might have put it, her “New Year's resolution”. Quite well, at that, she thought with a smile, as she and Kirito walked into the cabana's common room. Better than I ever dreamed.

Not the most ostentatious room, that. Simple wood-paneled walls, a fireplace that wasn't likely to see much use in the Fifty-First Floor's climate. Four chairs set around a breakfast table under a window
by the east wall; and by the fireplace, the one piece of furniture that looked at all expensive, a large
couch.

Nothing much. Only a beginning. But to Kizmel, it was everything. A home for her new family, one
that had no memories but the ones they would create together.

“Hey, sleepyheads!” Philia called from the table. “About time you got up. Though honestly, I wasn't
expecting to see you guys until at least noon.” The treasure hunter gave them a sly grin. “Should
Rain and I be glad sound doesn’t travel through closed doors in *SAO*?”

Kirito choked, and a furiously blushing Rain turned a glare on the blonde from the other side of the
table. “Philia, you can't just—I mean—!”

“If you're going to ask something like that, *please* do it when you don't have guests,” Asuna agreed,
herself so red steam was literally coming out of her ears. From the couch by the fireplace, she
favored Philia with the full glare of a Vice-Commander. “I know more about some things than I want
to as it is, Philia-san.”

Her own face burning, Kizmel could only nod in mute agreement. As she'd told Kirito once before,
what was done in private was often a very different thing from what was done around others, and
this was *definitely* one of them. Even “girl talk” had its limits.

Clearing her throat awkwardly, she pulled Kirito to the remaining chairs at the table. “We had an…
enjoyable evening, Philia,” she managed, looking anywhere but at the treasure hunter—or Kirito. “I
believe that's really all that needs to be said on the matter.”

“That's *still* too much information,” Asuna muttered. “But… good for you.”

That last was under her breath, so quiet Kizmel suspected she was the only one who heard it at all.
She let her friend have her illusion of privacy, though. *I haven't seen Asuna so embarrassed since the
time I tricked her and Kirito into sharing a hot spring with me without those ridiculous swimsuits. This
time, I have to agree with her.*

**Has Philia been taking lessons from Argo?** Terrifying thought, that.

Once they were all settled again, it was Asuna's turn to clear her throat. “If everyone is quite done
talking about… that…” She took a deep breath, looked over at Kizmel, and smiled. “That looks
good on you, Kizmel-chan. I was hoping I'd gotten a good match for you.”

“It's perfect, Asuna. Thank you.” Kizmel glanced down at the Swordmaster-style casual clothes
she'd chosen for the morning, and felt a small smile of her own. “Not quite what I'm used to, but
that's not a bad thing at all.”

In point of fact, she’d chosen Asuna's gift for this morning's attire partly for exactly that reason. Still
off-balance—to put it mildly—from the radical shift in her own view of the world, she'd decided
wearing something completely different from her people's style was exactly what she needed.

The shattering change in perspective on her past was something with which it would take some time
for her to truly reconcile. In the meantime, as with their new home, she thought an entirely new
beginning was in order. There were no memories, good or ill, associated with a Swordmaster’s skirt
and “tank top”.

**Well,** she amended. **Some good memories already. The look on Kirito's face… Perhaps the day
didn't start as well as I would have preferred, but it certainly wasn't bad.**
“Well,” Asuna said then, abruptly standing. “I wish I could say I was here for a social call like last night, but today the Commander sent me on business. Let me get breakfast for the newlyweds, and we can get started.”

She disappeared into the cabana’s small kitchen, leaving a perplexed team behind. “…Vice-Commander Asuna has the Cooking skill?” Philia said, blinking.

“Asuna’s dabbled in non-combat skills almost as long as I’ve known her,” Kirito said with a shrug, redness finally fading from his face. “I think she finally settled on Cooking because a good meal can be a major morale boost, sometimes.”

“An army travels on its stomach!” Rain proclaimed, nodding. “That’s the expression, isn’t it?”

So Kizmel had heard, during her training as a knight. Though she had suspicions now as to the origin of the saying, along with most of everything else she’d been taught in those days. This world is Kayaba’s invention, and perhaps a few others. Makers of games, not soldiers. I hope they at least consulted with true warriors.

Well. Perhaps that fear, at least, was groundless. From what her friends among the Swordmasters had begun to explain, now that she knew the truth, Kayaba had apparently had no shame when it came to “borrowing” from other sources. Such a perfectionist was likely to have stolen the best military wisdom, as well.

“Breakfast!” Asuna called out, before the elf could go too far down that mental path. “Don’t worry about me,” she added, setting plates of pancakes and bacon, flavored with a delicious-smelling syrup, on the table. “I ate this morning. For me this is all business.”

So she said, Kizmel mused as she dug gratefully into her friend’s cooking. But if she was any judge, Asuna was more relaxed than she’d seen in some months. I wonder what, exactly, Kirito had to say to her two days ago? This reminds me more of the Asuna from the days of our battles against the Forest and Fallen.

Kizmel wasn’t about to question it, in any case. For now she intended to merely enjoy the food—Kirito identified the syrup as maple, with evident surprise—and not worry about anything more serious for a few moments longer.

All too soon, though, breakfast came to an end, and their four-person party turned their chairs to face the couch. Asuna, who’d waited with admirable patience, took that as her cue. “All right, you guys,” she began. “Kirito-kun. I understand there were some things you didn’t want to talk about in front of the whole clearing group. What happened yesterday, really?”

Kirito and Kizmel glanced at each other, and with a small nod the elf girl ceded to the swordsman. His news, she felt, was the more painful. It would be better for him to get it out of the way.

Sighing, he opened his menu, went into his storage, and materialized the Baneblade. “First things first,” he said, turning to Philia. “Can you Inspect this for me, Philia?”

The treasure hunter, the only one present who had the skill that allowed for examining a weapon’s status, took the sword. “The Baneblade? What about it…?” With a quick tap, she brought up its status, and moved her finger down the immaterial page that appeared. “Hm… Eh? ’With the blade tested by the blood of evil, its sleeping power begins to wake. Let its edge taste the Well of Life, and the sword shall be restored.’” She looked up, eyes wide. “Kirito…”

“Yeah.” Kirito sighed, looking down at the clenched hands in his lap. “I was afraid it would say
If Philia was surprised, Asuna looked downright stricken. “Kirito-kun…”

“Morte is dead,” he said flatly. “I killed him yesterday, with the Baneblade.” Kizmel wrapped an arm around his back, and he didn’t resist her pulling him closer to her side. “I had to. He was between me and Kizmel while she fought off another member of Laughing Coffin, he was trying to kill me, and…” He drew in a deep breath, eyes falling closed in a wince. “No. Never mind that.”

Kizmel gently rubbed his back. He’d told her, the previous evening, the part he couldn’t bring himself to say to the others. That, having used Dual Blades, he hadn’t wanted to risk leaving Morte as a witness. Not of perhaps the one crucial advantage he might have, if it came to fighting PoH again.

She understood, but she’d lived the life of a warrior. Even now, few of the Swordmasters had any idea of the kind of cold, hard logic battles between intelligent warriors held.

“…I’m sorry, Kirito-kun,” Asuna said softly. “But… we all knew it was going to come to that, sooner or later. Don’t blame yourself.”

“And don’t start thinking we’re going to think you’re some kind of monster, either,” Philia put in quickly. “We were there for Titan’s Hand, remember? Those guys wouldn’t back down ‘til we poisoned them, and they were so low-level they couldn’t even hurt us. Morte…”

“One of the first PKers,” Rain put in, nodding. “I remember from Argo’s notes. He almost killed you more than once, didn’t he?”

“I know,” Kirito whispered. Outside the window, the wind began to keen, as if to match the mood inside. “I almost killed him, too, back on the Sixth Floor. I thought I was prepared. But…” He accepted the Baneblade back from Philia, and banished it to his storage with a shiver. “My grandfather always said it wouldn’t be easy.”

If they hadn’t already been focused on him, four sets of eyes would’ve locked on him with that comment. The greatest taboo of the Swordmasters, besides killing one another, was speaking of the world they’d left behind. Kirito had relaxed that some with his closest friends, but Kizmel knew he still didn’t bring it up lightly. “Kirito-kun?”

“My grandfather taught kendo,” he said in answer to Asuna’s query. “Never kenjutsu. But… well. While he never talked about it much, he was a police officer before he retired to focus on kendo. Like a city guard,” he added, before Kizmel could ask. “Grandfather always told my sister and me that a real sword has only one purpose: to kill. He taught kendo because he never wanted any students who would have to face that reality. ‘Too many young fools think they’re ready, and they never are,’” he continued, with the air of quoting words oft-heard. “‘Except sometimes, they are—and that’s worse.’”

Kizmel put that statement together with her husband’s reaction to the previous day, and what she’d seen of the PKers they’d fought, and winced. That much, at least, matched with her own training and experience. On the one hand reassuring, on the other… not.

“He said that a lot, when I was growing up,” Kirito added, seeing the looks Rain and Philia were giving him. “I didn’t train under him very long, but, well, when he said something it tended to stick.” He shrugged uncomfortably. “I’m… dealing with it. Kind of. But the Baneblade is not helping.” He shivered again, under Kizmel’s touch. “That message? That thing is intended to get more powerful after killing someone. I don’t care if it only worked against someone who deliberately attacked someone else. Kayaba is a bastard.”
"Indeed," Kizmel said softly. "Were this truly a relic of an ancient conflict, as I had believed, that would not be so unreasonable. As part of a game? Kayaba's machinations are those of a cruel weaver of tales, not one managing a world of living people."

That, she'd decided in the past day, was perhaps what was most horrifying about the Swordmasters' captor. When she'd believed him to be a sorcerer who had called realms of real people into the sky, he'd only been manipulating a situation that already existed. From legends that still survived from before the Great Separation, it was even possible there'd been a cold logic to it, aiming toward a legitimate end.

Instead, the entire world was nothing but a way for a mad storyteller to use people as living characters in a story. For that, Kizmel would gladly have placed her sword between his ribs.

For what she'd begun to sickly suspect, since her journey of self-discovery, she would have volunteered him for the darkest rituals of the Fallen Elves.

Abruptly, Kizmel shook her head. "Enough about Morte and the Baneblade," she said into the gloomy silence that had fallen. "We have no clues at all on this 'Well of Life', so let it rest for now. There is something else you must know, Asuna—something that, somehow, we must tell the other clearers. Though I fear how they may respond." It was her turn to take a deep breath. "I was wrong to believe the residents of the Steel Castle were as alive as I, Asuna. But the Swordmasters have been just as wrong in assuming I was the only living soul here before you."

She told them all, then, of her encounter with Tia. The “NPC” who claimed to be less than what Kizmel was, yet more than most of the inhabitants of Aincrad. How the cold girl had spoken of the presence of others like her—and that she herself had sided with Laughing Coffin, for the sake of delaying the end of the only world she knew.

The storm was upon their cabana in earnest, by the time Kizmel's side of the tale was told. She thought it was fitting, given what a storm the previous day's events had the potential to set off. I thought it was my world alone that was upset, she thought, leaning into her husband's side as the others took in the news. But this… I need not understand the whole truth of this "Sword Art Online" to comprehend the implications of Tia's existence.

Rain was the first to break the silence otherwise marred only by wind and thunder. “Well,” she began, mustering a small smile. “There's a bit of good news in there, right? I mean, if Tilnel really existed, then…”

“Then Kizmel-chan's memories aren't just fakes,” Asuna agreed. She was kneeling by the fireplace, coaxing it to life against the growing chill. “I'm glad for that, really. But this could change everything.” When the sparks had turned to a merrily crackling fire, she turned back to Kizmel's group. “Kirito-kun? What do you think?”

“…It's going to complicate things some,” Kirito said slowly. He looked out the window at the crashing waves and brights flashes of lightning. “Though maybe not as much as you'd think. We'd already agreed we need to treat every quest as if we were really summoned heroes, right?”

“After what you pointed out about how Kayaba probably set up the lore?” She nodded. “Even Lind isn't going to risk anything like what he originally suggested against The Geocrawler. There might be a couple in the clearing group that disagree, but there shouldn't be any organized action.” Asuna pursed her lips in thought, settling back down on the couch. “Which means we're not likely to hurt any of these 'living NPCs'.”

“At least not by accident,” Rain put in, a troubled frown on her face. “If this 'Tia' is with Laughing
Coffin, though… Who knows how many of them there might be out to get us. I mean, she wasn’t wrong. We’d be killing them just by trying to go home, even if we never laid eyes on them.”

Kizmel nodded silently. That was, after all, the crux of her own dilemma, and why it had taken so long to close the last distance with Kirito. "There are those seeking to free me from this world before the end, she thought, gently squeezing Kirito's hand. Yet whether they succeed or fail, my choice was made. As a knight, I cannot choose selfishness. Tia and others like her may not be so bound."

“That's true enough, Rain. But that's going to be true no matter what we do. Even if we stopped trying to clear the game right now, this world wouldn't last forever.” Kirito shrugged uncomfortably, meeting the redhead's eyes. “The SAO servers would have to be shut down eventually. But... for what it's worth—and I know it isn't much—there can't be more than a handful of NPCs like Tia.”

“You're sure, Kirito-kun?” Asuna said sharply.

“Definitely.” He nodded at Kizmel, a brief smile lighting his face. “Tia said she and her 'sisters' aren't the same as Kizmel. That implies Kizmel, like I always thought, isn't a conventional AI—and that Tia's type are born of conventional technology.”

*I think I'll be spending most of the next few weeks pestering him with questions about how this world truly works,* Kizmel thought. From the look of it, the other humans in the room had some inkling of what Kirito meant, but she was completely lost. “The distinction being, Kirito?”

“Conventional means it obeys the rules I'm familiar with, Kizmel,” he obliged. “Meaning however you bypass the normal rules, they don't. They're bound by the capabilities of SAO's hardware, and there's no way the servers can support more than a handful of NPCs with that kind of processing devoted to them.”

“So at least not many will have to die for you to be free,” she said softly. “That is a small consolation. Even so... I suppose it would be much worse if there truly were entire communities in this world.”

“For *us* to be free, Kizmel,” he said at once, squeezing her shoulder. “I promised you I'd bring you out, too, and I meant it.”

So he had. And if there was one thing that had been reaffirmed about Kizmel's world over the past days, it was that Kirito never lied to her. No matter what, that was one rock in her life, one she was only too glad to cling to.

*It means I will bear guilt as well, for what will become of the likes of Tia. But I had already decided to aid the Swordmasters—the players—whether I could be taken out of this world or not. The responsibility would be mine as well, and I will not look away from it.*

Philia cleared her throat. “Um, not to break up the warm and fuzzies, but... I had a thought, about Tia. Am I the only one thinking her being a 'conventional' AI is exactly how she ended up with Laughing Coffin?” Collective attention turning to her, she raised her hands, palm-up. “I'm not a computer expert, but I'm gonna guess that if Tia is 'alive but not as alive as Kizmel', the biggest difference is probably in intuition. Does that make sense?”

Kirito frowned. “…Probably,” he said after a moment. “You probably don't want the technical details, but there's basically two kinds of AI concepts: top-down, which makes decisions based on a pre-programmed logic tree, and bottom-up, which would be... well, essentially what Kizmel is: an intelligence that learns on its own, just like a human. Going by that, I'd say it's safe to assume Tia's a top-down. I didn't think we had the technology for even that before SAO, but if Kizmel proves the
existence of bottom-up, then top-down would be easy.”

I definitely need to ask questions. Many, many questions.

It was something of a relief when Kizmel met Asuna's eyes, and the human girl gave a resigned shrug. Apparently such knowledge wasn't ubiquitous in their world, either.

Philia seemed to follow it well enough, though, and she nodded. “Okay, then. Here's what I think: according to Argo, there's a few reports from survivors of Laughing Coffin attacks that mention a girl that was probably Tia—and nothing that sounds like her before that. So PoH or one of his guys was probably the first player she met. Which means Laughing Coffin's view is the only one she knows.”

That, Kizmel grasped readily. “You're suggesting Tia follows PoH's philosophy—or at least the one he's told her—because she knows no other, and lacks the ability to question it without a comparison.” She winced. “That… must be a terrible life.”

“It… would make sense,” Asuna said softly. It was her turn to look out the window, expression distant. “Humans can have a hard time understanding what life is like outside what they've been brought up with it. An AI like what you guys are describing… I only hope her 'sisters' haven't been found by Laughing Coffin.”

“Yeah.” Kirito slumped in his chair with a sigh. “I'm worried enough about what we might have to do about the red players as it is, and they made their own choices. I don't like the thought of having to fight someone just because they don't know any better.”

Depressing thought, that. Though unlike her companions, it wasn't entirely unfamiliar to Kizmel. The situation had never arisen, to her immense relief, but she'd occasionally wondered what would have happened had they encountered any children among the Fallen Elves. With the Forest, there had always been at least the possibility of reason. The Fallen were warped, one and all, and she'd been sickeningly sure any children born to them would have been just as twisted, through no fault of their own.

Now that was a disturbingly comforting thought. Her life before meeting the Swordmasters had been a lie, yet it seemed her experiences were still applicable to some degree.

That fact was enough to make her want to vomit.

“Don't give up, guys,” Rain said suddenly, again the one to break the rain-filled silence. When eyes turned to her, she grinned. “So Tia doesn't know anything else? Then all we have to do is show her! We've got Kizmel as all the example she needs of what a real heroine to her people is, don't we?”

Kizmel flushed at the praise. “Please, Rain, you give me far too much credit. After all, my own motives are hardly entirely altruistic—and unlike Tia and her sisters, I have the chance of escape.”

The redhead snorted. “And we all know you'd be doing the same thing even if you didn't. But forget about that. They're tied to this world? That's what Kayaba decided, and I don't remember any of us wanting to do things by Kayaba's rules. If there's a way to bring Kizmel out with us, then we'll find a way for the others, too—even if we have to find Kayaba and make him do it for us!”

March 10th, 2024

The most frightening thing about being in Laughing Coffin, Lux often thought, was just how little she actually saw of their activities. Since being given the choice of joining them or dying in a dungeon, none of her greatest fears had yet come to pass. Two months on, and she had never been given the task of luring other players to where the PKers of the guild could murder them.
She wished that meant her conscience was clear. After all, so far all she'd done was make supply runs into towns for the orange-marked players and provide what information she could pick up about the activities of the clearing guilds. Jobs that kept her away from Laughing Coffin's base much of the time, and out of any direct schemes of murder.

Lux knew better than to let herself feel good about even that. Just supplying the orange players—the red players, as the PKers were starting to be called—made her an accessory, and she knew it all too well. What they did with the scraps of information she provided, she was afraid to ever know.

Frightening as it was, that ignorance was just barely enough to keep her sane. Her hands weren't clean, but she could at least tell herself she wasn't the monster her “guildmates” were. It was sometimes even enough to let her sleep at night—though she wasn't sure she'd have been able to if she spent all her time in the red guild's base.

Now Lux did have reason to be there, though. Delving deep into a cavern on the Twenty-Third Floor, she was returning to the dungeon Safe Zone Laughing Coffin's red players used with a fresh batch of supplies. At least all I should need to do today is drop these off and go, she thought, nimbly dodging a Dwarf Bandit's axe before swatting it into a tunnel wall with a Horizontal. How do they sleep here?

She'd tried, once, before PoH had decided exactly what her job would be. The drums the Dwarf mobs liked to play in the night hadn't been good for rest. Worse had been Johnny Black's cackling suggestion the Dwarves might've dug too deep.

No Balrogs so far. But that Bandit Lord I ran into last time shouldn't have been so close to the surface. This place is really starting to give me the creeps.

When Lux slipped through the hidden tunnel into Laughing Coffin's chosen safe area, she almost wished she had run into a Balrog along the way. At her level, she might've been able to solo even a minor boss on that floor, and it certainly wouldn't have been as disturbing as what she found among her "allies".

The rough-hewn, torchlit cavern was filled with a dozen of the ragtag batch of killers PoH had assembled. Most of them were lounging around, talking among themselves or checking equipment, as was usually the case when Lux visited. This time, though, the distinctive figure of Johnny Black was pacing around, gesticulating wildly as he muttered to himself. For an audience he had XaXa, watching him through the red eyes of his mask while he polished his estoc, and PoH, who slouched against one wall with a very thoughtful look on his face.

“Bastard… I'll kill him for that, I swear… Him and that bitch of a doll he's always fawning over… They thought what happened to those brats in the Black Cats was bad? I'll make them beg for mercy…!”

Lux shivered. Johnny Black had never struck her as the most stable of Laughing Coffin, but deranged amusement was more his habit. Rambling was normal enough for him; she knew that well from when they'd “rescued” her. Furious mumbling was something else entirely.

And… isn't someone missing?

Taking care to stay as far from Black as she could, Lux edged over to the only other girl in the room, a blonde with long, twin-tailed hair. “Gwen?” she whispered. “Did something happen?”

“Hey, Lux,” Gwen replied, smiling slightly. “You missed it, huh? Johnny's been having a fit for three days now. Seems the Black Swordsman killed Morte the other day.”
Lux gasped, eyes going wide. “Morte is dead?!” she blurted, only barely keeping her voice low. “But... but the clearers never risk PvP! Doesn't XaXa always complain none of them, um... none of them have the guts for it?”

Anyone else, she wouldn't have risked asking. She tried to keep her interactions with the rest of Laughing Coffin to a minimum. Gwen, though, was only “allied”, as the leader of another orange guild. She was also the closest to being sane of any orange player Lux had met.

Striking up a friendship, even a tenuous one, with an orange player was crazy, and Lux knew it. She was also afraid she'd lose it completely if there wasn't someone she could talk to.

“That's what they always say,” Gwen agreed with a nod. “The Black Swordsman's different, though. I heard he almost killed Morte back on the Sixth Floor, once—and unlike some people I could name, I paid attention to the rumors after Titan's Hand got locked up. If any of those goody-two-shoes would PK, it'd be the Beater.” She chuckled darkly. “I don't know if Johnny's slept a wink since.”

_Hypocrite_, Lux wanted to say. But she couldn't, any more than she'd been able to reject PoH's original ultimatum. If she wanted to survive, these were the people with whom she'd have to work. Johnny Black wasn't stable at the best of times, and she could see crossing him right then would've been suicidal.

“Any idea what happened?” she murmured, trying to seem only curious. “Even with the rumors about the Black Swordsman... I mean, Morte was good.”

“They say the top players are the Flash, the Paladin, and the Black Swordsman—and that NPC Blackie hangs around with is supposed to be a monster, too.” Gwen shrugged. “All I know is, PoH thought that Dark Elf was a possible recruit, and he sent Tia to bring her in, with Morte and Johnny as backup. I told 'em it wasn't a good idea, but did they listen? Of course not.”

Lux was torn between horror at the death of another player, and a terrible relief. Morte was—had been—one of Laughing Coffin's best fighters, and unlike a lot of them he'd known perfectly well that he was killing people for real. If he was dead, then that was one fewer red player committing cold-blooded murder.

_On the other hand, Morte was about the only one besides PoH who could keep Black under control. ...I don't want to see what he's like if he goes completely over the edge._

Worse, no one else even seemed to care, either about Morte's death or Johnny Black's mad rambling. A room full of killers, and none of them cared.

Abruptly, Black spun to face PoH. “Boss! When the hell are we gonna go after the Beater?! We can't let him get away with killing Morte! Him and his pet, they've gotta pay for that!”

“And they will, Johnny,” PoH said coolly. Lux couldn't see his eyes under the hood of his poncho, but the lower half of his face showed an eerie calm. “But we have to be subtle. That's how we've gotten as many kills as we have, remember? And with the Black Swordsman, we have to be even more careful. He's sharp enough to have spoiled more than his share of our schemes. You were there, you know what I'm talking about.”

Lux wasn't sure if she was relieved by PoH's reasonable response or not. Black was frightening because he was crazy. PoH was even scarier because, as far as she could tell, he _wasn't_. If she'd heard right, he'd almost gotten the clearing group to tear itself apart more than once without even showing up, just by whispering in the right ears.
“Of course, if you do want to try for revenge yourself, be my guest.” PoH grinned, showing teeth. “I wouldn’t mind a good show, and I hear the Baneblade lights up real nice in PvP.”

Definitely not relieved.

Black’s teeth audibly gnashed behind his bag mask. “But Boss! We gotta show everybody you can’t just kill one of Laughing Coffin, and—!”

Abruptly, PoH raised a hand, cutting the mad killer off mid-rant. “Just a second, Johnny. She’s coming.”

Blinking, only then did Lux realize another of the regular residents of the cavern was missing. Not for long, though: within moments of PoH’s comment, a familiar girl in blue, with an (NPC) cursor, entered the Safe Zone from the same tunnel Lux had used.

As creepy as ever, she thought. Tia wasn't homicidal like the others, but to Lux that made her almost worse. Where and how PoH had recruited the NPC, she didn't know, but Tia's innocence gave her a sick feeling. Like she followed PoH because she literally didn't know anything else…

“PoH,” Tia said then, walking right up to the PKer leader. “The clearing group is expected to attack the Fifty-Sixth Floor Boss tomorrow.”

PoH nodded. “Figured as much. Once they finally got The Geocrawler out of the way, they sure were in a hurry. Any intel on what comes next?”

Again, Lux found herself shivering. By rights there should've been no way to know what lay on floors the clearers hadn't yet reached. Beta tester knowledge had only covered up to the Tenth Floor, and that not even the Floor Boss. Yet somehow, PoH occasionally came up with scraps of information just a little bit in advance even then.

“'S' wouldn't say much,” Tia answered PoH, a tiny frown creasing her forehead. “But she was unhappy. There is a system error, and it is going uncorrected. She said she was going to have to take action personally this time, in absence of higher orders.”

“Did she, now?” PoH hummed, sounding very interested. “How about that. I thought she only got involved for special occasions… Any hints about what's going on?”

Tia's frown deepened. “I didn't understand. She said something about an 'outbreak’…”

If the way the other members of Laughing Coffin suddenly perked up wasn't enough to send chills down Lux's spin, PoH's slow grin would've done it quite nicely. “Well, well, that is interesting. C'mon, Tia. Tell me exactly what 'S' said. If I'm right, then it really is showtime.”

March 12th, 2024

“I'm trying to decide if this floor is better or worse than the last,” Kizmel mused, boots ringing on the stone-paved road. “On the one hand, I'm well-pleased at being rid of the dryness and the dust. Especially after the dust storm that nearly choked us all to death on approach to the Pillar of the Heavens. On the other… something about this place is deeply unsettling.”

“I know what you mean,” Kirito agreed quietly. There was, he knew, no real reason to be so quiet here—especially not when they were nearly to a Safe Zone. Despite that, he couldn't help but feel like being too loud would attract… something.
What, he had no idea. But that itch behind his shoulder blades wasn’t something he was prepared to ignore. Not after the last time he’d felt so twitchy, it had presaged an attempted PK.

No, Kirito reminded himself. Morte was counting on me deflecting it. He wanted to stop me, not fight. He didn’t expect the duel—not the way it happened.

“Something not quite right about the grass here,” Rain said, just behind them. “It looks… not quite dead, I guess. But not healthy. And those trees look like they’re petrified, but alive. If that makes any sense.”

“No birds, either.” Philia's voice was distracted; the tone she got when she was Searching the surroundings, Kirito thought. “There’s something moving out there, but whatever it is, it's in the grass. Like it’s hiding, only not from us. Not mobs, though, just critters.”

The four of them were making their way along a roadway Kirito thought would've done the Romans proud, leading from the staircase from the previous floor to the first town of the Fifty-Seventh Floor. Karika, according to a road sign they’d passed, located just a bit west of center near the southern edge of the floor.

After the defeat of the Fifty-Sixth Floor's boss, Kirito's party had been more or less ordered to go on ahead and activate the Teleport Gate on the new floor. Lind's idea, that; Kirito still wasn’t sure if it was the DDA guildmaster's way of trying to reassert his authority after the debacle with The Geocrawler, or some kind of odd apology. Asuna had agreed with it, though, and truthfully none of them minded a little time away from the raid group, before the inevitable flood of visitors from lower floors.

What they’d found on the Fifty-Seventh Floor hadn’t quite been what any of them might have expected. Not that there was ever a way to know what a new floor would hold, so far beyond what the beta testers had reached, but after fifty-six floors Aincrad's vagaries had become somewhat predictable to the clearers. After a dusty, barren floor like the Fifty-Sixth, Kirito had honestly expected something a bit livelier.

Well, it's not a desert this time, he thought, as a keening wind threatened to tangle his coat with Kizmel's cloak. I'm just not sure I'd call it alive, either.

Well. Not healthy, anyway, like Rain had said. Nothing encroached on the pavement of the road, the grass was a shade of green that just didn't look right, and the trees… the trees reminded Kirito of the Forest of Demise, only not quite dead. That, combined with the behavior Philia reported of the local non-hostile wildlife, only added to his unease.

Kizmel's left hand strayed to his right, giving it a light squeeze. Glancing over at her, he found her giving him a small smile. The sight was enough to make him relax, just a little, reminding him he wasn't alone. Not with Rain and Philia watching his back, and his wife at his side, as reliable as ever.

My wife. That's going to take more than a week to get used to. …I'm not sure if it's funny or scary to think of introducing her that way to Sugu. Not that I think Kizmel will give me a choice.

“We're almost to Karika,” Kirito said then, as tall walls came into view around a bend in the road. He wasn't sure if he was glad for the distraction from the direction his thoughts had taken or not. “Whatever this floor's gimmick is, we should be able to find out soon enough.”

“The concept of each floor having a deliberate 'gimmick' certainly explains a great deal,” Kizmel remarked some fifteen minutes later. Within Karika, the buildings were of a style somewhat like the Fifty-Sixth Floor's “frontier town” look, but a bit sturdier, and the road the same smooth stone
pavement that had led there. “I had always wondered why each floor seemed to have its own crisis, apart from the war between the elves and the clearing as a whole.”

“A game has to be kept interesting,” Kirito agreed, inwardly glad that she was so calm about it. Six days, after all, wasn't exactly enough time to recover from such a huge shift in worldview. He knew. “I hate to say it, but I'll give Kayaba credit for managing to have so much variety, over so many floors.”

“Well, he wasn't exactly operating in a vacuum,” Rain pointed out absently. She was poring over a newspaper she'd bought from a local NPC, a timid young man who seemed as unwilling to speak loudly as any of them. “Kayaba created the NerveGear, sure, and obviously a lot of the programming for SAO itself, but he couldn't have done all of it by himself.”

“Yes. Come to think of it, I don't know if he was involved in the Anti-Harassment Code at all. The interviews I saw talking about the debate the developers had over it never once quoted him.” Kirito grimaced. “Probably because he was just going to do things his way in the end, anyway.”

He tried not to think too hard about the corollary to that. After his wedding night with Kizmel, he'd very reluctantly consulted Argo on the matter—figuring if he was going to be teased about it, he might as well get some info in exchange—and between the two of them they'd come up with two possibilities. Either Kayaba had determined it was necessary, either for immersion or for mental health, to make player avatars “fully functional”, or else another developer or two had done it as a joke, with the code intended to be dummied out in the final release.

Kirito was reasonably sure Argo's sly suggestion it was meant as a testbed for virtual eroge wasn't correct. That, he thought, would've been a bridge too far for the CERO board.

He hoped.

“Other developers,” Kizmel said thoughtfully, glancing away from a group of NPCs walking into what looked like bar, chatting about a card game. “So Kayaba was not the only sorcerer involved in Aincrad's creation? 'Programmer', rather?”

“Too big a project,” Philia said. She was turning her head from side to side, peering intently at the surrounding buildings. “Where was that bed and breakfast the town guard mentioned…? Oh, there it is. Anyway,” she continued, leading them down a side street, “Kayaba's a genius, but nobody's that good. Even if he could do it by himself at all, he couldn't have done it so fast.”

“Ah. That makes sense.” The elf girl frowned. “…And how likely is it any of them were complicit in Kayaba's crime?”

“No killing programmers out of hand, Kizmel,” Rain said dryly, looking up from her paper. “Kayaba's probably in here somewhere, so he's fair game, but I can't imagine any cronies of his are in here, too. There's gotta be a limit to how much server access can be hidden.”

In the near distance, Kirito noticed the shimmering sounds of teleports. Now that Karika's Teleport Gate was open, it seemed other players were beginning to arrive. Tourists from the lower floors, probably, he thought. The KoB and DDA will probably just follow us up from the stairs, like usual. Can't see the visitors staying long, though. Algade may be a good place for even low-level players to hang out, but this place is just creepy.

“Server access?” Kizmel sighed, waving a hand. “Never mind, I'll ask Kirito this evening. I fear it will take me until we reach the Ruby Palace before I understand half of how this world truly works,
Excited chatter was beginning to grow as more players arrived behind them. Rain seemed to pay it no attention, though, frowning down at the crinkled paper in her hands. "I'm not sure. There's some warnings not to go out of town without hiring guards, though. Something about how 'they' just overran the main pass through the Garda Mountains a couple of days ago."

"'They'?" Kirito repeated, a chill running down his spine. "What are 'they'?" Because I've heard that kind of nonspecific address before, and it usually meant—

Somehow, the piercing scream that rang out didn't even surprise him. Not at first. He only whirled in the direction of the shriek, hand flashing up to grip the Duskshard's hilt. Only when the first cry was joined by several more did his blood run cold.

"We're in a Safe Zone," Kizmel breathed, voicing his realization even as she yanked her saber from its scabbard. "This isn't like Dollarah. I saw the notice." She darted a glance at Kirito. "Could this be some kind of 'event'?"

"If it is, I've got another reason to strangle Kayaba," he growled. "You're supposed to have to trigger those, and out in the middle of a town isn't—"

"It's them! Run!"

Usually, progressing to the next floor was a cause for celebration simply for the fact that it was one step closer to freedom. For Lind, Guildmaster of the Divine Dragons Alliance, there was an additional reason he was glad to see the first town of the Fifty-Seventh Floor—and a reason he wasn't as pleased as he'd expected.

On the one hand, it was a welcome distraction from the events that had plagued the previous floor. On the other, Karika's general style was too much like a refined version of Dollarah's to take his mind off things properly.

There was a reason Lind was leading his small contingent of the DDA into town after a bit more of a delay than he would have normally. Even with the day wearing on into afternoon, there was more than enough daylight left to give Kirito's party a bit of a head start.

I still don't think I was wrong, he thought, walking through Karika's gate with the rest of his own party. While I perhaps should've remembered from the Sixth Floor that my plan could backfire, and I may not have been as tactful as I could have been, Kizmel-san still needed to know the truth. Better she learn it now than at a more crucial point in the clearing.

Despite that conviction, Lind was willing to concede the Black Swordsman's party had a reason to be unhappy with him, however well things had clearly turned out in the end. So long as they were all able to work together when the time came for the next boss raid, he was perfectly willing to give them space.

Besides, just then his guild had other concerns. Stopping by an NPC just inside the town gate, he purchased a map. After thanking the vendor—he doubted she was another Turing-class AI, but he'd come to the conclusion it never hurt to be polite—he unfolded it and started down the street again. "Hm... According to this, the shopping district is east of here. Let's stock up on potions before we find an inn for the night."

"Good idea, Guildmaster," one of his longest-serving guild members, Shivata, said with a wince. "I
kinda ran low during the boss fight. Sorry. I know it wasn't even that bad a fight—"

Lind raised his free hand. “Don’t worry about it, Shivata. You were right in the thick of it with Liten. If you took that much damage, it just means the DDA did their part.”

The KoB had stolen the show again, along with a certain group of independent players, but Lind wasn’t going to blame his subordinates for that. The DDA were still an essential part of the clearing efforts. Someday he still intended to dislodge the KoB from their position as de facto leaders; until then, he was proud of what they’d accomplished already.

They were most of the way to the shopping district when the first sounds of commotion reached Lind’s ears. He frowned, wondering what was going on, but quickly dismissed the noise. *Probably just tourists from the lower floors celebrating*, he thought. *Or else an NPC festival of some kind. … That actually sounds kind of nice. We could use the break…*

“Um, Boss?” Quetzalcoatl said, as they turned the corner onto the main shopping street. “Do you hear screaming up ahead? Like, not-good screaming?”

“Very not-good screaming,” Liten agreed, an edge of worry audible even through the muffling of her helmet. “I, um, think it's coming this way, Guildmaster.”

Quet, Lind might’ve brushed off. For all the katana-wielder’s skill in combat, the young man was a bit of a hothead, and Lind knew it. Liten, on the other hand, had always been a steady one; it wasn’t just because her boyfriend was already in the DDA that he’d poached her when Kibaou’s Aincrad Liberation Force had more or less collapsed.

Still. “We’re in a Safe Zone, everyone,” he reminded them. “We all saw the notice when we entered the town. Let’s at least stock up, then we can go take a look.”

That in mind, he calmly led his party over to a potions vendor. He was even starting a transaction when the shopkeeper suddenly took on a nervous look, totally at odds with what Lind was accustomed to from ordinary NPCs—and then the screaming began in earnest.

“What the—?”

“Boss!”

Lind turned to look, and his eyes went wide at the sight. NPCs—ordinary town NPCs, who moments before had been walking the streets as normal—were making a mad dash in their direction. As they got closer, more of the NPCs also turned to run, as if the panic was spreading.

Behind them was a veritable horde. Moaning, roaring, adding their own incoherent screams to the cacophony; the only thing about their appearance that Lind could process for a few stunned seconds was that they looked like they’d just crawled out of their own graves.

Then one of the raging mass caught up to one of the slower NPCs, seized her by the throat, and bit.

*Not possible,* Lind thought numbly. *Not in a town. And not—those can’t be—!*

The way the NPC woman’s gurgling cries died off, even as her attacker released her, and her skin started changing before his eyes chilled him to the bone. She wasn't dying… which, if anything, was worse.

“Guildmaster?” Liten ventured, voice quavering. “Wh-what do we do?”
The monstrous “NPCs” were getting closer, and before their eyes more of the townspeople succumbed to bites. Behind the DDA party, other players that had begun arriving also started to panic. Lind heard a familiar voice utter a filthy curse, accompanied by a shing of steel being drawn; most didn't seem to have the presence of mind.

_Something’s wrong here. Badly. We—we can’t just—_

Lind made a snap decision. “Everyone out, now!” he snapped. “Back to the previous floor for now. Go!” Amid a shaky chorus of assent from his party, he yanked a Teleport Crystal from a belt pouch. “Teleport: Eastwood!”

The last thing he saw as the blue sphere took him was the potion seller he'd just been trying to buy from, one of the horde who'd rushed ahead clamped onto the NPC’s neck. The image of a screaming man who looked perfectly human transforming into _something else_ would haunt Lind's nightmares.

“Guys?” Rain said anxiously. “That does _not_ sound good…”

Kirito was in complete agreement with her on that, and would've said so if he hadn't been immediately distracted by something else. The sudden influx of NPCs running in their direction was bad enough. The dozen or so players that tore on past made it even worse.

The moaning, gray-skinned people who jogged into view after NPCs and players both were enough to render him momentarily speechless. Tattered clothes. Skin that looked like it was rotting. Glowing eyes—and on some of them, glowing veins as well, as if their blood was on fire.

..._They're trying to bite those NPCs_, Kirito realized. “No way,” he whispered.


“This _has_ to be some kind of event,” Rain said numbly. “But even for Kayaba, zombies in a town is sadistic! Even if they can't hurt us, this is going to make it _impossible_ to get any sleep here!”

“Zombies?” Kizmel repeated blankly. “Ugh… Later. Stay calm, my friends. According to the rules you've explained to me, we have nothing to truly fear from them here.”

She sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as them, but Kirito latched onto her words anyway. After all, one of the few inviolable rules of _SAO_ that ran in the players' favor was that HP could not be reduced in a Safe Zone save by an official duel.

That in mind, he forced tense muscles to relax, and started to return the Duskshard to its scabbard—

“What are you idiots doing?!?” A player who’d fallen behind the others paused to grab Kirito's arm, wild-eyed. “We have to get out of here! I saw those things hit the shopping street—all the shopkeepers turned, too! This isn't safe!”

“They—wait, _what_?!?” Before Kirito could demand more of an explanation, though, the other player let go and fled down a side street, running like his life depended on it. Safe Zone or not.

“Questions better wait, guys,” Rain said, voice quavering but determined. “If there's any place that's still going to be safe, it'll be an inn—and if you haven't noticed, there's another horde between us and the inn we were going to.”

He spun, swearing under his breath. She was right; another group of zombies was coming from the alley next to the _Railway Inn_, and had already blocked their path. A dozen of them, he estimated—and they'd seen his team.
It had to be the fast kind of zombie, he thought, swearing again as they broke into a run. Where's Asuna when I need her? She'd love this!

Then there was no more time to think. The horde was on them.

Normally Kirito preferred to take the initiative against mobs, frequently with the simple but effective Sonic Leap. There wasn't time for that here, and boxed in with his friends there wasn't much room to maneuver, either. That being the case, he opened up with a basic Vertical, aiming to cleave down through the first zombie's chest through its left shoulder. The Duskshard flared azure with his hurried pre-motion, and came down toward the mob in a brilliant streak.

From the bright flashes around him, the others had much the same idea. In the instant before impact, Kirito uttered a silent prayer that their attacks would be no more hindered by the Safe Zone than the zombie's bites seemed to be.

The concussion that rang out battered his virtual ears, but succeeded in knocking back several of the horde before they could get into gnawing range. There was also, to Kirito's considerable relief, no purple flash or [Immortal Object] notice from any of them.

There was also, to his dismay, almost no other effect. In the short opening the collective attack provided, he had the chance to recognize that the zombies' cursors were a relatively pale red, and the HP of those that had been hit had not gone down.

At all.

Rain muttered something that sounded very uncomplimentary in a language Kirito only recognized from other times he'd heard her curse. “Zombies,” she bit out then, using the English term. “What do you think, guys?” she added quickly, the horde closing in again. “Aim for the head?”

“Neck,” Philia grunted, pulling her Ridgeback Sword in close. “Swords aren't good for destroying the brain. Hurry!”

Easier said than done. “Push them back!” Kirito called out. “We need space for that!” In the same breath, he slammed his free hand's palm into a zombie that was getting too close for comfort; the Meteor Palm smashed it back hard enough to trip up two more behind it.

Rain copied his move, while Kizmel instead chose to simply bash her shield into another's face. Not quite as effective as Martial Arts skill backed by System Assist, it still staggered the walking corpse, opening just a little bit of room on their patch of street.

That was all the opening Philia needed to let loose with a Horizontal Arc, her sword biting into the neck of a zombie just as it lunged for her. The skill tore in with what Kirito thought was more effort than usual, and when it ripped back out the way it came, the mob's head remained stubbornly attached.

At least it staggered it more, he thought, taking the time to shove several back from his side with a Serration Wave. Like a critical hit. But still no actual damage! Is it because this is a Safe Zone, or—?

“The Baneblade, Kirito!” Kizmel snapped. She smacked another zombie with her shield; followed up with a jab from her saber to the eye that sent another reeling with an anguished moan. “If all else fails, perhaps that will harm these things!”

Damn! He didn't argue, though. He only ducked back from the next ravenous lunge, twisted out of the way as Kizmel unleashed a vicious slash to buy him time and breathing room, and dropped the Duskshard. Letting it clatter to the stone pavement, he opened his menu and tapped a sequence of
commands that were becoming entirely too familiar.

The Duskshard vanished from the ground. The shining Mythril of the Baneblade shimmered into his hand, and with a furious shout Kirito unleashed a Horizontal, catching a zombie that had outright leapt three meters into the air to attack.

The mob's body kept on going past. So did its head. They went by on opposite sides of him, though, severed as neatly as anything else he'd had to behead in the year and more he'd been in Aincrad. The resistance the Duskshard had met was nearly nonexistent, against the "holy" blade.

Snarling, Kirito stepped out of the circle his team had formed, going on the offensive now. The inverted triangle of a Sharp Nail took off both arms and the head of another; a Suigetsu roundhouse kick bought him a clear meter's worth of space by bashing one zombie into two others. That was time enough for his sword arm to be released from post-motion, and he followed up with a Snake Bite to dismember one more.

"Holy blade," he heard Rain mutter behind him. "So that's what that was for… Fine, then!" There were the sounds of menu commands, and an object shimmering into existence. Then, "\textit{Lacho calad! Drego morn!}"

In the middle of ripping the Baneblade through a fourth undead NPC's throat with an unassisted, two-handed blow, Kirito couldn't afford the luxury of a double-take. He wanted to, though, confused as he was by Rain suddenly shouting in Sindarin in the middle of a fight. Especially when it was followed by a flash of light, which was itself accompanied by shrieks from the mobs.

"Ha!" Kizmel shouted. "That's better!" She stepped into his field of view, lowering her saber into position for a Treble Scythe. "Begone!"

Then Kirito did blink, as the spinning Sword Skill bit deeply into three of the horde. Far from the mere stagger and knockback his wife's blade had been doing before, this time it sent limbs flying in a spray of red particle effects.

Risking a glance over his shoulder, he found Rain and Philia similarly tearing into mobs on their side, their swords alight with a blue glow similar to the Baneblade's. "What the…?"

"I'll explain later," Rain got out, fending off an attempted biting of her left shoulder with an Embracer to the rotting mob's throat. "I only just figured out—what's \textit{that}?!"

Pauising only to push back the mobs still encroaching on his side with a Serration Wave, Kirito turned to look back down the street—and almost wished he hadn't. Stalking toward them from the direction of the Teleport Plaza was a very tall, very broad-shouldered figure in heavy armor, wielding a sword of comparable size. Through the gaps in the armor, all that could be seen was mummified flesh, with bone peeking through in places.

Above its head was a dark red cursor, and the name \texttt{[Revenant]}.

"That does not look good," Kizmel said, with studied understatement. "Kirito," she added, stepping in close to his side, "we cannot stay here. Even strengthened, we are outnumbered. And—ugh." Her eyes closed for a moment. "That is, pardon me, \textit{not fair}.

It took only a moment for Kirito to spot what she was talking about. They'd all beheaded a fair few of the zombies by that point, following the basic principle of any zombie movie—and all of them were \textit{getting back up}. Or crawling, in the case of those without enough remaining limbs to stand.

He was just taking in that blatantly unfair sight when the Revenant appeared to notice his party, in
turn. Which, of course, prompted it to turn its stalk into a fast walk.

“Guys?” Philia said nervously. “I don't like the look of that.” She joined Rain in smashed aside two more of the “ordinary” undead, and moved closer to Kirito and Kizmel. “I think maybe we'd better —”

The Revenant screamed, a sound that tore at Kirito's ears and simultaneously triggered a Slow debuff by his HP bar. It flickered out again almost instantly—too far away for the full effect, he guessed—but at the same time the Revenant's fast walk turned to a run.

He suspected the way the glowing veins on the zombies flared even brighter wasn't a good sign for their side, either.

“Run,” Kirito got out. “Now. Run!”

The zombies between them and the inn were a risk. Between the Baneblade, whatever buff Rain had managed to trigger, and sheer desperation, they charged through anyway.

Since when is SAO a survival horror game?! Kirito demanded of the absent Kayaba, as his team forced their way toward the Railway Inn's front door. Kayaba, you son of a bitch!

“I used to think the swamp and jungle floors were the worst. Now I think I didn't know when I was well off.”

Rain nodded in rueful agreement with Kirito's sentiment. “Yeah. I always hated the muck—especially when it rained. This is a thousand times worse. …Ugh, I wish they'd at least quit pounding on the windows. How is anyone supposed to get any sleep around here?”

“It is unusually sadistic, even for Kayaba.” Kizmel rested her head on Kirito's shoulder, looking as tired as if she'd just taken on a Field Boss. “Up to know, even as far back as I remember, the rules of this world have held firm. I wouldn't have expected him to inflict something such as this on us.”

“I dunno… Something about this doesn't feel right, y'know?” Philia glanced out one of the windows, grimacing at how little light was getting through. “This is way worse than, say, the anti-crystal traps that pop up here and there. I mean, this is a town, and not a dungeon town like Dollarah was!”

The four of them were huddled in a second-floor room of the Railway Inn, having escaped the apparent undead horde still gathering outside. Kirito and Kizmel had claimed one of the beds, curling up together with an unusual disregard for the other girls' presence; Rain had taken the other, sitting with her back against the wall and a book in her hand. Philia had chosen one of the chairs by the windows, though she looked like she was regretting it.

The fact that there were zombified NPCs crawling across those windows might have been related. The banging as they tried to break through the windows—and the inn's doors, and any other possible opening they found—was wearing on the entire team's nerves.

“At least the building still counts as an Immortal Object,” Kirito offered, brushing a hand through Kizmel's hair in a gesture Rain suspected was entirely unconscious. “We'll be fine as long as we stay in here. And if we do have to leave in a hurry, Teleport Crystals should still work, too.”

“If Kayaba hasn't put one of those traps on the town, too,” Rain said sourly, flipping to the next page in her book. “Wouldn't that fit with the whole ‘zombie apocalypse' thing?”

“Your world clearly has very strange literature,” Kizmel said, violet eyes opening a crack.
“Zombies… Judging from the behavior of those mobs, I take it that's a term your culture has for unquiet dead? To be sure, I'd heard tales of the undead in my childhood, but they were always cautionary, remembering the twisted rituals of the Fallen Elves. Certainly they weren't meant for… entertainment.”

Kirito surprised them all with a chuckle. “Don't let Asuna hear you say that. I sent her a message, too; I hope to hear back soon… Rain.” He turned to meet the redhead’s gaze, brief humor already gone. “That book. What did you do back there?”

Rain shifted her shoulders uncomfortably. This was a mystery she’d hoped to investigate on her own a while longer, given what little she'd already discovered. Especially after she'd gotten the full story about not just the final quest of the Moonlit Black Cats, but also the end of the Elf War campaign.

“It's the book I picked up back on the Fifty-First Floor,” she said finally, staring down at the yellowed, crinkling pages. “You remember, back in Hyrus Fortress? The mirror match boss?” The others collectively shivered at the reminder; not that she was any better off. “It's… supposed to be a record of the war with the Fallen Elves. From before the Great Separation. The *Chronicle of the Great War*, it's called.”

Kizmel pushed herself up, though not far enough to break Kirito's hold. “A record from that era?” she said sharply. “What kind of record?”

“I don’t quite know yet,” Rain admitted. Holding out the book for the others to see, she flipped through the pages. Most of them were entirely blank, and the handful toward the beginning were faded and torn, with some passages completely illegible. “It's been filling itself in gradually since I got it. Some of it seems to be based on my skill progression, some of it showed up whenever I leveled up. A few passages were filled in every time we cleared a floor.”

Including just as they'd gotten to the Fifty-Seventh. Unfortunately it had been cryptic enough in its references to a Necromancer that she hadn't made the connection until Kirito had brought out the Baneblade against the zombies.

“Some of it is bits of lore, I think,” she continued, turning back to the partly-filled pages. “There's also some gameplay tips, though, and hints about some kind of special skill. I *think*, in-game, this is supposed to be the journal of a Dark Elf knight from way back. That charm it showed me during the fight was in Sindarin, after all.”

“Thought that sounded familiar.” A *bang* on the window entirely too close to her head made Philia jump, but the treasure hunter visibly did her best to ignore it. “What was it, anyway? You said a charm. Like what the elves do instead of Swordmaster menus and items?”

“That’s what it looks like. 'Lacho calad. Drego morn,’” Rain quoted. “'Flame light. Flee darkness.’”

“Battle cry,” Kirito put in, nodding. “From *The Unfinished Tales*, I think. Fits for a buff that seemed to be mimicking what the Baneblade does.”

“*Unfinished Tales*?” Kizmel repeated, eyebrows and ears alike perking up. “When we have the time, I'd very much like to know what stories were used for my people… Later. When time permits. I assume, Rain, that that charm has limitations?”

“'Fraid so,” Rain said, grimacing. “I have to be holding the book, and it only works on 'the evil of the Three Races' foes', which I think means it doesn't have the Baneblade's PvP buffs. Worse, it only lasts about half an hour, and it has a two-hour cooldown.”
Which would probably have been “fair” under normal conditions, she suspected. If she was right, and it was allowing them to somewhat bypass the Safe Zone protections—scary thought, but right now it balanced things in their favor—it probably wasn't essential to fighting Aincrad-style zombies. In normal dungeon-crawling, that would probably have been more than enough.

As it was…

“Then we'll have to hope those things aren't so durable out in the field.” It was Kirito's turn to grimace. “Philia's right, though, this doesn't feel right. Clearing is going to be almost impossible if even the town NPCs are affected by this, and—”

A knock on the door interrupted him. A knock on the inside door, not the front door almost directly beneath their room.

Which—or how many—of them made undignified squeaks, none of them were likely to admit later. Rain was prepared to admit to her heart rate skyrocketing, and from the looks on her friends' faces, she wasn't alone in that, either. Nor in her relief when a familiar voice called through the door.

“Kirito-kun? It's me.” A pause. “And don't worry, I'm not infected. You can let me in.”

There was something completely unfair about Vice-Commander Asuna's wry, unruffled tone, Rain thought as she went to open the door. How even the Flash could be so calm in the middle of a zombie outbreak…

Still, it was something of a relief to see another living, non-panicked face when the dignified girl in white and red stepped into the room. “I'm glad to see you all safe,” Asuna said, while Rain closed the door behind her. “It's chaos out there. Pretty much all the other players who made it up here have already teleported back to lower floors.”

“So Teleport Crystals still work here?” Philia asked quickly, this time not even flinching when a zombie pounded on the window behind her. “Or did everyone reach the Teleport Plaza?”

Asuna shrugged. “Hard to say who did what, but the Commander and I got here just in time to see Fuurinkazan using crystals to get out. This definitely isn't an anti-crystal trap, at least.”

Kirito and Kizmel both relaxed at that. Considering how close they were to Fuurinkazan, and their own experiences with anti-crystal traps, Rain wasn't surprised. “At least they're okay,” Kirito said with a sigh. “Alright. Did you find out anything on the way here, Asuna?”

The KoB vice-commander sat on the end of the bed Rain had reclaimed, displaying a dignified poise the redhead honestly envied. “Not much. But I can tell you the zombie plague, or whatever it is, is spreading through the whole town. If there's a shopkeeper NPC still 'alive' by now, I'll be surprised. By the end of the night this place will probably be completely overrun.”

Kizmel closed her eyes, huddling closer to Kirito. Kinda wish I could, Rain thought, still just a bit jealous. And I don't have a lifetime of thinking NPCs are all people. That's gotta hurt.

“It's worse than that, though,” Asuna continued, expression turning to Vice-Commander calm in the middle of a crisis. “I don't know yet if the status effect can hit players. Whether it does or not, word of this is going to spread. Bad enough that we know it can get in town, and affects shopkeeper NPCs. Even if it can't leave this floor or infect players, there's going to be rumors.”

“And that'll lead to panic,” Kirito said quietly, tightening the arm he had around Kizmel. “People hiding in inns. If it gets bad enough, even clearers might freak.”
“Exactly.” Asuna took a deep breath. “Kirito-kun. Commander Heathcliff is going to try to keep things under control with the rest of the guild. He formally requests your party help me figure out what's going on, and how to stop it. Whether this is a glitch, an event, or… whatever. Will you?”

Kirito took a quick look around the room. His silent question drew a shaky grin from Philia and a wordless hum from Kizmel. Rain simply rolled her eyes. Like I'm going to sit this one out? I'm trying to be a hero. Even without the Chronicle of the Great War, I'd be going.

“We're in, Asuna,” their leader said, smiling just a little. “…I don't suppose you have any idea where to start?”

“Not yet,” Asuna said, sighing. “I sent a message to Argo asking for her help, though. She'll be careful, Kirito-kun,” she added, seeing the sudden anxiety on his face. “She told me she'd already heard from Fuurinkazan, and Sachi-chan was able to hide from the zombies with her cloak. Argo's Hiding should keep her safe enough.”

“Should”. That wasn't really a word any clearer liked to rely on. Even so, Rain thought, Argo really was the best at what she did—and this was one risk someone had to take. If ever there was a quest as important to clearing Aincrad as any Floor Boss, this was it.

“…All right, then.” Kirito was obviously unhappy, but he didn't push it. “We'll have to wait for her to dig something up. In the meantime, Asuna, here's what we were able to figure out from the initial attack. Not that it's much…”

Thump-crack. Thump-crack. Thump-crack...

At least the windows were still showing no sign of breaking, despite the fists pounding on them from outside. To Kirito, though, that was cold comfort, pitted against the primal reaction his brain had to the constant noise. His fight-or-flight reactions were screaming at him to do one or the other, preferably both; and while he was keeping his cool without too much trouble, he still resented it. He wasn't sure, though, which bothered him more: the noise itself, or that it was distracting him from what would otherwise have been a pretty comfortable position. He liked not having to be embarrassed at Kizmel tucking herself up against him, even with Rain, Philia, and Asuna in the room with them.

Kirito wasn't quite sure what to make of the look Asuna was giving them. There was a soft smile on his old partner's face—but at the same time, a sadness in her eyes. Not jealousy, he thought—despite all the girls that ended up hanging around him, he at least had the consolation of not being at the center of any love triangles—but something else. Something deeper.

…Probably the same thing that bothers me, when I let myself think about it too much. There's no way to know how long any of this will last.

The late hour probably wasn't helping. Though the battle with the Fifty-Sixth Floor Boss had been earlier in the day than most, that was a relative term. Between reaching Karika, beginning to explore it, fighting through a zombie outbreak, and holing up, it was edging toward sunset.

Sunset, with zombies—zombies still trying ineffectually to break in through the windows. Even for Kirito, used to odd hours and disturbing quests, it made for a bad combination with the apparent glitch in the Safe Zone mechanics.

“You know, it's too bad this had to happen,” Asuna remarked, an hour after they'd all settled in to wait for Argo’s report. “I didn't get a chance to look at much of the town, but what I saw was pretty
interesting. Did any of you notice there's what looks like railroad tracks here?”

Kirito started at that—but Kizmel beat him to replying. “A railroad?” she repeated, lifting her head from his shoulder. “I had no idea there were left in this world—or I should say, I didn’t know there were any here at all. Not with the Steel Castle as it is.”

It was the humans' turn to look at the elf in collective surprise. “You know what a railroad is, Kizmel?” Philia blurted, eyes wide.

“Certainly,” Kizmel replied, shifting to sit up in bed. “Though I suspect they’re not quite the same as what you have in your world, Philia. Do remember, for all that I’ve little experience with them, I am somewhat familiar with the concept of machines.” She frowned thoughtfully. “Ah, of course. That would be why this is called the Railway Inn. I wonder…”

“If there are any events or quests tied to it?” Rain guessed. “Must be. It wouldn't be in the game if it wasn't important, right?”

Not quite true, Kirito thought to himself. The Elf War quest turned out to be a lot more important than any of us thought, but there's still a lot of details here in SAO that are just there for flavor. Still, she's probably right about something as big as a railroad, of all things.

He was about to say as much, but was shortstopped by a rapid knock at the door. “Hey! Lemme in, guys, hurry!”

Asuna darted over as quick as her namesake, quickly yanking at the knob. “Argo?” she began, as the info broker darted in. “What did you find about—”

“No time!” Argo interrupted, a harried look on her face. “Train's leaving in five minutes! Ya gotta be on it!” She thrust a small book into Asuna's hands. “Full report's in there. Read it when you have time. Get going!”

Argo the Rat in a hurry was enough to galvanize anyone with a brain. Asuna was out the door in a second, followed quickly by Rain and Philia. Kizmel leapt into motion barely a second later, but Kirito hesitated. “Argo,” he said, “are you—?”

“No time!” Argo insisted again. “I'm not specced for this kinda thing, an' somebody's gotta catch the train! Go!”

Bewildered, and more than a little unnerved—maybe even anxious—Kirito finally obeyed, rushing out into the hall and toward the stairs down to the first floor of the inn. She can always teleport out, he reminded himself. And Asuna has her report. I just have to hope—uh-oh.

It looked like a horde of the zombies had followed Argo to the inn, which suggested her Hiding hadn't quite been good enough. More urgently, it meant there was no small obstacle between them and the destination the Rat had urged them toward.

And we still don't know if they're infectious to players. This isn't good.

Lingering just inside the doors that were still keeping the mobs out, his friends exchanged glances. “I don't suppose that charm is ready again yet, Rain?” Philia asked, with forced calm. “Cause otherwise, um…”

Rain shook her head. “Not yet,” she said heavily. “At least another half-hour.”

“Then it's knockbacks and running,” Asuna said firmly, more collected than the rest of them. Resting
a hand on the hilt of her rapier, she turned to Kirito. “Kirito-kun. I hate to ask this, but I don’t think there’ll be any other players around to see, and right now we need every advantage we can get. Can you…?”

Kirito took a deep, steadying breath. “I know. Just a second.”

It wasn’t much longer than that, either. When he began preparing for his duel with Asuna back during The Geocrawler fiasco, he’d changed the setup for his Quick Change mod—and after his fight to the death with Morte, he’d left it that way. Sometimes, he’d realized, he needed a trump card; and sometimes he needed it very, very fast. Fast, and sometimes more urgently than even the Baneblade.

With just a downward sweep of his hand to open his menu, then one jabbed command on the ethereal page, the back of his coat shimmered. The Baneblade remained sheathed over his right shoulder; the Duskshard’s scabbard materialized over his left.

Dual Blades was a double-edged sword, considering what was likely to happen if people learned the Beater had yet another unique ability. Just then, he didn’t see any other choice. If Argo was right, there wasn’t time.

He drew both swords, and nodded to the others. “Open the door, and run,” he said, as they drew their own weapons. “Asuna, do you remember where you saw the railroad?”

“It’s the most noticeable thing in town,” she said, returning a nod of her own. “Lead the way, Kirito-kun, Kizmel-chan. I’ll give directions as we go.”

“Okay.” Kirito drew in another breath. “Now—let’s go!”

Kizmel kicked the doors open. That was enough to catch the first two zombies cleanly in the face, pushing them back and staggering a couple more behind them. At least three more piled into the gap—and the Baneblade and Duskshard flashed out to either side as Kirito dashed through. The Double Circular that was the most basic offensive move Dual Blades had cleared a good three meters around, between the direct impacts and the domino effect.

Three heads went flying separately from the bodies. At the same time, though, Kirito noticed a cracking noise from the Duskshard, which didn't strike him as a good sign.

There was no time to worry about it. Either because of Argo’s flight or simply that the Railway Inn was the only place players were in town just then, a huge mass of the undead had gathered on the street. Even as he led his party out, more of them poured in from all sides.

“Turn left!” Asuna snapped out, jabbing a Linear beneath grasping hands. “We need to head northwest!”

Great. Into the setting sun. Kirito’s eyes narrowed against the light now streaming through the gap between floors, grateful that there was no pain in SAO. Why does this feel like the ending of a movie? With us on the wrong side?

Philia and Rain unleashed twin Horizontals, breaking an opening toward the indicated direction. A small one. In the post-motion delay, the redhead swore in the language she’d used before as another zombie managed to get hold of her arm. Gripping it with enough strength to challenge a clearer’s STR stat, it lowered its head to bite—

Kizmel smashed the back of its head with her shield, giving Kirito time to rip through its left arm at the shoulder with the Baneblade. That gave a snarling Rain enough leverage to yank free from the
remaining hand, slam her palm into its face, and get back into motion.

“Would that Agil was still on the frontline,” Kizmel bit out, twisting to one side as they pounded down the street to keep her cloak out of yet another decaying hand. “This would be a good time for, what's the Swordmaster term, 'area of effect'!” Her shield swung out to one side, fending off jaws descending for her shoulder; her saber slashed in a vicious backhand on the other, almost catching Kirito in the chest in the process of dissuading one trying for him.

“We'll make do,” Asuna said confidently. One more zombie emerged from the horde to lunge at her; she jumped clear over it, pulling off a flawless mid-air Diagonal Sting to shove a mob out of the way of her landing. “Turn right at the next intersection!” she added. “The station isn't too far from here!”

While Kirito was introducing an infected NPC—a priest at the town church, he thought with a wince, judging from the cassock—to a Twin Stab to the chest, Philia huffed. “How are you so calm right now, Asuna-san?!” she demanded, her Ridgeback screeching down another zombie's nose. “We're in the middle of a zombie apocalypse here!”

Asuna rammed an Oblique into her latest opponent just as they turned the corner, hitting with such force that it was flung clear into the window of a shop. Kirito couldn't help but notice the [Immortal Object] notice pop up almost comically at the impact. “I like zombie movies,” the fencer answered Philia with a laugh. “If this weren't an outbreak in a town, I'd be having a lot of fun! And just 'Asuna' is fine.”

You sure sound like you're having fun anyway, Asuna. Kirito wasn't going to complain, though. He'd missed the Asuna who could take the time to enjoy Aincrad, even in the middle of the death game. If this was what it took to show him that side of her again, fine.

Well. “Fine” once we get this outbreak under control—yikes!

Turning one more corner, the open-air train station was suddenly in clear view. The train sitting on the tracks was even recognizable, in general form if not specifics. Boxy, sitting on ordinary-looking wheels and tracks, with about two dozen cars visible. Kirito was willing to bet they weren't made of steel, especially not with the liquidy sheen they gave off, but otherwise it didn't look too strange.

The angular car at the very front wasn't at all familiar to him, though. Armored, like it was expected to ram through things, there was no trace of smokestacks or anything he'd have recognized from a more modern train. Instead the “engine” car gave off a surreal azure glow, reminiscent of some Sword Skills and other system effects.

Kirito had an uneasy feeling that meant the train was just about ready to leave the station. He wished that was the worst part of the situation.

There were no zombies for quite a long stretch between his party and the train. He would've counted that as a good thing, except it was because this was the first place the Fifty-Seventh Floor's roads were anything less than perfect. There was a large gap in the street, or perhaps better said a small gorge; and while it wasn't possible for it to be that deep, any fall had unpleasant possibilities in the middle of a zombie outbreak.

They're closing in on us, there's a horde of them at the station itself, and if Argo's right—and I'm reading that front car right—we're running out of time.

Kirito swung both swords out low and back to his sides. “Everyone, charge-type skills! We're jumping the gap and hitting that last horde running!”
There was a chorus of acknowledgments, and a bright flare as five Swordmasters with six weapons all began pre-motion at once. The high-pitched hum of Sword Skills waiting to be unleashed was almost as deafening as the multicolored light was blinding—and then they were at the gap in the road.

A chorus of yells now, as they unleashed their skills. Kizmel reached the hole first in the blinding light of a Flashing Penetrator; the raw momentum of the high-level thrusting skill took her clear across and then some, crashing into the undead mobs on the other side like a bowling ball.

Kirito was close behind, leaping at the very edge and curling into a ball, twin swords spinning in the vertical wheel of a Corkscrew. Not as insanely fast or long as a Flashing Penetrator, it still took him neatly across the gap and into the zombies like a buzz saw. Limbs and heads went flying from the impact—along with another of those ominous cracks.

Asuna hurtled into the fray after that, her Shooting Star scattering another small cluster of the undead. The single-hit skill had none of the prolonged effects of the first two to cross the gap; on the other hand, the post-motion was shorter, allowing her to quickly step in with a Quadruple Pain to give Kirito and Kizmel time to recover.

Twin Sonic Leaps crashed down a split second later, toppling four more almost as an afterthought with Rain and Philia's arrival.

"Okay," Kirito got out, spinning upright from the crouch Corkscrew had ended in. "We made it this far." He almost missed the hand grabbing at his shoulder; a brutal backhand from the Baneblade disarmed that one. "Now what?"

He should've known better than to ask that, he immediately realized. The entirely recognizable sound of a train whistle was all the answer he needed, and not at all the one he wanted. Not when the remaining dozen or so zombies who'd merely been tossed around were recovering, and those the Baneblade had dismembered were mostly pulling themselves up as well.

Mostly. Kirito did notice one he'd more or less bisected vertically seemed to be staying put. Though the fact that it hadn't shattered struck him as a bad sign.

"The train's leaving, Kirito-kun!" Asuna called out, entirely unnecessarily in his view. "We have to hurry!"

"I know!" Baring his teeth in what couldn't even be mistaken for a smile, he whirled to face the accelerating train. "We can still make it! Move!"

The next few moments were a confused whirl of blades, decaying arms, teeth, and unnerving, glowing veins. The last push to the platform saw the five of them dodging jaws, twisting away from grasping arms, lashing out with Sword Skills as they could. Bodies were flung away, mostly just from knockback. Without the charm from Rain's book, only the Baneblade managed any genuine harm.

Kirito hoped, as he sent one of the zombies flying away in several more pieces than it had arrived, that it was only because it was a Safe Zone that they were so durable. As it was, the implication that anything they had could hurt them inside a town was giving him major chills.

The implications of the infection working in a Safe Zone were worse. So far they'd been lucky, but sooner or later, just one slip…

Then they were at the platform itself. The last zombie standing in their way took a Linear from
Asuna, fell back onto the tracks, and with a hideous gurgle was caught in the train's wheels. Several noises that Kirito thought would haunt his nightmares later, and it was spat out the other side.

Just in time for him to realize they were running out of train to catch.

“Move!” he screamed again. “Go!”

Kizmel was first, catapulting herself from the platform onto the side of the last, open-topped car. Rain and Philia slammed into place a moment later, gripping metal rails set vertically into the car. Then Asuna, leaping with typical grace to join them as the train picked up speed.

Almost too late, Kirito sheathed his swords and pushed off, flinging himself onto the back wall of that last car. Catching himself on the very edge, he slammed into it almost hard enough to trigger a stun; pausing only a brief moment for breath, he flipped himself up and into the car itself.

He thought he finally had time to rest, as his friends clambered over the sides to join him. Then Asuna, turning a relieved smile toward him, froze, eyes widening.

“Kirito-kun!”

No time for thought. Baneblade and Duskshard leapt back into his hands, and he brought them up in an instinctive Cross Block as he spun—just in time to catch a heavy sword in the junction of the blades.

The thud as the Revenant's armored, mummified body landed on the floor of the train car was almost an afterthought, next to the impact of its massive blade against Kirito's. He didn't even really notice it, staring into the red eyes that glowed behind its heavy, spiked helm.

“You,” the Revenant breathed out. “Found you.”

Ice filled Kirito's veins at the undead warrior's proclamation. He'd been recognized by a mob before, but that had always made immediate sense in context. The Revenant was completely unknown to him—and the idea that it knew him chilled him to the bone.

Almost a year and a half of combat reflexes still got him moving quickly. Breaking away from their weapon lock, he swung his swords back, letting pre-motion grip them; at the same time, the Revenant inhaled, obviously preparing another scream like before. Only this time, close enough to matter.

I have to be faster—!

A silvery streak passed by a centimeter from Kirito's head, catching the Revenant right in one of the eyeholes. Weaponized scream turning to an anguished howl, it stumbled back—and in the moment it had only one foot solidly on the metal floor, he acted.

Screaming right back at it, Kirito hit it full-force with a Twin Stab, backing the System Assist with every point of his STR stat. Neither sword pierced the Revenant's armor, though the Baneblade flared almost painfully bright; still yelling, he kept the skill going as long as he could, forcing the blades farther with a determined step.

Crack. Crack. Snap!

The Duskshard's point broke off, followed by the rest of the sword shattering to pieces in Kirito's hand. But it was enough. The Revenant, unbalanced, crashed into the car's low back wall, and teetered there—and then Kizmel was there, rushing in to smash its helmet with her shield.

The massive, undead warrior tipped over, seemed to hang in the air for a moment, and fell to the
railroad tracks below. Within seconds, it was lost in the growing darkness of the evening.

“Found… you…!”

For a long, long moment after the Revenant tumbled from the train, the party of Swordmasters could only look at each numbly. Even the [Outside Field] notice that appeared in the air between them, officially signalizing they had left the relative safety of Karika, garnered no reaction.

Only when Kirito tossed aside the broken-off hilt of the Duskshard, letting it follow the blade into destruction, did Philia let out a deep sigh, shoulders slumping. “Okay,” she said, staring down at the floor. “Does anybody know what that was about? What was that thing?”

“I wish I knew,” Kizmel told her, shivering. “It's nothing I learned of growing up, or as a Pagoda Knight. As I said earlier, the undead were nothing but ancient tales to us, and I certainly don't recall hearing of anything like the Revenant.” She turned toward the member of the team who'd been calmest in the situation, up to then. “Asuna? Was that from any 'movie' you know of?”

“Not specifically,” Asuna replied with a shrug, slowly sheathing her rapier. “There's probably any number of horror movies that could've been borrowed from, but it's not like any zombie I've ever heard of.” With a calm Kizmel honestly envied, the chestnut-haired girl turned to the party leader. “Kirito-kun, are you okay? Your sword broke on that thing. How many does that make now? Three you've had break in battle since we've been here?”

“…Four,” Kirito muttered. “My Anneal Blade, the one PoH broke at the Reliquary, and—that other time.” He sighed, holding up the Baneblade as if to check it for damage. “Good thing I've got this. The Durability stat is crazy, and it didn't just bounce off those things.”

Asuna's eyes narrowed at his evasion, and she shot a sharp look at Kizmel. The elf, however, had absolutely no intention of enlightening her friend on that incident. The events of the Forty-Third Floor were a secret she and Kirito had managed to keep even from Argo, and they both meant to keep it that way.

Although, she thought with a hidden smile, I might suggest returning there, when time permits a respite from the clearing. I can think of certain… recreational uses for what we found there.

“Uh, guys?” Rain said, breaking the lighter mood that arisen. She'd gone to retrieve the sword she'd thrown into the Revenant's eye, but was now looking outside with a wary frown. “Is it me, or does it look kinda foggy all of a sudden? And shouldn't we be seeing the Garda Mountains by now?”

Kizmel wasn't the only one to turn her attention to view out the back of the car, and through the narrow windows set in the walls. “You're right,” the elf girl said, seeing the fog Rain had already spotted. It was dense already, and growing thicker by the moment; as she watched, it closed in to within a couple of meters of the train itself. “That isn't normal at all. Could this be…?”

Kirito slashed his hand down, opening his menu. A fast movement of fingers later, and he uttered a curse under his breath. “We've entered an instanced map,” he announced, glaring down at the menu. “I don't know where we're going, but it's not anywhere in the Fifty-Seventh Floor's normal fields. I can't tell how far this map goes, either.”

The warmth that had crept back into Kizmel's body after the Revenant's eviction was chased right out again by that. “Should we teleport out?” she ventured. “I know Argo said we needed to be on this train, but this… I don't like this, Kirito. If we're no longer in Aincrad proper, we have no idea what might happen next. Asuna? What do you think?”
Both of them were frowning, and she could see Asuna weighing her responsibilities as vice-commander of the Knights of Blood. “You may be right,” she said finally. “At the least, we should probably inform the Commander.” She bit her lip. “Kirito-kun, everyone. I hate to ask this, but could you keep investigating for now, while I teleport to HQ? Get out the minute you think it’s too much, but… I think we need this.”

“Do it,” Rain said immediately, fingers tightening on the hilt of her sword. “You’re right, Asuna. Someone needs to tell the KoB what’s up, and someone needs to find out where this train is going.” She smiled; shakily, but honestly, Kizmel thought. “Go. We’ll handle things here.”

Asuna looked dubious, even when Kirito gave her a reassuring nod, but didn't protest. “All right, then. Be careful, everyone.” Reaching into a belt pouch, she withdrew an azure crystal and held it aloft. “Teleport: Granzam!”

Somehow, Kizmel thought, it wasn't a shock to any of them when absolutely nothing happened. That was the kind of day they were all having, after all.

“An anti-crystal trap,” Philia said numbly. “We’re out in an instanced map, with no map data, and Teleport Crystals don’t even work. Can this day get any worse?”

“Don’t say that!”

The chorus from the others present—Kizmel included—apparently came just a moment too late. On the heels of Philia’s ill-advised complaint, at the same moment as the collective rebuke, a pounding noise rang out on the door at the far end of the train car, leading to the next. The a second, louder noise.

Joined by several more, as if the first person—or thing—had had friends come to help.

“Kirito-kun?” Asuna said, with strained calm. “I don’t suppose you have a spare sword? I think we’re about to have company.”

Kirito winced, began to shake his head. Kizmel spoke up before he could, however. “Kirito. Check our storage. There will be an item called ‘Andvar’ within.” She coughed at the looks that got her. “I’d not mentioned it before because I was hoping for a more appropriate time, but… Well. Needs must.”

Truthfully, she was surprised she’d kept it a surprise as long as she had. When their inventories merged upon their marriage, she’d suspected he might have spotted it; but apparently, as she’d hoped, it had simply gotten lost amid the myriad items they’d both collected over time.

Moments later, the cruciform blade of Andvar appeared in a bright flash, settling into Kirito’s hand. “My father’s sword,” Kizmel explained softly. “I retrieved it when I visited my childhood home, some days ago. It’s not as strong as the Duskshard, or I would have mentioned it sooner, but I believe it should be adequate for now.”

“…Yeah. It should be just fine.” The smile he gave her was enough to warm her chest and face both, even in the midst of the crisis. “Thanks, Kizmel. Now—” He broke off, seeing a crack appear in the door to the next car. “We’ll talk later. Let’s move!”

The two of them led the way, hitting the door hard enough to knock it clear off its weakened hinges. That sent the two zombies that had been attempting to break it down sprawling—which was just as well, as it quickly became apparent fighting them in the confines of a train car was worse than out in an open street.

It was well that the car, like the first, seemed empty of cargo. The undead within it, as Kizmel found
when several streaks of red were suddenly etched down her sword arm, had claws.

She and Kirito forced their way into the new car as quickly as they could, his twin swords and her saber thrusting and slashing at the dozen or so zombies in clear view. No time or space for Sword Skills here; Kizmel could only be grateful that, outside the limits of Karika, it didn't take charms or a holy blade to inflict injury.

It was hard enough as it was to avoid being bitten, carving their way into the horde. But soon, as another zombie went down from a Baneblade thrust to heart—and stayed down, remarkably—Asuna was stabbing her own way into the melee. Following quickly behind, Rain and Philia tore into those that got around behind the forwards.

This train car was some ten meters long, by Kizmel's estimate. They had fought perhaps a third of the way down it when light filtering from above brought Kizmel the realization this one, too, had no roof. They'd bought themselves two meters more when she realized she could hear the sound of another blade in motion—from ahead of her party.

After lopping off the arm of a zombie that had just raked its claws down her face, Kizmel caught a glimpse of an enormous blade tearing into the undead from the opposite side of the car. For a brief, chilling moment, she thought the Revenant—or another like it—had somehow gotten aboard. Then she realized the figure behind the sword was, quite simply, far too short.

Also, the voice shouting out a battle cry was far too high-pitched to be anything like the monster they'd forced off the train. High-pitched, and almost… girlish…

She and Kirito double-teamed one more zombie—a corpulent one, so large it needed three swords to properly dismember—and then suddenly the way was clear. The last undead mob in the forward half the car was just then being hurled clear out the top by a wide, round-tipped sword, one that tore the zombie clear in half along the way.

“Take that!”

That last yell seemed to chase the final mob's remains away; and then, with a completely incongruous giggle, the figure holding the sword swung it up and behind its back. A motion that would've seemed perfectly normal, had the weapon not massed nearly as much as the wielder.

Kizmel squinted through the dark. There was something about the figure that seemed familiar. I've seen that silhouette before. But where? Surely no other player managed to reach here—and that voice. While I may not know every clearer, I thought I did know all the…

Moonlight chose that moment to stream in through a break in the fog above, casting their unexpected ally in stark relief. Lavender hair. Eyes of a color Kizmel could only describe as red wine. Largely purple clothes, of a cut that made Philia's usual outfits look modest, covering a figure that momentarily made even Kizmel feel inadequate.

Kizmel recognized her. Even the cheerful smile the girl—young woman?—turned their way, despite never having seen more than just her silhouette. But why… is someone like her…? No. She's—

“You,” Kirito breathed. “You were the one who oversaw the battle in the Mirror Room, back in Hyrus Fortress.” Despite the fact that the girl had put away her blade, he kept his in hand. Low, defensive, but ready. “What are you doing here?”

“Ehehe. About that…” The lavender-haired girl with the (NPC) mark under her cursor chuckled, scratching the back of her head. “Long time no see? I was really impressed with how you guys
handled that! Nice job!” Then, with disturbing abruptness, she sobered, though she never quite lost
the smile. “Kirito. Kizmel. Vice-Commander Asuna. I'm MHCP-002 Strea, an agent of the Cardinal
System.

“We need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

This was originally intended to cover the Murder Case, but that went out the window
when I realized the specific plot I'd come up with for the Fifty-Seventh Floor was
growing large enough that the murder would be a side show by comparison. That'll be
coming next arc, I suppose.
Pacing for this chapter is, I will be the first to admit, possibly a bit off. I had a lot of
loose ends to tie up with the beginning, and then… absolutely nothing relevant left on
the Fifty-Sixth Floor. Apologies if the mid-chapter time skip comes off as at all
awkward; I really couldn't think of any other way to handle it.
Hopefully the abrupt turn to Zombie Apocalypse and surprise appearance by everyone's
favorite Cloudcuckoolander AI. (Truthfully Strea was originally intended to get a proper
debut much later than this, but when the zombie outbreak plot started expanding I had…
other ideas.)
I should perhaps mention I'm aware I may have gotten the description of Gwen wrong. I
still haven't had a chance to read the relevant portions of Girls' Ops, and the wiki didn't
seem to have an image of her, so I did a search and went with the character that seemed
to show up most in the results. If anyone more knowledge can confirm/correct me on
that, I'd be grateful.
Also, apologies if the Sindarin is off. I just did a brief search for something appropriate,
so I can't vouch for its authenticity.
I think that about covers things here. I realize this chapter couldn't possibly live up to the
last two, but I hope it was at least enjoyable. -Solid

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!