Fairy Dance of Death

by Catsy

Summary

AU reboot of the entire SAO storyline, beginning from the premise that Kayaba Akihiko was obsessed with magic and Norse Mythology rather than swords and pure melee. As a result, he created the Death Game of Alfheim Online rather than the floating castle of Aincrad—a world in which player-killing is not a crime, and the nine player races are in competition with each other to reach the top of the World Tree. Multi-POV epic following the stories of multiple canon characters throughout the game.

[Home Page] [FAQ (mild spoilers)] [World Map] [Timeline (major spoilers)] [TV Tropes (major spoilers)] [Tumblr (spoilers are tagged)]
Thank you for your interest in *Fairy Dance of Death*. It's no coincidence that I originally began posting this story on Nov 6th, 2012—exactly ten years to the day before the canonical launch of Sword Art Online. It seemed an auspicious day to begin a complete "reboot" of the SAO universe.

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**Premise:**

This is an AU fic starting from the premise that Kayaba was obsessed with fantasy and Norse Mythology rather than swords and melee, and developed ALO rather than SAO, trapping 20,000 players inside the Death Game of Alfheim Online. If you don't know what ALO is, you probably haven't seen past episode 14 of the anime or read the Fairy Dance volumes of SAO—and you probably should do that first in order to get the most out of this story and avoid spoilers, although the story of FDD will progress markedly differently than the SAO or ALO arcs.

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**IMPORTANT:**

Many of the differences between this universe and canon SAO will be shown as the story progresses, but in order to avoid confusion from mismatched expectations, there is one thing I wanted to make clear at the outset: while this fic is set in the world of ALO, it is not the game of ALO that we know from canon. It would be better to describe it—for the most part—as a blend of SAO game mechanics, the setting and races of ALO, and a whole lot of original content.

If you're very familiar with both games and see something that makes you think "that's not how it is in SAO/ALO", just remind yourself that this is an AU fic and that the discrepancy is probably intentional—I take a lot of pride in the amount of excruciatingly detailed research and world-building I do for my writing, and I sincerely hope you will enjoy the result.

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**History:**

The first two Acts of this story were originally posted on Fanfiction.net between 11/2012 and 8/2014. During that time, *Fairy Dance of Death* became the second most popular SAO fic on FFN, with thousands of regular readers. I have become increasingly frustrated with FFN's excessive content restrictions, lack of tags or decent formatting options, and draconian filtering of anything that even looks like a URL; after the completion of Act 2, I took a hiatus to work on refining the outline for Act 3—and while I'm at it, work on migrating FDD over to AO3. I haven't decided whether I will eventually stop posting new chapters to FFN, but my long-term intent is to either move the story here, or maintain this as an alternate "multimedia" version of the fic. Please bear with this process.

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**Differences from FFN version:**

- Diabel's name is spelled Diavel as in canon.
- The format of the in-universe date headers at the beginning of each chapter has been adjusted.
- Wording and small details polished here and there; none of the changes are material.
- Some typos and factual errors corrected.
- Planned addition of more media, such as chapter illustrations and an optional "minimap" interface showing where the character(s) are.
- Most notably, I added this foreword and consolidated several later "short" chapters from my brief experiment with that style so that their length was more consistent with the surrounding chapters. This has had the result of chapter numbers changing from what they were on FFN as follows:
I tried to arrange things so that they evened back out for the post-transition chapters, but it just didn't work.

**Reference Material and Links:**

Home page: [http://ayashi.net/sao/fdd-index.html](http://ayashi.net/sao/fdd-index.html)
FAQ (very minor spoilers): [http://ayashi.net/sao/fdd-faq.html](http://ayashi.net/sao/fdd-faq.html)
Interactive World Map (no spoilers): [http://ayashi.net/sao/fdd-worldmap.html](http://ayashi.net/sao/fdd-worldmap.html)
Timeline (major unmarked spoiler warning): [http://ayashi.net/sao/fdd-cal.html](http://ayashi.net/sao/fdd-cal.html)
Majutsugo, the Language of Magic: [http://ayashi.net/sao/majutsugo.html](http://ayashi.net/sao/majutsugo.html)
Chapter 2

ACT 1: Launch

"Alfheim Online may be a game, but you don't play it—you live it."
—Akihiko Kayaba, interview dated 10/24/22

6 November 2022
Day 1 - Afternoon

With a smile, fourteen year old Kazuto Kirigaya reached across his desk to turn off the television. The sudden silence in the room seemed to echo with half-remembered bits of the newscast, which had been reporting on the launch of the world's first true Virtual Reality MMORPG: Alfheim Online. He'd only been half-listening to it anyway; most of his attention had been focused on his desktop computer as he skimmed social media sites and the Fulldive forums for last-minute information about the game. The only time the news had commanded his full attention was when there was an interview with Akihiko Kayaba—the genius behind the Nerve Gear VR technology and the developer of Alfheim Online.

But the clock said 12:58 PM Japan Standard Time, and that meant he had less than two minutes until he could actually be playing the game.

Kazuto gracefully shut down his computer and gave his room a last once-over, making sure snacks and drinks were by the side of his bed so that he wouldn't have to log out for long when he took breaks for sustenance and basic needs. After one last swig from his water bottle, he sat down on the edge of the bed and picked up the bulky Nerve Gear helmet that would be his brain's interface to the virtual world.

Had Kazuto spent much time thinking about girls rather than video games and advanced computer programming, he might've been embarrassed by the way he ran his hands across the surface of the Nerve Gear, caressing it almost like a lover. But in a way, it was fitting: during the two months he'd been part of the closed beta for ALO, he'd certainly spent far more time wearing that helmet than with his family. After all that time spent in Alfheim, the fairy world of magic and adventure almost felt more real to him than the world in which his body lived and breathed. When he was in that world, he was free—completely unbound from the limitations of the physical world. In Alfheim, all he needed were his wings and a good sword.

It was time. Kazuto slipped the Nerve Gear onto his head, settling back onto his bed and getting comfortable. There was a small digital heads-up display inside the helmet showing vital data like the device's battery life and network connection; it also had a clock. As he watched, the seconds ticked down to 1:00 PM one by one.

At 12:59:59, a final grin of anticipation touched Kazuto's face as he spoke the voice command that initiated the startup sequence, stripping him of any awareness of the outside world and replacing his senses with input from the game engine.

In Japan, one common method for creating pseudonyms was to combine syllables from their given and family names—a method of abbreviation popular for various other phrases as well. So when the
Kazuto was prompted for his username, he gave it the same name he used for his character: the first two mora of his family name followed by the last from his given name.

K-I-R-I-T-O, he typed on the holographic keyboard hanging in the air before him in ALO's chargen room, romanized rather than using kana. After entering his password, the game surprised him by prompting him whether or not he wanted to load his beta character data. Kirito had been under the impression that there was going to be a full wipe of the player base after the beta, and it was going to shock him if they actually let him carry over the levels and items he'd gained there.

After a moment of indecision, he accepted the prompt. Depending on how much carried over, it might be a little unfair—but given the nightmarish difficulty curve of the game, any advantage would be welcome. And if nothing else, it would save him the tedious process of selecting a race and customizing his character. Certain hair and skin tones were only available to certain races, but nearly any aspect of facial or body structure could be manipulated to the heart's content within the bounds of that racial archetype.

Early in the beta, Kirito had experimented with a few different races—the Salamander tribe was especially popular due to their prowess with weapons and mastery of fire magic, and he'd been frankly stunned at how many people enjoyed playing the diminutive feline humanoids called Cait Sith. But it hadn't taken him long to discover that he vastly preferred the unpopular Spriggan race for a variety of reasons—not least of which, he admitted to himself a little sheepishly, was that he thought their dark ash-gray skin and predominantly black clothing was really cool.

Sure enough, the game skipped past the giant roulette wheel of the race selection screen and the unthinkable complexity of the character customization. A player could always simply accept a randomly generated appearance, but Kirito couldn't stand that—he'd spent a long time crafting the appearance of his final character, modeling it after one of his favorite manga protagonists.

The chargen room faded to black, and black shifted to the not-quite-black that a person sees with their eyes closed as the murmur of a crowd rose from a distant, hollow sound into something more substantial that surrounded him on all sides.

Kirito opened his eyes, and for the first time in over a month looked upon the virtual game world of Alfheim, staring down at his hands and his avatar's dark-skinned Spriggan body as he stood in the center of a vast plaza. He didn't have a way to see his own face yet, but everything else was exactly as he remembered it, aside from the equipment he wore—which was all the basic default starting gear. He extended the first two fingers of his left hand and drew a vertical stroke in the air, and grunted in satisfaction as the system menu opened with a gentle chiming sound, hanging in the air at around chest height.

A look at his status screen confirmed his suspicions: he was back to a level 1 character, and while he still had the pair of starter spells given to all Spriggans and the first two skills he'd selected, both his spells and skills had been reset to one point out of the thousand it took to master them: complete beginner level. It was going to take months of grinding to get him back where he was before the wipe.

He sighed, but there was no real regret in it—he hadn't expected anything to carry over in the first place, and it had spared him the hour it'd take to try to recreate his character's appearance. That was an hour he could be spending getting a head start on everyone else.

Dismissing his menu with a wave of his hand, Kirito took his first good look around at his surroundings, and started in alarm. He'd expected to spawn in the Spriggan starting city of Penwether, where he'd be surrounded by others of his own faction, but he found himself in the middle of a vast plaza filled with thousands of players from each of the nine races, all of them
mingling and marveling at their surroundings. Now and then a flash of colored light would appear in
an empty spot somewhere in the plaza, pixels resolving into the spawning avatars of players as they
logged in. Towering far above the spires of the city he could see the vast trunk of the world-
tree *Yggdrasil*, in whose roots the city nestled. On an overcast day the branches of the tree would be
lost to the clouds above; even on a day of clear blue skies like today the tree canopy was hazy with
the kilometers of distance and cast a broad shadow across the land as the sun traveled.

"Welcome, traveler!" The voice came from somewhere behind and to his right; Kirito whirled,
startled, and found himself facing an NPC with the glowing question mark of an available quest
hanging over her cat-eared head. The amber-haired Cait Sith woman grinned toothily. "Bet you're
confused, aren'tcha?"

"A little," Kirito admitted. "I thought I was going to spawn in Penwether like we did in the beta. But
this looks like the neutral city of Arun, in the shadow of Yggdrasil itself—and we shouldn't be able
to get there yet."

The NPC nodded as the game's natural language processing algorithms parsed his words and
decided that he'd responded the right way to trigger the quest. A small icon popped up in his far left
peripheral vision; when he tried to focus on it, the quest update window grew in his HUD and
explained that this was a tutorial quest—one which Kirito knew hadn't been in the beta. That was a
good sign; it suggested that he could expect a lot more new content that hadn't been there before.

"On any other day," the nameless Cait Sith NPC went on, "of course everyone'd begin their
adventure in their race's starting city. Today, the High King Oberon has summoned all of you here
under a flag of truce to meet your fellow faekin and hear what he has to say."

"Will we get sent back when the event's over?" Kirito asked with some alarm. While there were a
few low-level or relatively safe areas around Arun, the trip back to Penwether would be long and
incredibly dangerous at level 1. And that was just the danger from mobs—there would also
undoubtedly be players from opposing tribes out hunting as well, once this truce was lifted. He'd be
frankly shocked if they intended to leave all of the players here.

The catgirl shrugged fluidly, tail twitching. "Got me, buddy—now you know as much as I do. But
the High King won't be speaking for hours yet, so I'd say go spend some time making friends and
making money. I hear there's been a problem with slimes down in the city sewers, so you might want
to ask a guard about that."

On saying this, the quest marker over the NPC's head disappeared. Another update appeared in
Kirito's peripheral vision, recapping what the NPC had said and giving him a reminder about the
typical-sounding starter quest for killing the slimes. He ignored it for now; it was probably the sort of
thing that would reward him a mere handful of Yuld—the game's currency—and a pittance of EXP.

He had some familiarity with the city of Arun already, so it didn't take him long to find an NPC
equipment vendor that could outfit him with something better than the starting dagger and black
cloak given to his race. For 20 coins he got a basic leather chest guard, and 50 more bought him a
bronze one-handed long sword. Here in the shadow of the world-tree, the shop probably sold some
incredibly high-end equipment worth thousands or even millions of Yuld—but at level 1, he couldn't
even see them in the shop menu anyway.

That would do for the time being, but it nearly wiped out his starting money. He contemplated some
food in case he ended up being out hunting for an extended period of time, but decided against it—
he was just going to poke his head outside of the city Safe Zone and see if he could find some low-
level mobs to grind, get back in the swing of things.
But first, to see if he still had what it took to fly. Until this point, the glistening black translucent wings that hung from his back during flight had been absent. Now they appeared at need as Kirito tried to remember what it had felt like to train himself to use Voluntary Flight, imagining that he could feel the wings growing from his back and getting them to respond to specific muscle movements. It took a few twitches and false starts, but it was like riding a bicycle: a little tough to get at first, but once you did, you never really forgot. In moments he heard the familiar deep thrumming sound of his wings beating, shining iridescently with the stored power of the sunlight that allowed him to fly.

Kirito crouched, tensed, and kicked off the ground.

It all came flooding back to him in a rush of exhilaration: the endless hours and days spent in this game, fighting and flying and fighting and flying and flying some more. He looped a few times, swooped past an NPC vendor while doing a barrel roll, and wove through the columns surrounding the plaza before shooting back out into the open air at the center.

"Hey there, flyboy!

The flippant call caught Kirito off-guard, distracting him as he looked around for the voice. He swerved to narrowly avoid a pair of Undines in blue mage robes, and ended up bouncing off one of the large animal statues dotting the plaza. He landed in a tumbling, undignified heap, annoyed but grateful at least to be in a Safe Zone and not to have taken falling damage from the crash. As he sat up and rubbed his head, a lanky Salamander with a garish striped bandana wrapped around his shock of red hair jogged up to him and crouched nearby. "Hey, sorry about that. You okay?"

"I'm fine," Kirito grumbled, looking the Salamander up and down warily. The kinds of players who gravitated towards Salamanders tended to be aggressive, and more often than not they'd been a real threat. He was in no danger here in the city, but he felt the need for caution nonetheless.

Seeming to catch the look, the Salamander held up both hands, palms-out. "Don't worry, I'm not sizing you up for a PK or anything—I don't play like that. I was actually hoping you could help me out."

"Help you?" Kirito said in surprise. "No offense, but... you know this is a PvP game, right?"

"Well, sure, but there's nothing says we can't work together too—I read that there were lots of mixed-race parties and guilds in the beta. That's why I tried to get your attention, actually. I thought to myself: 'Klein, my boy, that guy there was a beta tester. That's the only way he could be flying around so naturally like that. You were, weren't you?'"

Kirito turned away, still watching the Salamander out of the corner of his eye. "Um, maybe. Why?"

Klein put his palms together before him and bowed deeply. "I'm begging you to take pity on a poor newbie and teach me how to play this game!"

Kirito's jaw dropped. It was true: there was no rule preventing players of different races from cooperating. Races could even be officially allied if their elected leaders were on friendly terms, and it wasn't particularly uncommon for different races to party together if they weren't at war. But although there were plenty of mobs and bosses for PvE play, ALO had been designed from the beginning with player-versus-player combat in mind, and the game mechanics and long-term quests of the game had made most of the factions neutral to each other at best.

Moreover, Salamander players had had something of a reputation in the beta. Because of their racial advantages with weapons handling and fire magic, they were very popular with aggressive players
who enjoyed PvP combat—and more than a few griefers as well. But there was something completely earnest about Klein's entreaty that made it hard to suspect him of ulterior motives, and Kirito knew from experience what he must be going through as he acclimated to the virtual environment and game system.

"All right," Kirito said finally, trying for a smile. "First thing you're going to want to do is learn how to fly."

Quickly setting aside her confusion at being dropped in Arun after listening to the NPC's speech, Argo wasted no time at all. Her inside information had been accurate up to this point; the game had allowed her to import her Cait Sith character data from the beta and skip the time she would've spent in chargen, and the rumors of a special world event appeared to be true. Her source hadn't said anything about everyone spawning in the city of Arun, but she wasn't about to argue—it would make it much easier to make contact with all of her previous contacts from the beta who'd been lucky enough to get one of the 20,000 copies of ALO from the first printing.

She had at least thirty names of people who'd emailed her before logging in to tell her the character name they'd planned on using, and most of them planned to roll characters of the same race as before. It wasn't worth fretting over the fact that the production version of ALO lacked an in-game web browser or any other way of contacting the outside world—that might bother some people who depended on being able to look up FAQs and guides while they were playing, but Argo had been blessed with an encyclopedic memory that let her recall just about any word or phrase that she'd seen or heard at least once. It wasn't eidetic memory—to her chagrin, she couldn't imprint images or memories or anything else the same way; it would've greatly expanded her ability to act as an information broker—but words stuck, and so did information if she read it or heard it aloud.

Sitting on a bench in one of Arun's major traffic areas and chewing on a broad peppermint-flavored leaf, her large mobile cat ears twitched to track passing conversations with half of her attention while she manipulated her game menu in front of her, rapidly tapping out messages to her contacts and adding them to her friends list when she got an affirmative response.

"Come on, Ki-bou," she muttered after sending a reply to one of her Imp contacts, her tail lashing in mild annoyance. "I know you're here. You could take five seconds to answer me."

Swiping her menu closed, she hopped off of the bench and jogged off towards the central plaza at the foot of the World Tree. She received several new-message notifications in the time it took her to reach her destination, but for the moment she ignored them, looking around for the player she needed to meet. So many players of the same races looked alike when they were all wearing starting equipment, but the sharp eyesight of the Cait Sith race let her pick out her quarry quickly enough—he was one of the very few dark-haired Sylphs she'd seen yet.

"What took you so long, Skarrip?" Argo planted her hands on her hips, trying to look severe. Between the inherent cuteness of the Cait Sith race and her own diminutive stature, it didn't quite have the desired effect. Skarrip favored her with a bemused smile and arched an eyebrow.

"You'll forgive me of course for having real-life obligations. I'm here now, though."

"Real life? What's this riaru you're talking about?" Despite her impatience, Argo had a hard time being too angry at Skarrip. He had always been one of her best inside sources in the beta, and was downright obsessive on the subject of ALO's aesthetics and game mechanics. When he shrugged at her rhetorical question, she made a small fu sound, a vocalized puff of air. "Well anyway, spill. What've you got on this world event?"
Skarrip shrugged again. "The High King Oberon—"

"You mean a GM playing him."

He continued as if she hadn't interrupted. "—Is supposed to appear at five-thirty for a special announcement. Everyone needs to be there for it."

Argo's tail lashed in a figure eight. "I got that much from the catgirl NPC. What've you got that's news?"

"If I could tell you anything else, my dear," Skarrip said with splayed hands, "I assure you I would 'spill'. Do bear in mind that my job has a confidentiality clause."

"That you regularly break on my behalf."

"A fact which you'd do well not to speak too loudly if you want me to remain in a position to help you."

Argo paced in a circle around her contact—it wasn't quite accurate to call him a friend—stopping as he said this and poking him a few times in the small of the back. Skarrip didn't turn except to cant his head in her direction whenever she came about, still wearing that infuriating smile. "You're hiiiiiding something," she said, drawing out the verb slowly into a nasal sound.

"And so I am. Aren't we all?"

Returning to face him from the front, Argo crossed her arms in front of her chest and added foot-tapping to her repertoire of impatient gestures. "I don't have time for your games today," she said finally. "I have a network to rebuild. Let me know when you can tell me something useful, hm?"

Skarrip inclined his head, a few locks of dark violet-black hair drifting with the motion. "I shall do just that. Your abrasive personality quirks aside, it's nice to see you again, Argo."

"Meh," she said, hiding a brief smile. "I got stuff to do. Send me a message once in a while."

Trotting away from Skarrip and the irritating enigmatic attitude he liked to put on, Argo drew open her menu and began replying to the messages that had accumulated while she was wasting time with him. Over the course of many conversations during the beta, she had narrowed him down to one of two or three people affiliated in some way with Argus. It was possible he was one of the company's social media organizers or bloggers, but based on his name and in-game racial preference she was leaning strongly towards the opinion that he was the lead artist for the Sylph race, Rintarou Sukagawa—someone who was known to be a player himself, but whose actual character was unknown.

Like her other Argus contacts, he frequently came up with some particularly juicy insider info, which made him useful—but just as often he had a habit of putting on airs and pretending that he was more important than he really was.

She could smell it a kilometer away when he was bullshitting, and today was one of those days—he didn't know anything of worth about the supposed opening day event, or else he would've sold the info to her.

"Excuse me," said a female voice as someone tugged on the hem of Argo's cloak. Startled, she hopped in place and whirled around, tail slashing the air. A slender Undine girl in the usual starting gear was standing there looking horribly embarrassed and hopelessly confused, shifting from one foot to the other as she stared around at everything as if it was the most bewildering thing she'd ever
"I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm incredibly lost and you look like you know what you're doing." She tugged nervously at one of the locks of long blue hair that spilled over her shoulders.

"That's not all I know," Argo said smugly. "Argo's the name, and you've come to the right person if you're looking for info. What'cha need?"

"Well, it's just… this is my first time in the game—any game, really—and I've never done anything like this before. What do you do here?"

Argo boggled at the question, her petite jaw hanging open for a moment and revealing tiny, needle-like fangs before she shut it with a clapping sound. "You're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was," the girl said with building embarrassment, the pale skin of her cheeks darkening as she looked down at her feet. "This is my older brother's game, but he had to leave suddenly for a business trip yesterday. I was curious what all the fuss was about, and fairies sounded kind of neat—so I decided to try it out."

It was too much. Argo doubled over in high-pitched laughter, drawing stares from passers-by which only increased the Undine girl's discomfort. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. So lemme get this straight. You're borrowing your brother's Nerve Gear, you've never played a video game before, and you decided to login to _ALO_ of all things?"

"I've played some games before," the girl said a little defensively, brows furrowing and eyes flashing in a way that hinted at a temper lurking somewhere under the surface.

"Like what?" Argo asked, finally recovering her composure.

"Well," she said, reaching reflexively to where her pocket might've been if she'd been in her own skin and clothes. "I've got a bunch of them on my smartphone. I really like the one where you have to knock down the dancing _inugami_ with flying cats."

Argo lost it again.

"_Piikei_?" Asuna said finally, face contorting in even further confusion at the lengthy explanation. "I've never heard the word before. What does it mean?"

"P, K," Argo replied, sounding out the Latin letters slowly and separately, then repeating the English words they stood for. "As in _Player Killing_. It means attacking another player and reducing their hit points—their life—to zero. Did you even read the manual?"

Asuna shifted uncomfortably, feeling incredibly stupid. It was not a feeling she was accustomed to, and she didn't like it one bit. This world of magic and fairies was starting to rapidly lose its luster for her. "There's a manual?"

"Oh for—" Argo stopped abruptly, and sighed, looking up at the much taller girl through a messy veil of auburn bangs. "Okay, listen. I don't make a habit of giving out information for free, but you're a complete noob and I'd hate to see you get ganked on your first day. So here's how it works. When you created your character, you saw there are nine races, right?" Asuna nodded. "Each race is competing with the others to clear the huge dungeon in the trunk of the World Tree, _Yggdrasil_. The first race that makes it to the top gets an audience with King Oberon, who's supposed to allow them and two of their allies to… ascend, you could call it, into a higher form that has the power of unlimited flight."
"Unlimited flight?" Asuna had heard that players could fly in the game, but didn't really know anything about how it worked yet. Once again she kicked herself for not reading the manual—or for that matter, knowing that there was one in the first place.

"Yup," Argo said happily. "Flying is awesome and everyone loves it, but you can only fly for about ten minutes max before you have to rest your wings—and you can't fly underground or in dungeons. So getting to the top of the World Tree is kinda like the game's grand quest."

Asuna pursed her lips, thinking. "So what did you mean about… PKing?"

"Well," Argo said as if she was explaining gravity to a child, "only one race can win an audience with the High King, right? And they can choose two allied races to go with them. So…"

"So it means every race is competing with every other," Asuna interjected, pleased that she'd been able to figure it out before it was explained to her. "Wait, that means the game's all about fighting each other? Not against monsters?"

"Sorta," Argo said. "It's a PvP game—err, player versus player—but there are plenty of monsters to fight. In fact, that's the main way you earn EXP and level up."

"Ekkusupii?"

Argo sighed again, palm sliding across her face. At that moment she seemed to react to something Asuna couldn't see, her eyes drifting off to her left, and she muttered under her breath. "Well it's about time, Ki-bou." Looking up at Asuna again, the catlike girl said, "tell you what. You know how to open your menu, right? Go into Options. Look for Help. And RTFM."

Asuna started to open her mouth to ask what RTFM was, but Argo interrupted irritably with the English words: "Read The… Friendly Manual." Then, back to Japanese: "Gotta go. Good luck!"

As the catgirl who'd identified herself as Argo ran off, Asuna realized she'd been terribly rude and had neither introduced herself nor thanked the girl for her help. With a sigh of her own, she gazed up at the impossibly massive tree that towered above the city, her eyes traveling up and up until they strained to make out the twisted, gnarled forms of the lowest branches, which were nearly lost in the haze of distance and the sparse clouds that drifted across the sky. Faintly, far above even those branches, she could see what looked like a collection of structures—what might've been a city, or a castle, or something. At that distance, it was hard to tell.

It was a lot to take in all at once for someone who'd never played an MMO before, let alone the world's first VRMMORPG. She knew she'd be wise to take Argo's advice and study the manual as if she were cramming for her entrance exams, if she wanted to get anywhere in this game.

The thought struck her as funny. An hour ago, she hadn't had the slightest idea what to expect, other than that it was some kind of "virtual reality" game and that it was a world of fairies and magic—and a bunch of other stuff her brother had rambled about without explaining the acronyms or strange terms. She'd just logged in to try it out and see what he was so obsessed about, and here she was thinking about cramming to learn how to play as if she had any intention of doing so.

She giggled furiously, and didn't care now who gave her odd looks. Now that some of her desperate confusion was gone, she could go back to the sense of wonder she'd felt when she first logged in, marveling at the sights, sounds, smells—and the fact that there were sights, sounds and smells at all in this virtual world. It was nothing short of a technological miracle that her body—her avatar, she'd heard it called—could actually sense these things as if it was her real body, in the flesh.
It was magnificent. At that point, she was just as happy to leave silly obsessions like fighting other players and adventuring to the top of the World Tree to the gamer geeks who actually enjoyed that sort of thing. She could be content just walking around in this world and being immersed in and amazed at it.

Asuna laughed beautifully as she spun in place, dancing in a little circle with her arms held up as if they could touch the sky. In that moment, she was happier than she could remember being in a long time.

Kirito had made it look easy, but he'd had the advantage of hundreds of hours spent in Full Dive during the beta test. Klein, on the other hand, had to begin with the much less intuitive " joystick" method, which involved a virtual controller gripped in the left hand that allowed fine control over the player's flight. Many players never got the knack of using their back muscles to control their wings, but it was an essential technique to master if you wanted to fight in the air effectively.

As he finished sending a message and swiped his menu closed, Kirito arrived at the conclusion that Klein wasn't going to be mastering Voluntary Flight anytime soon. After about an hour of practice, the new player could maneuver reasonably well using the joystick method, but had barely been able to get so much as a twitch from his wings without it. At that point, Kirito flagged down an NPC guard and initiated the slime-killing quest in order to give the two of them some combat practice, a task which sent them down into the dank, labyrinthine sewers beneath the city.

"It's like this," Kirito explained as the End Frame of a slime's death animation played, the mob disappearing in a puff of brackish smoke and rewarding him with a tiny amount of Yuld and EXP. "You progress in two different ways in ALO: leveling up your character by earning EXP, and increasing your skills by using them. Leveling up gives you a small boost to your flight time and maximum HP and MP, and gives you access to new spells, skills and gear. Each time you level up you also get five stat points which can be distributed how you like between STR, AGI, INT, or VIT. Strength increases your weight limit and physical damage. Agility increases your speed, evasion and accuracy. Intelligence increases your magic damage and your maximum MP, while Vitality increases your damage resistance and maximum HP. With me so far?"

"I got that much," Klein said, eyeing another slime that was roaming close to where they were. "And it's like some of those old first-person RPGs, where you have to use your skills and spells in order to get better at them and unlock new ones."

Kirito nodded, smiling. "You got it. Now you try this next one. This time, don't just run in swinging. Open up your spells menu and tap the Fire Bolt spell; it should be the one starting spell that all Salamanders get."

Klein manipulated his menu interface in the air in front of him. It was invisible to Kirito, as were the menus of any other players. "Okay?"

"Now," said Kirito, "you should have an option in the menu for pronounce. The system will read you the incantation for the spell—you need to listen carefully and say it exactly the same way. It can be faster or slower, so that you can time it to go off when you want to, but the rhythm and pronunciation have to be just right. Try it slowly the first time: focus on your target, aim your left hand, and recite the words."

"I feel so goofy doing this," Klein said with a grin as he raised his arm. "Hijan!"

It took a couple tries, but on the third hijan, an anemic bolt of flame leapt from Klein's fingertips and shot towards the slime, drawing a skreeee sound from the target as it struck.
"Great!" Kirito shouted. "Now you've got its attention, and you started the fight by doing some free damage to it. When it gets close, unleash one of your sword skills."

"How do I do that?" Klein asked as he waved his cutlass threateningly at the approaching mob. It was a glob of sewage about the size of a small dog, and would have been less intimidating if it didn't smell so convincingly awful. The slime hissed as it bounced towards Klein and struck him with a tendril of goo.

"Not like that," Kirito replied with amusement as he slouched against the wall, watching Klein run in circles slashing wildly at the mob. "The system's waiting for you to move your sword just right so that it detects the starting position for an art. When it does—"

"Some help, please!"

"Giving it to you if you'll listen," Kirito said, grinning. "When you get the right position, your sword will start to glow and you'll feel a kind of tension build up. When you're ready—release it."

Klein's HP was dropping slowly from the weak attacks of the slime, but he hadn't been doing much damage in return either. He kicked the slime away to get a little breathing room, and settled the sword with the back of the blade on his shoulder in a particular way. When he did, the blade began to emit a pale orange light, and as the slime propelled itself towards Klein for another attack, the Salamander suddenly shot forward in a streak of light and left a glowing red trail of damage on the enemy. A few moments later, the mob exploded into its death animation.

"See?" Kirito said, strolling up to Klein and punching him lightly in the arm. "Nothing to it. You'll be farming bosses in no time."

Klein pumped his fist in victory, grinning. "Are all the spells that easy?"

"Not a chance," Kirito said. "Generally speaking, the more powerful and higher level the spell, the longer and more difficult the incantation. Some of the higher-level spellwords are really hard for Japanese people to pronounce without a lot of practice."

It took a few hours to finish killing enough slimes to complete the tutorial quest, but by that point Klein had found his rhythm and the two of them spent some additional time hunting the slightly higher-level rats for extra EXP. Their first level-up had come fairly quickly, but it was getting close to dinner time before the pair saw level 3. By mutual agreement they headed back up to the surface to turn in the quest and vendor off all their trash drops.

With their inventories emptied and some money to their names, it was time to tend to their empty stomachs. As they sat on a rooftop eating the basic bread loaves they'd bought, Kirito had to explain to Klein that the hunger he felt was the game's simulation of their character's state—a state that had nothing to do with whether or not his body in the real world felt hungry or not.

"It's really easy to spend too long in Full Dive, eating regularly and having a great adventure, and then come out hours later and immediately realize that your real body is starving or dehydrated."

Klein whistled. "Good thing I came prepared, then. I've got a pizza ordered for 5:30, and that's not too far off!"

Kirito laughed. "That's hardcore. What, are you planning on missing Oberon's big speech?"

"Oh, that's right! Well, I'm sure the Fairy King won't mind if I slip in a little late with pizza and ginger ale on my breath."
As the two players shared more lighthearted joking, unwinding from the last few hours of flight practice and grinding, Kirito gazed up at the distant lower branches of Yggdrasil, pondering what wonders still awaited him that high above. During the beta they'd barely scratched the surface of the massive dungeon within the trunk of the world-tree, let alone reached the top where it was said that Oberon awaited to reward the first race of fae to seek an audience in his presence.

It was a prospect as exhilarating as it was daunting.

"Hey, Kirito," Klein said after a long pause. "What are you planning on doing after this? I mean, after the main event, whatever it is."

"Hm? Well, we'll probably get sent back to our starting cities after this, so I guess I'll start questing and grinding in the ruins around Penwether. I know a lot of good spots there."

"Yeah, I bet you know all sorts of stuff. Can't believe how lucky you were, getting into the beta."

Kirito shrugged, a little embarrassed. "Well, in a way we're all lucky—with only twenty thousand copies in the first printing, anyone who's here in this world right now is lucky. I'm just glad I got to come back. It's not like outside, where so much of what you can or can't do is dictated by where you were born or who your family was. In this world... the only limit is your skill as a player."

"I can see what you mean. So hey, I wanted to ask you something. I logged in with a bunch of my real-life friends, former guildmates from other games. Each of us was going to pick a different race, but I don't think anyone was planning on rolling a Spriggan."

"They're not very popular," Kirito admitted. "Illusion magic isn't generally all that useful in combat, and most people prefer the races with an elemental affinity." He reached over and poked at Klein. "Salamanders are pretty popular."

"Maybe so, but you're doing just fine. I haven't run into the other guys yet, but when I do, I'd like to introduce you—we should all go out partying together, I think you'd like them."

Kirito shifted uncomfortably. Klein seemed like a nice guy, and it had been fun pairing up with him for the last few hours. But at his heart, Kirito preferred to adventure solo—it was another reason he liked playing a Spriggan; the race had a reputation for being loners who hired out as freelance mercenaries.

Again displaying the ability to be observant when he wanted to, Klein waved his hands. "But I mean, it's okay if you don't want to, Kirito. I know most people like to PvP in this game, and you've got no reason to trust a group of strangers. You taught me a lot today, and I'll pass that on to my buddies. If you ever want to party up again, I'd love to! If not, that's cool."

Kirito nodded quietly, suddenly at a loss for anything he really wanted to say. He glanced at his HUD, saw the time there, and managed to produce a smile. "You'd better get going," he said. "Your pizza's going to be there in a minute."

Klein shot bolt upright. "Oh, hell! How could I forget! This world's just too immersive. Thanks, man, I owe you again."

The soft sounds of Klein's menu opening played in sequence, and then a bewildered outburst from the Salamander yanked Kirito's attention away from the slowly setting sun on the horizon. "What the fresh hell?"

"Hm?"
Klein swept his menu closed and then opened it again. "I can't find the logout button. I could've sworn it was supposed to be right here?"

Kirito rolled his eyes. "It's in the system menu, right at the bottom."

"That's where I am!" Klein said, stabbing at the air with his finger impatiently.

Sighing, Kirito opened his own menu and casually sent it spinning to the bottom. And then he blinked, not sure if he was seeing correctly. The logout button was there, all right—but it was a blank button, bearing an icon but no label. When he pressed it, it displayed the same kind of curt animation that he'd get from trying to select a grayed-out, disabled option. "That's... really odd."

"I guess we should expect some bugs on launch," Klein said, sounding as if he was trying to sound blasé and worldly about it.

"Tell you what," Kirito said as he rose to his feet and stretched, wiggling his wings. "Let's see if we can find a GM who can log you..."

Kirito trailed off as a rising wall of noise made it difficult for him to hear his own voice and leaves stirred around his feet, scuttling across the rooftop like an army of insects. What had begun as a light breeze built into a gale-force wind whipping around them, stealing their words from the very air. Klein was shouting something, but Kirito couldn't catch it. The wind built to a crescendo, and the light of a teleportation effect flared around the both of them.

When the teleport light faded, Kirito was standing in the middle of the gigantic plaza where he'd first spawned, surrounded by thousands upon thousands of players. As he watched, players continued teleporting in by the dozens, all of them looking just as confused and startled as he felt. Aside from the expensive and rare Escape Crystals and some kinds of rumored high-level magic, there was no instantaneous fast travel in Alfheim—between their wings and the ability to ride tamed mounts, players had to get anywhere they wanted to go on their own. Kirito had only been teleported a few times when he got stuck in bugged world geometry, and never forcibly—a GM would warn a player before doing that.

The setting sun seemed to freeze in place on the western horizon, framed between two of the mountains that straddled Butterflies Valley leading to the Sylvan lands. The hue of both the sun and sky shifted rapidly to a deep orange-red, throwing a crimson cast across everything and making the deep blue hair of some Undines appear almost black. The air, thick with the fears of the assembled players, was filled with sparkling motes of light, like the after-effect of a spell or the dwindling luminescence of a dead player's Remain Light. Gradually those motes drifted towards the trunk of the world-tree, beginning to coalesce into a vaguely humanoid form over a hundred meters tall.

Rather than the High King Oberon, however, the figure that appeared wore the hooded robes of a GameMaster—one of the administrative helpers in the game who would help run quests and deal with bugs. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that the robes of a GM appeared—but no one seemed to be wearing them. Although they seemed to be draped around a gigantic human form, it was a form that was unseen and without substance: the depths of the hood were nothing but the blackest night, and the gloves that emerged from the voluminous sleeves were not attached to arms. Kirito watched with a sense of growing apprehension as the massive figure raised those hands high, spread its arms dramatically, and began delivering the most important tutorial of his life.
"Understand this: Alfheim Online is no longer merely a game. Players may no longer respawn in their home city when they die, and the only means of resurrecting a player's Remain Light are through rare items and high-level magic. If your HP drops to zero and your Remain Light disappears, the Nerve Gear will destroy your brain—ending your life forever, in this world as well as the real one."
—Akihiko Kayaba, Alfheim Online tutorial

6 November 2022
Day 1 - Evening

Kirito studied the features he saw in the slender mirror with a growing sense of horror. He still had the ash-gray skin of a Spriggan, as well as the pointed ears sticking out and back from his head at a slight angle, but the youthful, androgynous face was very recognizably his real one. When his mirror—along with everyone else's—expired into a spray of blue polygons with a shattering sound, he looked up and around at the other players and suppressed an inappropriate urge to laugh nervously. It seemed like everyone had changed. It was like being at an otaku convention of one kind or another, surrounded by people of all shapes and sizes wearing fairy costumes. It looked absurd.

No one was laughing.

"Kirito…? Is that you?" Turning towards the sound of his name, Kirito saw the Salamander player he'd been partying with earlier. Klein didn't look significantly different than he had before—less handsome, a little scruffier, but that garish bandana would've tipped Kirito off if nothing else had.

Kirito nodded, visibly shaking off the sense of shock he felt. "Listen to me, Klein. I don't know what's going to happen now, but I know I don't want to be standing around here. I'm going to make for Spriggan territory—it's just through the pass to the east. There's a lot of tough monsters in the way, but I know some safer routes to get there. There's a really good leveling spot south of Penwether—"

Kirito didn't get to finish. Kayaba—having watched all of the players react to his "proof" that this was now their reality—had one more message to deliver. The growing sounds of discord and dismay in the crowd fell silent once again as the booming voice echoed across them.

『I will now teleport all of you back to your race's starting zones. Tomorrow morning the system will hold a vote for each race to select who will lead them for the next month. This vote will be held once every thirty days. Choose well: your survival depends on it.』

『This concludes the Alfheim Online tutorial. Good luck, players.』

When the sparkling blue light of the teleport effect faded, Kirito found himself standing amidst a number of other Spriggans in what he recognized as the ancient beige stonework of Penwether—somewhere in the merchant district, if his guess was correct. He could hear the sounds of other teleports finishing, and although he could only see a handful of his faction in his immediate vicinity, he knew that there must be hundreds of others being randomly sprinkled around the town.

Tamping down the panic that threatened to claw its way back to the surface, Kirito thought hard. There was nothing he could do now for that poor newbie he'd spent the last few hours playing with. Very likely he'd been teleported back to Salamander territory, which was a long journey to the very south end of Alfheim through both Undine and Imp territories.
And then an uncomfortable thought seized him. Should he *want* to help that player anyway? ALO had been intended from the beginning as a PvP game. The fact that real death was now a consequence of your Remain Light disappearing didn't change the nature of the game—only the stakes. Kayaba’s terms for clearing the game had explicitly pitted the races against one another with mutually exclusive goals, and from a purely pragmatic standpoint he'd be wise to consider any Salamander—any other race, really—as a potential threat.

Kirito bolted from where he was standing, breaking into a run before kicking off the ground and taking to the air. He knew exactly where he needed to go first, exactly what quest he needed to find—and he prayed it was still the same as it had been in the beta. Within an hour, he knew the area surrounding Penwether would be flooded with Spriggan players all competing for mobs and EXP. Some of those conflicts would be violent. The problem would only get worse from there once the neighboring races—Leprechauns to the northwest and Undines to the south—began hunting beyond their immediate territories, looking for unclaimed mobs.

It was frustrating, not being able to fly as quickly as he used to with his beta stats. Now and then Kirito could see distant specks in the sky that must be other players, their own speed as limited as his as they sped towards whatever destination they'd chosen. He was willing to bet that anyone taking to the sky like that with a specific location in mind was a beta tester like him, and hoped none of them were after the same quest.

The town of Lithjagg was several kilometers to the south, near where the vast expanse of ruins marking Spriggan territory began to give way to the low wetlands common to the Undine areas. Technically these were "neutral" territory—neutral in the sense that it was no-man's land. As with Arun, all players would be safe in a neutral town like Lithjagg, but in the open areas surrounding it any players could freely hunt any others. Kirito didn't think that most players would be able to overcome the emotional barriers to killing this quickly, but he didn't want to count on it—nor did he want to count on everyone else necessarily even believing Kayaba's story.

But Kirito believed it. He'd voraciously devoured any materials written by Akihiko Kayaba, as well as the scant few interviews he'd granted the media. He had very nearly idolized the man. There was no question in his mind that everything Kayaba had said in that tutorial had been the truth: death in the game meant death for real.

As he skimmed the treetops at his maximum flying speed, occasionally rising or evading just enough to clear an unusually tall trunk, he heard a chime sound in his ear that very briefly muffled the sound of the wind rushing past him. When he saw the name glowing beside the mail notification, he pulled up and settled to a precarious perch at the top of a tree to rest his wings for a few moments, refocusing on the icon in his peripheral vision to open the message.

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This changes everything. We need to talk. -Argo
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Asuna aimlessly walked the streets of Parasel in a state of numb shock. She had done so ever since Kayaba's so-called "tutorial", ever since she was forcibly teleported back to the Undine starting city along with thousands of other players of her… race? Species? Faction? Tribe? That catlike girl, Argo, had used the word "race" before, but it was really just an arbitrary distinction between the fake bodies that all of the other players in this game wore—it was hard to take seriously.

In truth, she wasn't sure what she should think. At first the whole thing had seemed like some kind of story cooked up by the people running Alfheim Online, a fun trick to pull on the game's opening day. The blood-red sky, the ominous evil-looking guy in the robes, the fourth-wall-breaking threats about logging out and dying… scary stuff, but for all she knew maybe that was all roleplaying—part of the immersion. Should she be playing along? She'd opened her menu and looked for the logout
button, and like so many others had found that it didn't work. Perhaps someone who had actually read the manual would know the real way you were supposed to get out of the game.

But when she'd looked around at the other players to see how the supposed veteran gamers were reacting, she had seen neither amusement nor enjoyment. In fact, she was one of the few people who hadn't looked to be either furious or terrified; that had scared her far more than the words of the massive robed figure. And when she'd looked into the mirror, seeing her real face there with slender elfin ears tapering back through her light blue hair, she'd let out an involuntary scream before dropping the mirror and clapping her hands over her mouth.

She didn't know what RPGs were supposed to be like. Maybe this was all still part of the opening day ceremonies, still some kind of intense, immersive joke that a longtime gamer would take in stride. But if it was... it had stopped being funny—or fun—a long time ago.

It was well past 10 in the evening now. She was long since late for dinner; her mother would be furious. At this rate she was going to be a wreck at school in the morning—assuming there was school in the morning. At one point she'd been consumed by a horrified thought—what would happen if her mother, in one of her fits of pique, decided to yank the Nerve Gear off her head. Would she truly die? Would she get a "game over" message? Would she even know if it happened, or would her awareness simply come to an end in blackness that she'd never even see coming? The thought had taken her to the edge of hysteria, and she'd had to force herself to think about something else in order to get control.

She was scared out of her mind, and she wanted to go home.

Perhaps that was why she was walking, despite having no destination or purpose to the journey through the dark streets of the Undine starting city. Maybe if she walked long enough, far enough, she'd find a way home—meet someone who would laugh and assure her that this was all part of the game, and show her the hidden command she was supposed to use to get out. She could leave and never, ever come back.

Nobody laughed. Nobody reassured her. And nobody—not one blue-haired person out of all the ones she passed—seemed to know any more than she did.

Asuna didn't know where she was now, but she wouldn't have known one part of Parasel from another if she'd been told anyway. All she knew was that she was exhausted—physically and emotionally—and that her feet were tired and sore. She stopped and leaned against the damp gray stone wall of the nearest building, the surface cool against her palm from all of the moisture in the air. And then her knees buckled as she began to cry, great wracking sobs that shook her body while she slid slowly down to a sitting position, leaning against the wall and hugging herself with a white-knuckled grip on her opposite shoulders. For a moment, a stray and absurd thought flitted through her head: gratitude that her wings seemed to disappear from her back when they weren't in use; she probably would've crushed them against the wall otherwise.

"Young miss, are you hurt?"

Trembling, Asuna slowly raised her eyes to the unfamiliar voice, peeking up at its owner through bangs that were plastered to her tear-streaked face. The voice belonged to a young adult man with electric-blue hair that was cut relatively short, save for a pair of long locks that trailed down from his own bangs and temples nearly to his shoulders. He was wearing a blue tunic that matched his hair covered by a simple bronze breastplate, and she could see the grip of a sword sticking up at an angle from one shoulder.

She swallowed once to try to regain her unsteady voice, and said, "I-I don't... I don't think so... I
mean… nuh-no one hit me… I j-just… I'm just…"

The stranger crouched beside her and put a hand gently on her shoulder; she flinched away. Withdrawing the touch with a grimace, he ventured, "You're scared like the rest of us."

"Is this r-real?" Asuna asked suddenly, in a seeming non sequitur. Never before had the answer to a question been so important to her.

The man's eyes dropped to the ground. "I don't know. I think so. Otherwise don't you think someone would've logged us out by now?"

A low moan escaped Asuna's throat, and she turned away from the stranger, leaning her head against the cold stone. "Please leave me alone."

Asuna heard him sigh, heard the tinkling of metal buckles and the soft sounds of fabric rustling as the man stood. "Very well. I'm sorry to bother you." He started to walk away, then stopped, half-turning and looking over his shoulder at her. "If you're tired or cold, miss, there's an inn just a few doors down from here." When she didn't answer, he added, "I'm staying there myself, in room 2C. If you need somewhere to stay tonight, I'll pay for a room of your own."

She looked back up at the kind stranger, a little bit of strength returning to her. Swiping a hand across her face, she sniffled once and asked the man's name.

He folded an arm across his chest and bowed to her. "You may call me Diavel. I like to think of myself as a paladin—of a sort."

A weak smile touched Asuna's lips as she gave her own name, gone just as quickly. Diavel answered it with a firmer smile of his own, and said, "You should get some rest, mi—Asuna. Who knows? Perhaps if we go to sleep, we'll wake in our own bodies." Then he raised his gaze to the moon hanging in the sky just above the level of the rooftops, his smile fading to an expression that was very troubled indeed. "And if not, then we all have a critical choice to make in the morning."

The central courtyard of the city of Gattan was filled to capacity and then some, the sandstone and packed-mud walls lit by hundreds of torches and abuzz with the conversations of thousands of players. The crowd was a sea of flame-colored hair and similarly-hued clothing, and here and there a burst of actual flame was seen as someone cast a spell—whether for practice, demonstration, or to settle an argument. Klein saw plenty of the latter; it was a good thing the city was a Safe Zone.

There was a stage at one end of the courtyard, a dais of stone that rose about a meter and a half from the ground, paved with a tessellating pattern of octagonal and square bricks. Several Salamander players stood upon it, arguing with each other; occasionally someone was shoved off the platform or someone new would climb up to join the loud debate.

Klein stood about thirty meters from the stage, not paying much attention even when players took the floor and addressed the crowd, speechifying and making their opinions of the situation known. From what he could see, not many other people cared about what they had to say either.

In Klein's eloquent estimation, the situation was way fucked up.

Periodically even the minimal attention he was paying to the pontification of the other Salamanders would be diverted to his HUD as he got a message from one of his friends. So far all but one of his real-life buddies had contacted him back to let him know they were okay, and to confirm that they, too had been teleported to their race's home city. Based on the limited information he'd gotten from each of them, he was starting to get a rough idea of where everyone was located in relation to
everyone else—and a very good idea of just how hard it was going to be to get back together.

He was on the verge of blowing off this pointless gathering and heading towards Imp territory to pick up the first friend when a loud voice boomed out from the stage, projecting to be heard above the din. "Alright, enough of this crap, listen up!"

Klein, along with a significant number of other players, turned his eyes to the stage. The new speaker was a stocky Salamander with orange hair styled into short cactus-like spikes, a long sword in a dark gray scabbard slung over his shoulder. He stood at the very edge of the platform, fists on his hips, and tried to look severe.

Jerking a thumb towards himself in a very Western-style gesture, the man spoke with an Osakan accent that sounded like he was playing it to the hilt for effect. "The name's Kibaou, and you need to hear what I've got to say. Is there anyone here who's dumb enough to think that Kayaba was feeding us a line of bullshit when he said that this was a Death Game?"

There was a general murmur of discontent and negation, and a small handful of heckles from people who apparently really were that dumb. Kibaou seemed to ignore the latter. "You heard what the man said. Only one race can reach the top to get unlimited flight, and with the height and time limits on our wings, unlimited flight's the only way we're gonna reach that." He pointed off in the far distance, where a swirling purple vortex of light could be seen hanging in the sky above the World Tree even from this far south.

Kibaou paced back and forth along the edge of the stage, scowling as he continued punctuating his words by gesturing sharply at the phenomenon that had appeared shortly after Kayaba had finished speaking. "That is the way out. And we need to get there first. And you know what that means." He stopped and bellowed out, "it means we, as Salamanders, need to stick together! It means that anyone else trying to get there—any other race trying to get there—is a threat to us!"

Klein felt increasingly cold as he listened to Kibaou speak, and especially chilled by how receptive the crowd seemed to be, murmurs of approval and even outright cheers far drowning out the objections and cries of dissent. It wasn't that the man was necessarily incorrect about the stakes—it was his attitude, the absolutist posture of us-versus-them. Every bit of it rubbed Klein the wrong way, made him think of the friends who were scattered across this game world waiting for him.

Kibaou pounded his fist into his palm, riling up the crowd. "We need to band together and start leveling up, patrolling our territory and protecting our hunting grounds. We need to fight our way back to Arun so we can start clearing the World Tree. And we need to strike first against anyone who gets between us and our freedom! Who's with me?"

The answer, to Klein's dismay, was: far, far too many. Anger growing, he pushed his way to the front and shook his fist in the air. "Who the hell do you think you are?" Klein yelled loudly, trying to be heard above the growing noise from the crowd. "Some of us have friends who logged in with us! The rest of them are trapped in here just like we are! What do you expect us to do, kill them?"

Kibaou scowled darkly down at this interruption that was too loud—and close—to be ignored. "It's us or them, dumbass. Only one race can win the prize that means freedom—them and two of their allies. That's gonna be us. You want to save your friends, you tell them to side with the Salamanders." A ragged cheer rippled through the crowd, and more than one player gave Klein looks just as dark and unfriendly as Kibaou's. Another chill ran through him as it began to dawn on him just what a dangerous position he was in. He turned and began pushing his way through the crowd, followed briefly by Kibaou's taunts.

As he made his way towards one of the side streets leading out of Gattan, a hand touched his arm.
"Hey."

Klein jerked away from the touch, turning to level a glare at the speaker and ready to fight. The man he faced was massive—and given what had happened with the mirrors, Klein knew that had to be what he really looked like, save that the player himself probably didn't have an anime-like sweep of deep wine-red hair or thick eyebrows of the same color. At his side was another Salamander player almost as large; there was a definite family resemblance between them.

The man held out both hands, palms splayed, and spoke in a deep, gravelly voice. "Easy. I just wanted you to know that I appreciated what you just said. We might be in competition with the other player races to clear Yggdrasil, but that doesn't mean it has to come to open war. We're all still human beings."

Klein relaxed a little—just a little. After a moment, he nodded slowly. "Yeah, tell that to cactus-head up there. Seems like he's got a lot of fans."

The larger man grimaced; the other man beside him folded his arms and spoke next. "What Eugene's trying to say is, we should think about sticking together—or at least keeping in touch. We don't like the direction this is going, but right now we seem to be in the minority."

"What's your name?" Eugene asked.

When Klein hesitated, the other man said, "I'm Mortimer. This is my younger brother—my real brother, I mean."

"Klein. And don't get me wrong, man, I'm glad I'm not the only one who thinks Kibaou's playing with fire—"

"So to speak," Eugene put in with a smirk. Mortimer rolled his eyes and took a swipe at his brother, which he absorbed without flinching.

Klein waved a hand. "Whatever. Like I said, I'm glad we agree on this, but I've got friends who are depending on me—my real friends, from the real world. I gotta go find them."

Mortimer nodded slowly. "I understand. Just please consider this: if everyone who opposes this kind of warmongering leaves the Salamanders, who is left to stand in his way?"

It was an uncomfortable question, and it produced an uncomfortable silence from the three of them. Mortimer nodded again after a few seconds. "That's what I thought. We can't ask you to abandon your friends, and your loyalty does you credit. Just think about what we said." He lifted his left hand and manipulated his menu, sending a friend request to Klein.

Klein held the taller man's gaze for a few beats—or what would have been a few beats if his avatar had a heart to keep time. Finally, he reached up and pressed the Accept button.

"If we're gonna be voting on a leader tomorrow," Klein said as he made to leave, "you've got my support. Maybe you should get up there and make your own speech."

"He's right, Mort," said Eugene. "I think it's time you took your own advice and made your opposition public. Right now that bastard's got everyone fired up, and if morning comes and they don't have another option to think about, they're gonna vote for the biggest mouth."

"You going to go up there with me?" Mortimer said with a wry smile.

Eugene shrugged. "Don't see why not, bro. We're in this together." He glanced at Klein. "Keep in
touch. We'll let you know how things go."

Turning without answering, Klein resumed heading towards the gates of Gattan, quickening his pace. He was halfway to the front gates when he remembered something, and held up his left hand to summon the flight controller. With a harsh buzzing sound, he rose into the air and left a faint trail of red light in his wake.

Something ugly was happening, and he didn't want to be there when the shit hit the fan.

"War," Argo said simply.

The other Cait Sith sitting around the low wooden table froze, each in their own manner. Sudden and absolute silence descended, the overlapping conversations ceasing at once as a half-dozen sets of mobile triangular ears flicked towards the unpalatable word that Argo had dropped on the table like a litter box offering.

"And we should believe that because…?" The speaker was a male Cait Sith with silver and black tabby streaks in his ponytailed hair.

"Do you even know who she is, Raikouji?" another put in, sitting up from her leisurely sprawl across the sea of pillows in the common room. She displayed sharp, prominent fangs as she spoke, glaring across the table at him.

"The Rat," he answered acerbically, putting bite into the nickname. "We were all in the beta, Alicia; I'm not dense."

"Coulda fooled me," Argo remarked as she picked at her teeth with one of the steel combat claws she wore. "I thought it was ostriches that put their heads in the sand, but I guess it happens to cats too. Who'da thunk?"

Raikouji shot to his feet with a snarl, forming fists and hair standing slightly on end. "This isn't a roleplaying game anymore, Argo! We're prisoners, not fucking cats!"

Argo looked pointedly at Raikouji's tail as it lashed the air, then up at him with raised eyebrows and a smile of feigned innocence. "Yah, it's not a game anymore, Raiko-pin. So why don'tcha pull your head out and start acting like it? You think I said war 'cause I like the way the word sounds? I'm telling you, I got no less than three people inside the Salamanders telling me—separately—that they got an influential faction talking about going to war."

"Against the Imps," said another of the Cait Sith beta testers present, a young woman in mage robes with long braided silver hair who was sitting in seiza beside Raikouji. She gave him a significant glance and waved him back down until he was seated again.

"At first," Argo said, nodding. "You think it stops there?"

A grain of sand could've dropped on the table and made a racket.

"She's right," Alicia said finally. "Look, we all know what kinds of players like to play Salamanders. And if the racial distribution is roughly the same as it was in the beta, it means they probably have half again as many players as we do—and easily twice as many as the Imps. They'll roll over them like they were nothing."

"Good!" Raikouji blurted out to a room of shocked looks. "That takes them to Undine territory, not ours. Let them weaken themselves! They still have to go through the Sylphs in order to get to our
"They could cut through Butterflies Valley once they reach Arun," Alicia pointed out. "Or simply blockade it, and cut off our own access to the World Tree. They'd have the manpower to spare for that."

Raikouji fixed her with his gaze, yellow-green eyes filled with impatience. "So what do you propose? And please, keep in mind that this is all moot if none of us get elected tomorrow."

Alicia shrugged and leaned back onto the stack of multicolored pillows, lacing her fingers behind her head. "How about not blowing off a potential threat, for starters?"

"I'm not 'blowing off' anything, Miss Rue. I'm telling you that A, what the Salamanders do on the other side of the damn continent is Not Our Problem, and B, that there isn't a lot we can do anyway unless they actually do threaten us directly. Hell, if they take out the Imps and Undines, that's two less factions that can clear the game before we do."

"'Fewer'," said one of the Cait Sith who hadn't yet spoken, a man in light plate armor with a full-length tunic that matched his short brown hair who sat cross-legged next to Alicia.

Raikouji turned to him, momentarily derailed. "What?"

"You said 'less'. The correct word would be 'fewer'."

There was a chorus of groans around the table, and Alicia picked up one of the larger pillows next to her and whacked the player who'd made the grammar nitpick, unbalancing and keeling him over backwards with a yelp. Ears flattened against her head, she practically spat out her reply. "Less, fewer, who cares? Is anyone else here not okay with giving zero shits about the idea of the Salamanders 'taking out' several thousand players? Which, I'd like to remind you, is another word for mass murder under the circumstances?"

"I return your attention to Exhibit B," said Raikouji as he met her stare across the table. "Namely, the fact that we are not exactly in a position to do anything about it even if we wanted to."

"We could warn them," suggested the grammar-correcting Cait Sith as he sat up and threw the pillow back at Alicia, who caught it and hugged it to her chest.

"I know, Fenja, I've already warned my Imp contact," said Argo with a dismissive wave. "Not that it does much good until tomorrow when they have a leader to warn."

"And the Sylphs?" asked Alicia, chin pressed against the top of the pillow she was hugging. "They're our neighbors, after all. Don't you have any contacts there?"

"Maybe," Argo said evasively.

Fenja frowned. "I thought we agreed we were putting all our cards on the table tonight."

Argo let out a long sigh. "Yeah. And I've already warned them. Again, not that it does much good until the elections tomorrow morning."

Alicia just shook her head. "Okay, look. We're all tired, and we're getting on each other's last nerves. Other than me and Rai, anyone else put their names up for the vote?" When no one else raised their hands, she nodded. "Okay. Well, I guess that gives us a pretty clear choice, doesn't it?"
"You're assuming no one else outside this room submitted their bio," Fenja pointed out. "There had to be what, at least a thousand of us out there when we were ported back from Arun?"

"More than that," Argo said. "But you gotta know the option's there in the first place. It's buried in the Community menu." She smirked. "Nobody reads the manual."

"But we can't be the only Cait Sith beta testers who made it in," Fenja replied reasonably. "Just the ones who know each other. There'll be others."

Alicia shrugged as she stretched languorously. "What does it matter? One way or another, we'll know in the morning."

The sun was just beginning to rise over the mountain range that formed a natural barrier across Imp territory when Klein received the message from his friend telling him to come out of hiding. Chagrined at the necessity of even having to hide in the first place, he crawled out of the shallow cave atop the rock outcropping and spread the tall, dry grass that shielded it from view. Below he could see one of the main entrances to the vast expanse of underground caverns that encompassed Imp territory, with a small number of players of that race either standing around talking or on their way back into the caves.

Klein could see Kunimittz down there at the center of a knot of players, talking with them animatedly. It was striking how well the wedge-shaped poof of deep violet hair fit his real-life appearance, even though the racial hair colors hadn't been changed to match their real ones. Klein was just about to send him a message asking when it was actually going to be safe when he saw his friend—still talking to the other players—point directly up at where Klein was hiding, then make a beckoning motion.

Swallowing nervously, Klein stood and summoned his flight controller, dropping off the edge and floating slowly down to the ground near the group of players. Several nearby Imps started with alarm, a few even reaching for their weapons—until Kunimittz ran forward and gave Klein a huge bear hug, laughing and slapping him on the back. "Oh, man, am I glad to see you! Have you heard from the others?"

"Everyone except Issin," Klein replied, looking over at the group of players Kunimittz had been talking with. Some of the looks he was getting were not exactly friendly. Some were overtly hostile. "Are you sure this is okay?"

Kunimittz laughed. "Well, I wouldn't come wandering into the Everdark by yourself, buddy, but no one's gonna attack you while I'm here with you." He looked around meaningfully and spoke up. "This is the friend I was telling you about, hear? We've known each other for years on the outside; he's okay."

The announcement seemed to thaw a bit of the hostility emanating from the other Imps; a few even smiled at him. There were still a handful of dark looks thrown his way, but Kunimittz met them with an even stare until they turned away.

"It's like that here too, is it?" Klein asked, rubbing the back of his head in a nervous gesture. He felt like the proverbial mouse at the cat convention.

"What, the Salamanders are being dicks? Color me shocked."

Klein laughed, as did a few of the nearby Imps. "Like you wouldn't believe. Sounds like you've been talking to some veteran players."
Kunimittz nodded. "Yeah, there's a handful of beta testers who stepped up and were helping some of us grind last night." He gestured towards one of the Imps who'd laughed, a tall man in light plate with long jet-black hair and a broadsword. "Seems like we're a relatively small group over here—Freikel says just under a thousand players—so a lot of us have been getting to know each other. You already vote?"

"Sure did," Klein replied with a grimace, thinking of the building conflict he'd left behind between Mortimer and Kibaou the night before. "You?"

"Yup. For Freikel, in fact—he's a great guy. Yo, Fry! Come on over here and meet my friend."

The named player broke away from his group and approached, giving Klein a slightly wary look as if sizing him up. "Fry, this is Klein, one of my best friends on the outside. Klein, Freikel. He was in the beta, and he's been a huge help to a lot of people."

"Good to meet you," Klein said as he bowed.

Freikel eyed Klein with a look that was still a little cautious, then relaxed and tried on a smile, bowing in return—albeit a touch less deeply. "A pleasure," he growled out—at least, his voice sounded like a growl; Klein had to assume he always sounded like that, because he was still smiling. "Call me Fry. Your friend Kunimittz here is a quick learner." Then his gaze sharpened again. "Are you here to take him away?"

Klein and Kunimittz looked at each other, then back at Freikel. "I mentioned last night that there are six of us," Kunimittz said. "We all made different characters, and we'd been planning to meet up and party together. At least, before… that stuff happened and we all got separated."

Freikel looked like he'd bitten into a lemon. "I'll be honest," he said bluntly. "I'm not happy about that. There are few enough of us as is."

"Fry, I told you that I'd been planning to leave when I found my friends."

"And you also know the situation we're in," Freikel said, frowning. "Look, no offense intended, Klein—I've got no grief with you. But you know what's at stake here now. For all of us. You're talking about taking a player away from an already small population—and at that, someone I'd very much like to have in my party. And that's on top of the fact that a lot of Imp players tend to be soloers."

Klein folded his arms across his breastplate, nodding. "I can't really blame you. But to be just as honest—you can't make him stay, either." He looked over at Kunimittz. "It's your call, man. If you gotta stay here, you gotta stay. I'll smooth things over with the others. It's just… I thought we were gonna all stick together."

Kunimittz looked genuinely torn. He glanced between Freikel and his old friend, an increasingly conflicted expression dominating his face. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, and when they opened, he turned to Freikel and bowed. "I'm sorry, Fry. I need to stick with my friends. You've still got my vote, and you'll be a great leader—and once we've regrouped with everyone else, I promise I'll talk to the others about coming back and helping the Imps with clearing."

Freikel took a deep breath, and sighed, letting it out slowly. "All right. I suppose I can't really force you to stay, anyway." He gave Kunimittz a lopsided smile. "I'll hold you to that promise, though."

"Count on it," Kunimittz replied with a grin.

Klein cleared his throat. "Hey Fry, listen, you've been real decent about this, and I appreciate it. So I
want to give you fair warning about something."

Freikel raised his eyebrows. "Warning?"

"Yeah. I left Salamander territory late last night, so I don't know how it went… but when I was on my way out, there was a major jackass named Kibaou trying to stir up shit and get everyone psyched up for war with the other races. Another guy, name of Mortimer, was going to publicly oppose him—but like I said, I left before that went down."

"And you couldn't have mentioned this earlier?" Freikel's expression was as tight as his tone.

Klein spread his hands. "I've been here for what, five minutes? I'm telling you this out of respect and courtesy. I want no part in that fight—we're headed west to Sylph territory to pick up Dynamm."

"Back across Salamander lands," Freikel mused. "Be careful. If what you say is true… they may not look too kindly on you traveling with one of ours."

"We'll watch our backs," Kunimittz said. Turning to Klein, he held up his left hand and summoned the flight controller. "Ready to go?"

Klein held out a hand to Freikel, who shook it after a moment. When they parted, he brought out his own controller. "Ready as I'll ever be."

At first, the sound blended into that of the insects hiding in the tall grasses that sprouted from the mountainside like hair. But as Klein and Kunimittz began to rise into the air, the sound grew until it turned heads all across the clearing in front of the cave where they were gathered, a buzzing drone almost like that of a flight of propeller-driven aircraft.

_No_, Klein thought suddenly. _Like wings._

Freikel's sword was in his hand before Klein even realized he'd reached for it, the blade pointing up at the sky. "Is this what you were talking about, Klein?"

As Klein looked up, following an invisible line drawn from the tip of Freikel's broadsword to the west, he saw an angry-looking cloud on the horizon that was painted with the colors of the setting sun—except that the sun was currently rising to the east. It was too far to make out individual parts of the cloud, but with a sickening feeling Klein knew what he'd see if he was close enough.

The Salamander army had come. And they weren't waiting for the leadership vote to happen.
Chapter 4

"…Faction Leaders function similarly to guild leaders, except for an entire race; in addition they have a variety of powers over the laws and foreign relations for a given race (q.v. «Leadership Powers», «Alliances», «War»). It is important to protect them: should a Leader ever be killed, his or her race's territory will become the territory of the attacker's race for a period of one week or until the next election cycle, whichever is longer…"
—Alfheim Online Manual, «Faction Leaders»

7 November 2022
Day 2 - Morning

However quickly a player might fly, they were still outpaced by the speed of sound. The buzzing thrum of thousands of Salamander wings reached Klein and the others long before the army itself, and even though the approaching horde was large enough to have been seen practically as soon as they left Gattan, they were still much too far to make out individuals and left the Imps with a few minutes of warning. Klein and Kunimitz returned to the ground, landing near where they'd been when they took off.

"Everyone, calm down!" Freikel shouted, his deep voice echoing in the narrow valley that spread out from the cave entrance. "We don't have time for panic. Yashik, you're the fastest—get to Everdark right now and warn everyone what's coming. Sekitaro, send messages to the other beta testers on our team and tell them to start organizing defensive chokepoints at all the cave entrances. Neha—"

"Who put you in charge?" demanded one of the Imps who hadn't been named.

Before Freikel could answer, all of the Imps suddenly appeared to be distracted by something, their eyes going to their left. At the same time, Klein received an incoming system message, which expanded into a purple window in front of him when he focused on it.

『07/11/22 07:00 AST — Salamander Leadership voting closed. For the next 30 days your «Faction Leader» will be «Kibaou». Please congratulate him!』

When Klein looked back up at Freikel, he noticed a new icon appear beside the Imp's HP gauge: a gold star. Freikel leveled a withering gaze at the Imp who'd challenged him, who had the grace to look away. "You did," he said flatly. "You all did. Now move like you've got a purpose, people!"

"What can we do to help?" Klein asked before he could think it through.

Freikel paused for only a moment, black eyes darting between Klein and Kunimitz. "You two can get the hell out of here as fast as possible," he said. "Because in about two minutes I'm not going to be able to guarantee your safety—nobody's going to be able to tell you apart from the army that's about to land on us, and in the midst of battle no one's going to try."

Kunimitz looked tormented. He started to step forward and object. "Fry—"

"GO!" Freikel roared before turning and beginning to shout more orders to the disordered collection of Imp players still standing there.

Klein and Kunimitz rose steadily into the air as the sound of approaching doom grew until it was near-deafening. They left red and violet trails of light behind them, arcing up and over the ridge
where Klein had spent the night hiding and veering to the northwest to try to swing around the Salamander forces. The players below shrank to ant-like specks scurrying around and preparing their defensive lines, and then disappeared altogether.

"Are we doing the right thing?" Kunimittz said loudly, trying to be heard over the rush of air and the noise from the assault force. He kept venturing looks back, as if he could still see Freikel and the others from that far away.

"We're doing the only thing we can," Klein answered just as loudly, not entirely sure that he was right. "We've got to go find Dynamm and the others."

"Uh, Klein, hate to be the harbinger of pants-wetting news, but we've got a problem."

One look to the southwest told Klein exactly what his friend meant. While the bulk of the Salamander forces were descending towards the mountains, he could see several crimson lines of light arcing away from the main force—and towards them. It was a sure bet that they could see the flight trails of Klein and Kunimittz just as easily.

If it had been a straight pursuit, they would've had the advantage—the Salamanders were likely far closer to the end of their flight time from having come this far, and Klein and Kunimittz could likely outdistance them. As it was, the three Salamanders altered course northwards to cut them off, and despite swinging to the northwest to try to go around them, Klein grimaced when he realized that they were going to have no choice but to deal with the problem.

When they were close enough to tell the individual players apart, Klein and Kunimittz pulled up short and turned their backs to each other, hovering in the air and facing outward as the three Salamanders surrounded them with weapons drawn. He tried rising in order to be able to fly above them, but they matched altitudes whenever he did.

One of the Salamanders approached and addressed Klein from just outside of melee range, pointing with his sword and glaring at him from under bushy reddish-brown eyebrows. "Suppose you explain what you're doing running away with an Imp, boy."

"Boy?" Klein snarled, his cutlass in his hand. "Listen buddy, I don't know what kind of horseshit Kibaou's filled your head with, but you need to stop and think about what you're doing. This is my friend. We're all people, not fairies."

"Sounds like he's one of Mortimer's people, Corvatz," said the Salamander off to Klein's right. "The commander said to take prisoners if we can."

The voice of the third spoke from behind Klein, nervousness in his tone. "Um, guys, seriously, isn't this getting out of hand?"

"Shut up, Malten," Corvatz snapped before quickly returning his attention to Klein. "Look, we need every Salamander we can get, so if you move aside and let us deal with this Imp, we'll permit you to go back to Gattan unharmed."

"Mighty big of you," Klein said sarcastically. "I think I'll pass. We're leaving. Make your play or get out of the way."

Corvatz's eyes narrowed dangerously and he raised his sword as if preparing to give a signal. "So be it. Salamanders—"

"Hijan!" Klein uttered quickly, snapping his hand out and blasting Corvatz at point blank range. The damage was attenuated by the natural fire resistance of Salamanders, but it was still a solid hit that
knocked the target back. As the burst of flame dispersed, Klein was already lunging forward, one hand on the flight controller while the other lashed out with his cutlass and slashed an angry red line across the metal chestplate of his opponent. In his peripheral vision, Klein saw a bolt of violet-black energy crackle across the air and impact the Salamander who'd been closing in from his right, temporarily blinding the man as he howled and clawed at his face.

"Let's go!" Kunimittz shouted, rocketing past the blinded Salamander and swinging the end of his mace hard into the player's chest, knocking off a chunk of his HP and sending him tumbling backwards through the sky with a trail of red particles.

Parrying an enraged swing of Corvatz's sword, Klein forced him back by sending another blast of fire for him to dodge, and shot off to the west right on the heels of his friend. Chancing a look back, he could see the Salamander that Corvatz had called Malten still hovering there with wide eyes and a stunned look on his face. Klein sketched out a quick salute to him and increased his speed as much as possible.

"We're in deep shit, aren't we?" Kunimittz called back as a pair of fire bolts shot past them.

"Not as bad as you think!" Klein shouted. "Now that we've got a head start, I don't think they can catch us. They've been flying for a while, and we'd just taken off—their wings ought to run out before ours do."

Klein thought back to the Spriggan player who'd helped him out in the first hours of the game—while it was still a game. They'd only known each other for a few hours, but the things Kirito had taught him had probably just saved his life. Klein resolved to return the favor someday—however he could.

A wave of heat traveled up his body as another fire bolt narrowly missed him by mere centimeters, searing the air as it passed. He could hear indistinct shouting in the distance, and when he looked back he saw Corvatz already turning and descending quickly towards one of the sculpted mesas that jutted out of the desert floor. The other Salamander that had still been with him didn't seem to notice that his superior had peeled off, and fired off another bolt that Klein—seeing it coming—was able to dodge.

Then the player's wings began to quickly flicker and lose their luminescence, their beat slowing until they stilled against his back. Too panicked to recover and glide, the man screamed as he plummeted towards the ground in a wild, tumbling spin.

Torn, Klein clenched his free hand and swore. "I know I'm gonna regret this… Kunimittz! Keep going!" So saying, Klein performed a tight loop and shot towards the ground at top speed, wings emitting a throaty buzz. The other Salamander, gravity-powered, was quickly approaching terminal velocity—but the maximum flight speed of even a level 3 character like Klein was faster still. The question was whether he could get to him in time.

The ground was approaching fast. Klein reached the Salamander when they were a mere hundred meters from the sand dunes, but when he tried to grab him he didn't have the strength to arrest the other player's fall. Grateful yet again for Kirito's flying lessons, Klein put every ounce of effort into stopping the other player's uncontrolled tumble and shouted to be heard. "Stop freaking out and pull back on the controller! You can glide to the ground!"

Klein wasn't immediately sure he'd gotten through—the way they were both plummeting, it was hard to read the other's face, and to just barely avoid crashing himself Klein had to sharply pull up and hover. But before the other Salamander could make a sandy crater in the desert floor, Klein saw his darkened wings spread, turning the helpless fall into the beginning of a lateral glide. The Salamander
struck the ground at an angle, bouncing head over heels across the dunes and kicking up sprays of sand like a stone skipping across a pond. When he came to a rest, his hit points were close to the red zone… but he was alive.

Klein warily approached, ready to apply a burst of speed and flee if he had to. The other Salamander groaned as he slowly picked himself up, rivulets of sand pouring out of the gaps in his armor and from his hair. His eyes darted up and to the left where his HP gauge would be and widened; he looked up at Klein with an unreadable expression. "Thanks," he said. "I mean it. You saved my life."

"We're all in this together," Klein said. "No matter what that bastard Kibaou says, never forget that."

The Salamander nodded, shaking more sand out of his armor and rubbing his head. "Sorry about earlier. You better get going, though. Corvatz might come back once his wings recharge."

With a wave, Klein shot back into the air and headed towards Kunimittz—who, having ignored Klein's words, was hovering and watching from a short distance away. He drew close and hovered beside his friend.

"It's all good now, man. You ready to keep going?"

When Kunimittz didn't answer right away, Klein snapped his fingers in front of his friend's face. Blinking, Kunimittz shook his head quickly and waved his hand the way he would to dismiss a UI window.

"Hey, you all right, bro? You look spooked. Did something happen?"

Kunimittz swallowed hard and turned away. When he spoke, his voice was hollow with grief. "Yeah. That would be the understatement of the day."

"They what?"

The outraged shout echoed in the common room of the inn, silencing conversations and drawing stares—more stares, that is, than a bedraggled Imp had already drawn from the room full of Undines. The player's black-on-black eyes had a haunted, shell-shocked quality to them, and his gaze dropped to the mug of untouched tea he was holding in both hands as he answered.

"They invaded and conquered us. It was an early morning surprise attack, just after the closing of the leadership vote, and they… well, nobody was expecting anything like that. Not right on the day after… you know."

"I don't understand," Diavel said over his own tea with a troubled frown. "How did they manage to do that? You should've all been safe within the borders of Everdark. They'd wouldn't even be able to hurt anyone there unless— " His eyes suddenly widened as he inhaled sharply.

The Imp looked up from hooded eyes and nodded. "They killed him. He must've taken at least ten of them with him, but there were too many. It was the last thing I saw before I fled into the tunnels."

"Zerg rush," said another Undine at the table. When everyone else looked confused at the unfamiliar English words, he waved a hand in vigorous dismissal. "Another game. Not important."

"I get the idea, Jentou," said a third with a knowing grimace. "They swarmed him."

Jentou nodded in confirmation. "And then their whole city, yeah. That's basically what it sounds
Geddes shuddered and set down his cup. "I don't know. It wasn't like it was an outright massacre—they only killed those who kept fighting them. But we all got a system message when Freikel's Remain Light disappeared, warning us that Everdark was now Salamander territory. After that, it was... well, it was like there wasn't much point. Most that I saw either ran for their lives, or threw down their weapons and surrendered. Those who didn't do either..." It didn't need to be said. Everyone at the table got the point.

Finishing his drink, Diavel drummed his fingers lightly on the table, gaze slightly unfocused as he thought. Finally, he raised his eyes again to the Imp sitting across from him. "On behalf of the Undines, Geddes, we appreciate you bringing us this tragic news. You and any other Imp players who've fled the Salamander aggression will have amnesty here in Parasel, no questions asked. I'll make an announcement to that effect."

The Imp's eyes swam with the beginnings of tears, turning them into glistening black marbles. "Thank you," he whispered. "Today has been..."

"Today was a tragedy and a crime against humanity," Diavel said severely, his eyes hard. "One that this Salamander would-be tyrant will come to regret."

"What will you do, Leader?" Jentou asked. "You know we're behind you. When the rest of the Undines hear what's happened, everyone will be."

Diavel's fingertips rapped the table again. "For now, giving shelter to any Imp refugees will have to do. Jahala, I need you to start asking around and gathering a list of beta testers. We'll need a core cadre of experienced players to organize and lead border patrols. We need to know if the Salamanders plan to move on us, too—and we need to put a stop to it if they do."

"We should be safe in Parasel though, right?" asked Jahala as he took notes in a window hanging in front of him. "I mean, worst case scenario they could surround the city and keep us from venturing out to quest and level up... but they couldn't maintain that kind of siege indefinitely, and they can't enter the city without being at our mercy because of the Safe Zone."

Diavel nodded. "We'll be safe here." Then he grimaced. "Provided they don't kill me, too."

"Then with all due respect, Leader," Jentou said firmly, "you're not allowed to leave Parasel."

Diavel gave Jentou a rueful look. "I know. Believe me, I'm not happy about it—I'd much rather be out there leading the clearing groups. But we can't let things get to that point—we can't let them bottle us in here. If that happens, we'll all start falling behind in levels and skills, and we won't be able to stand against them when it counts. We need to protect our territory, and we need people to keep going out and getting stronger."

Jahala's hands tightened into fists where they rested on the table. "If they come with the kind of numbers they sent against the Imps, we won't be able to stand against them."

"No, we won't," Diavel agreed, expression resolute. He rose from his chair in one smooth motion, a decision forming in his mind as he glanced at each player in turn. "Not alone."

It took several minutes looking through menus and help files before Diavel found the functions he needed to set Parasel as a Safe Zone for Imp players, and when that was done he discovered that he didn't need to make any kind of announcement to advertise it—from what Jahala and Jentou
immediately told him, the system seemed to broadcast rule changes to all the other members of his faction. Still, he knew there would be mass confusion and unanswered questions if he didn't say something, so he crafted a brief announcement mass-mail that called upon all available Undines to gather outside the gates of the spindle-like castle that rose from the island in the center of Parasel.

With most players still reluctant to venture outside of the Safe Zone less than 24 hours after Kayaba trapped them in the game, the vast majority of the Undine population was in a position to heed the call. A massive crowd in blue and sea-green colors grew quickly in the appointed spot—as their leader, Diavel had access to the faction stats and knew that there were exactly 2,471 living Undine players; from the look of it as he flew overhead, nearly all of them were there. He landed atop the gatehouse of the castle in a crouch and stood on the edge of the roof, raising to his lips an object that resembled a conch shell and using it to amplify his voice.

"Undine players, hear me! I know many of you are confused by the system message you received about Imps being granted the protection of our city's Safe Zone, and you're probably wondering why I've summoned you all here. I don't wish to waste your time, so I will speak plainly: the Salamanders have launched a surprise attack and slain the leader of the Imps, invading and subjugating their home city. From the reports we've received, many players were killed in this act of aggression—many human lives extinguished forever."

The outcry that this produced was easily the equal of the din that had greeted Kayaba's original announcement. Diavel waited until there was a suitable lull before tapping the narrow end of the conch and speaking again.

"Kayaba may have placed us in competition with each other to escape this world, but we must not allow him to rob us of our humanity in the process! I have opened our city to any Imp players seeking refuge from Salamander aggression, and I ask you all to open your hearts to them as well—many of them will have lost friends or family this day. In the meantime we must do all we can to prepare ourselves so that we can stand against any further acts of war."

"Among those of you like myself who were beta testers, I know that some are reluctant to reveal this fact to others. Now is not the time for isolationism or selfish ambition. I ask you all to come forward and contribute your knowledge and skills to the defense of our city. You may come to me privately if you wish—but I need to know who you are so that we can best utilize our most precious asset: people."

Diavel knew that from where he stood high above the crowd, no one could see his face clearly. Nevertheless he steeled himself against whatever fears and grief he felt, doing his best to don a mask of strength and resilience. To quell some of the unrest he could hear rising from the crowd, he swept his arm out in a grand gesture and went on. "Understand this! So long as you remain within the Safe Zone of Parasel, the Salamanders can do you no harm. So long as they cannot take the life of your leader, they cannot do to us what they did to the Imps. This will leave many of you reluctant to venture outside, even at the cost of limiting your ability to quest and level up. I will not judge you for that—for the safety of all of you, I myself cannot leave."

"But by the same token, your best defense against the Salamander threat is to make yourselves strong! My second in command, Jahala, will be organizing parties to patrol our borders and guide refugees towards the safety of Parasel. Those of you who join these patrol parties will have the opportunity to earn EXP fighting against the mobs—that is, computer-controlled monsters—which populate the wetlands surrounding our city. Even if you don't join these border patrols, I encourage all of you to travel in full parties for safety, and earn as much EXP as you can. The stronger we get, the more quickly and safely we can fight our way back to Arun and begin clearing Yggdrasil."
"There is one other thing you can do for yourself and the rest of the Undine faction," Diavel said, holding out a hand and uttering a few quiet syllables that produced a pulsating blue glow in his palm. "As most of you know, one of the advantages of the Undine race is in healing magic—only we can access the very highest-level spells of that type. All of you will have received a modest single-target heal as one of your starting abilities. No matter what kind of character you play, I urge you to train even that basic heal spell as much as you can. Eventually the most skilled of you will gain access to resurrection spells which will allow you to revive someone before their Remain Light disappears. I cannot overstate just how critical this is—it is literally a matter of life and death now."

There was one last point to make, and it was not a trivial one—though he feared it was likely to be controversial. Bringing the conch up one last time, Diavel took a deep breath. "The Salamanders have the advantage of numbers, and we will need allies in order to resist them. In aid of this, I will be sending envoys to the leaders of the other player races, warning them of the Salamander threat and seeking friendship wherever we can find it. If you see a party of Spriggans or Leprechauns—or anyone else—try offering your services to them as a healer in their party. We will gain far more by building bridges and alliances with the other races than by narrow-minded protectionism. And when we reach the World Tree, we will do so in a position of strength—and find a way to win freedom for everyone in this game!"

Even had Diavel anything further to say, it would've been drowned out by the spontaneous cheers that erupted like a tidal wave breaking across the assembled mass of Undine players. Although it was his wings which carried him into the air then on a thin pillar of blue light, he felt as if he could've been lifted by the force of that sound alone.

Kirito grimaced as he read the message, grinding his teeth without being aware he was doing it. His fist tightened around the snugly wrapped hilt of his sword, and when he realized he was still holding it he gave the blade a habitual flourish and sheathed it on his back. His gaze drifted to the south as if he could see through the dense mountain range that bordered the Undine lands not far from where he stood, as if he could peer through the many kilometers of distance and solid rock and see the Salamander army on the other side.

If this was true—and Argo had never before given him bad information—it confirmed his worst fears. Thus far he'd been able to avoid unnecessary conflicts with other players, and considering the lethal stakes he was more than happy to continue doing precisely that. At level 6 he reasoned he was probably well ahead of the curve—but magic had an uncomfortable tendency to act as a force multiplier, and a full party of Salamanders bent on PKing anyone they met would still have a pretty good chance of being the end of him, regardless of how much stronger he was on a one-to-one basis.

Still, the thought of launching a day-one blitzkrieg against the Imps… if this had been the beta, or if Kayaba hadn't trapped them all here in a life-or-death struggle to survive, he would've been struck with profound admiration at the lantern-sized Gnomish steel balls that the Salamander leader had to be carrying around under his hakama. As it was, he only felt a sense of deep revulsion at the thought of how many players had to have died in that assault. A duel or killing in self-defense would be one thing, though thankfully he hadn't yet had to put that to the test—Kirito had every confidence that he'd prevail in any fair fight.

But what Argo had described was simply murder.

Kirito thought long and hard about his options. The pay was fair, and he knew Argo was good for it—that was never in doubt. It was certainly more than the Yuld he was earning from the quest mobs he'd been fighting, and he could always grind along the way.

Looking around in all directions across the sprawling wetlands, Kirito made certain that there was no
one within sight—on the ground or in the air—and sat down to rest his feet and wings while he responded.

「Understood. I'm close to finishing an important quest, but as soon as I'm done I'll head back north and bring word to our leader—her name's Yoshihara. I don't know her but that's what the system message said this morning. -K」

The response was swift. 「Anneal Blade, right? Don't take too long—you know I'll make it worth your time. And be careful, Ki-bou. These guys aren't screwing around, and I don't wanna lose you. -Argo」

There were any number of ways a person could've taken her parting comment, but the platonic nature of his longstanding friendship with Argo meant that only one of those had the slightest chance of crossing his mind. He grinned slightly as he tapped out his reply on the holographic keyboard hanging in the air in front of him.

「Don't worry. If I get ganked, I won't be around to collect the fee and you can afford to buy another Spriggan contact. -K」

Argo's reply was creatively profane, and made him laugh out loud as he got back to his feet and stretched his sore muscles.

Shading his eyes with the bridge of his hand, Kirito took one wary look back in the direction of Imp territory before breaking into a run. He needed to find more of the right type of mobs to wrap up this quest quickly—the reward for completing it was an absolutely essential piece of equipment, especially if he was going to have to potentially defend himself against Salamanders.

His boots left muddy footprints in the stagnant, shallow water of the lowland marshes as he kicked off and took to the air, the deep thrum of his wings cutting a swift path across the Undine sky.

Slashing at the air as if she could cut the message window to pieces with her claws, Argo was so incensed that she had to repeat the gesture twice in order to get her menu to close. Ears flat and tail twitching without conscious thought as the system interpreted her emotional state, she filled the room with another colorful and lengthy diatribe about Kirito's ancestry, hobbies, sense of self-preservation, wits or lack thereof, likely perversions of choice and preferred computer operating system.

"So does that mean he'll do it?" Alicia asked once Argo seemed to have gotten it out of her system. "You were a bit vague on that point."

Argo bared her teeth. "Yeah, he'll do it—the stupid, careless, free-wheeling ox-brained son of a—"

"I get the picture," Alicia said with an amused twitch of her ears—before her good humor collapsed and she let out a sigh. "At least that's one thing that's gone right today."

"Screw Raikouji—"

Alicia made an appalled face. "Rather not."

"—it's not your fault the rest of our faction is filled with idiots who can't see the big picture here. If we're all still alive this time next month, you'll get another chance." Argo paced around the small room as if she was trying to walk a groove into the floor, tail still slashing animatedly with her level of agitation. "I need to head north. I don't have any ears in the Puca, and it's bugging me not knowing what's going on up there."
It was a striking admission from Argo, and Alicia doubted that it was one she would've given if she was any less upset. Whatever this Spriggan contact of hers had said, it had really gotten under her skin. "Good luck," she said. "When you see the Puca, say hi to all four of them for me."

Argo snorted. Alicia's joke was an exaggeration, but there was a grain of truth in it. Only the Spriggans were less popular—or less populous. Out of the two thousand players in the closed beta, barely 150 of them had been the musically-inclined race of fae. Barding magic required a certain amount of actual musical or singing ability on the part of the player, or at least the aptitude to use one of the simplified instruments that resembled a controller from a play-along music video game.

Alicia stood by the window of the inn room, her hands clasped behind the small of her back. She canted her head in Argo's direction as the younger girl manipulated her equipment menu and donned her traveling cloak. "You realize that Rai's going to be super-pissed if he finds out you're reaching out to the other races behind his back. He wants us all to sit tight, work on leveling up, and protect the city of Freelia and its environs."

Argo's brown eyes glittered with reflected candlelight as she drew her hood up over her head and fixed Alicia with an uncomfortable stare. "Raiko-pin can pound sand. He doesn't own me." The door shut behind her with a slam, leaving Alicia alone and momentarily speechless.

Freelia was in most areas a colorful, vibrant city—the Cait Sith, as a whole, were a popular race and tended to attract fun-loving players with a good sense of humor. You had to be able to laugh at yourself at least a little bit in order to play an anthropomorphic feline and put up with the inevitable teasing from players who liked to grab your tail.

But like most of the cities, it had been designed to also include a few artificially run-down "slums" with appropriately-themed NPCs and quests. It was into these alleys and side streets that Argo quietly disappeared, her Hiding skill melting her into the shadows as she trained it up.

Now and then she would turn her keen eyesight on a particularly dim or shabby stretch of street, night vision enhancing the low light and bringing some of the darker corners into relief. In one of these byways she crouched and made a sound with her tongue against the roof of her mouth, hand slipping into her cloak and emerging with a small object grasped in her slender fingers. She set it on the ground and went motionless, making the tchtch sound again and waiting patiently.

Before long, movement stirred in the dark, soft and barely audible noises scuttling against the packed dirt street. A sleek gray form a little smaller than her forearm with a tiny yellow cursor was momentarily visible in a patch of moonlight, although her night vision let her track its progress until it paused before her offering, whiskers twitching suspiciously and beady black eyes taking in its surroundings before venturing to nibble at the small chunk of cheese.

Activating her race's Beast Taming skill, Argo reached out and stroked the rat's smooth fur, placing her palm on the ground and letting the creature clamber up onto her shoulder as its cursor turned green.

"You're a pretty one, aren'cha?" she whispered. "We're gonna be good friends, you and I."

The rat sat up on its hind legs and sniffed the air, then pushed at the hem of her hood until its nose poked around the front where it could see her face. She reached up with a fingertip and touched the rat on its forehead, activating one of Beast Taming's optional child skills. Her eyes flashed briefly with an amber light that was mirrored in her new pet's tiny black orbs, and the same light sheeted across the rat's body for a moment.

"But first," she told her pet quietly, taking to her feet again, "I've got a little task for you."
A squeaking sound was the only reply—but words weren't necessary through the bond that she now shared with the simple creature. Argo smiled a secret smile of anticipation in the shadow of her hood.

"Eyes and ears, my little friend," she said as she began heading in the direction of the castle that she could see towering above the sprawling city of Freelia. "Eyes and ears."

Asuna sat with her legs dangling over the edge of a small stone foot bridge, one of hundreds that spanned the Venitian-style canals and channels that criss-crossed the city of Parasel. There was a damp chill in the night air, but it didn't seem to touch her—according to the help files, the Undine race was resistant to cold and could breathe underwater for a time, though she hadn't put the latter ability to the test and wasn't sure she wanted to try. She'd bought a loaf of bread intending to pick off pieces and feed it to the fish she could see just below the water's surface, but was annoyed to find that it didn't work that way—she could take bites out of the bread and even cut it with her starting dagger, but as soon as she threw a piece at the water it burst into a tiny spray of blue polygons, its durability exhausted.

So the hard bread had become her late night snack, and as she worried at it with her teeth she kept ruminating over the speech that her faction leader had given earlier in the evening. The shock and fear she'd felt at the news had quickly turned to outrage, and that in turn had been replaced by determination as she'd found herself swept up in the rollercoaster of emotion that Diavel had inspired in the crowd. She hadn't earned so much as a single experience point yet, but after a few minutes of practice she'd been pleased to find that casting the basic healing spell she started with wasn't so difficult as she'd feared. It was only four syllables if you counted the moraic $N$ at the end, and the cadence wasn't hard to get.

"Zuyasun," she whispered softly for practice, feeling the now-familiar warmth as the light of the basic healing spell flared in her hand, depleting a small amount of the blue bar she could see just below her HP gauge. She wasn't hurt and there were no other nearby targets, so it faded quickly without effect—but she'd made it happen. She could use magic. If the circumstances hadn't been what they were, she might've been giddy with joy over the discovery.

What Diavel said had stayed with her. Here, perhaps, was something that she could do—something that might save someone's life. It was a thought she'd seized upon like a castaway grasping for driftwood, the idea that she might be able to do some good in this digital purgatory without having to fight another person.

"You've gotten good at that," observed a familiar voice from the opposite end of the bridge. A twitch of surprise shot through Asuna before reason asserted itself and reminded her that no harm could come to her within the city limits. Diavel stood a few meters away, limned in light as he leaned against a lamp post. "Have you been out questing?"

Asuna shook her head. "Goodness, no. I'm still scared to leave the city." She looked down at the dagger she'd been using to slice the bread.

Diavel followed her eyes, misunderstanding the look. "Still just the starting weapon? Nobody's leveled up their Smithing yet, but there are NPC shops where you can buy something better fairly cheap."

"It's not that," she said, sheathing the dagger and putting the remainder of the bread back in her inventory. She'd been delighted when she figured out that she didn't have to carry it around in her hands. "I just don't want to fight anyone. I don't think I could."

Diavel made a thoughtful noise, coming over and sitting on the edge of the bridge a few paces away
from her. "You don't have to. But you should at least learn to defend yourself. Do you plan on using your healing magic?"

Asuna nodded. "I think so. I'd like to, at least. It's something I could do to help people without fighting."

"Well, yes and no," Diavel said. "It's true that you could level up your Water Magic skill and improve that spell without ever drawing your weapon. But you'd still be at level 1, and it would forever limit the power you could achieve and the spells you'd have access to. You wouldn't be able to get new skill slots for Holy Magic, which is required in combination with Water to use the strongest recovery spells—including resurrection. And even if you could, you wouldn't have the MP to cast them. Moreover… out in the field is where healing is most critical. If someone can get back to the city alive, even with only one hit point left, they're safe and can heal themselves."

Asuna hadn't considered that. There was so much she had to learn if she was going to be stuck in this world. "I can't do it," she said quietly. "Please don't make me."

"Nobody will make you do anything," Diavel assured her. "But the mobs in the wetlands immediately surrounding the city are all very low level, and none of them have dangerous attacks. You could earn some EXP and practice your skills in relative safety without ever raising your hand to another person. And with that basic heal you've gotten so good at casting, you shouldn't have anything to worry about."

The idea outright terrified her. Even the lowest-level… mob, she supposed they were called… could kill her if she was careless. If she stayed in the city, she was safe. They all were. She didn't understand why anyone would want to go out there and take the risk.

But there was truth in Diavel's advice. He'd been in the beta—whatever that was; it seemed to signify that he'd played the game before—and he'd been elected the Undine leader. He obviously knew far more than she did, and if he said that her "level" limited the spells she could use, he was probably right. As well, what he'd said about healing being needed outside the city rather than within the Safe Zone made all too much sense. If she wanted to save lives, eventually she'd have to be where they needed saving.

"I need to think about this," she said after a long silence.

Diavel nodded as he rose to his feet. "Of course." He started back across the bridge, and then stopped halfway there. "I think there's more strength in you than you realize, Asuna." And so saying, his wings materialized on his back and carried him off in the direction of the castle where he now resided.

When morning came, it brought with it a clarity of intent that she hadn't felt since she first logged into Alfheim. It took her a bit of asking around, but before long she found herself walking into a rustic shop with a sword and shield painted on the sign that hung above the door. A bell tinkled above her head when the door opened and closed, making her smile in momentary nostalgia, and as she looked around at the bewildering array of arms and armor on display, she saw that she was the only person in the store other than the obese, smiling shopkeeper.

"Excuse me, sir," she said as she approached the counter. "I need a better weapon than this." She tapped the dagger belted at her side. After a moment, she added, "and maybe some kind of armor to protect myself."

"You've come to the right place!" the shopkeeper said jovially, smiling at her in an automatic sort of way. "What can I get you?"
"I'm not really sure," Asuna admitted, panning her gaze around the room again as she thought about it. "What do you recommend?"

The smile remained fixed on the man's face. "It's difficult to say," he replied in an odd tone of voice.

Asuna looked at him in confusion. "Well, I certainly couldn't say—I don't know anything about weapons. I don't want to fight other players, just... mobs."

Still the same smile, as if it was painted on his face. The shopkeeper scratched his head and gave her a confused look that was easily a match for her own.

This was getting her nowhere—the man was completely unhelpful, and possibly touched in the head. Asuna was starting to get annoyed. "Look, I'm just asking for a little advice. If you can't help me, you can't help me, but just say so."

After a few beats, the shopkeeper said, "Can I help you?"

Asuna nearly blew her top at this, but just when she was opening her mouth to give the idiot shopkeeper a piece of her mind, something clicked for her and she felt extremely silly. Of course he couldn't give her advice—he wasn't a real person. When she looked at him closely, she realized that she couldn't see the green cursor or HP bar that appeared above any other player when she focused on them—the cursor was white and there was no thin ribbon of green in a quarter-circle around his head.

Blushing furiously and grateful that no one else had been there to see her make a fool of herself, she thought it over. It needed to be something she could use with one hand, leaving the other hand free to cast spells—at least, she assumed so. Something lightweight—she wasn't very strong, didn't want to be slowed down by a lot of weight, and she knew she'd never be able to lift some of the bigger weapons or swing around something heavy like a mace. She didn't want something so small that she'd have to be up close and personal with a monster like she would with the dagger, but she didn't know how to shoot a bow.

Her eyes traveled the length of the shop several times before alighting on something she'd missed the first time, hanging high on the wall behind the counter. It was perfect: one-handed, light, quick, and with enough reach to keep from having to get right up in an opponent's face.

"Excuse me," she said, pointing tentatively at the back wall. "How much is that rapier?"
"The only way to escape this world is to pass through the vortex that has opened high above Yggdrasil itself—and the only way to reach it is to clear the dungeon within the World Tree and defeat the boss that waits at the top. Whosoever delivers the Last Attack to this boss will win the favor of High King Oberon, who will grant that player's race and two of its allies the power of Unlimited Flight."
—Akihiko Kayaba, Alfheim Online Tutorial

7 ~ 8 November 2022
Day 2 - Evening

By the time Kirito was able to return to Lithjagg and turn in his quest, he was exhausted beyond belief. He'd spent half the evening his first night in the game and nearly the entire second day grinding the quest mobs for the rare drop that he needed, and was ready to lay a curse upon the family of whoever had designed the game's random number generator when he finally got his hands on the precious flower he needed.

A short night's sleep in Lithjagg relieved most of Kirito's exhaustion from the previous full day of questing, and by midmorning he finally arrived at the Spriggan home city of Penwether, a complex of ancient-looking stone structures that surrounded a towering pyramidal ziggurat which contained the vast majority of the city itself. He approached the main entrance fully expecting to have to wait a while before he was able to see Yoshihara, the elected leader of the Spriggan faction.

What he hadn't expected was to be told that she wasn't there.

"Out?" Kirito said incredulously. "She left the city?"

The other Spriggan eyed him askance and managed the impressive feat of sounding both bored and sarcastic at the same time. "No, she's astral-projecting herself out to the ruins so that she can grind EXP in two places at once. Next stupid question?"

Kirito palmed his face and peeked at the man through his fingers. "Fantastic. Does she have any idea what's going on in the game right now?"

The guard made an exasperated sound and finally turned his full attention on the player badgering him, crossing his arms. "What do I look like, her secretary? If you want to talk to her so bad, why don't you buzz off and go there yourself? I'm sure she'd love to play 20 questions with some random kid while she's trying to level up."

Turning away in disgust, Kirito stalked off and found a patch of grass to sit in while he thought, wishing that he knew anyone who was traveling with the Spriggan leader. He'd tried sending her a message, but by default players couldn't receive messages from someone who wasn't a friend or guildmate—you had to toggle off that privacy feature manually, and you had to know it was there in the first place. And even if he'd been allowed to send her a private message, it probably wouldn't have reached her or her party as long as they were in a dungeon anyway.
In the beta, Kirito had loved playing a Spriggan. Aside from the aesthetics of the race and the proximity of the useful Anneal Blade quest, Illusion was more useful to a creative-minded player than it was given credit for, and the small population and individualistic attitude that prevailed in the race's typical player base suited his solo nature. But there were times when being part of a very small, casual faction with no real direction or structure had its drawbacks.

This was one of them.

The Scarhill ruins, Kirito knew, wasn't especially far away—it was a popular low-level dungeon northwest of Penwether, buried in the forest like most of the other ruins that dotted the Spriggan lands. He could probably reach it in under an hour if he pushed himself and only stopped to rest his wings.

Briefly he considered firing a message back to Argo and telling her that he couldn't find Yoshihara, but the fact that his nominal leader had left the safety of her home city wasn't something he wanted to tell even a friend—not even Argo, who he trusted more than anyone else in this game.

Besides, Argo's reply was likely to be: well, go find her then—that's what I'm paying you for.

He didn't think the Salamanders were likely to be launching any incursions this far north when they hadn't even—to his knowledge, anyway—hit the Undines yet. But it wasn't a chance he wanted to take, and he had agreed to deliver a message.

It was the last point that decided him. His working relationship with Argo was built on mutual trust and reliability, and he had a reputation to uphold. Or so he liked to think. Gathering himself, he stopped by an NPC smith to repair all of his gear to top condition, and set out for the ruins at his maximum cruising speed.

In a way, the diversion was convenient; Kirito needed to head towards Leprechaun territory anyway in order to have a chance at finding a player weaponsmith of any skill this early in the game, and Scarhill would be more or less on the way. When he had to land in a winding glen in order to make his first rest stop, he found a mossy log that jutted out over the trickling river and sat down, drawing the Anneal Blade from his back and lovingly running a palm down the length of the glossy black blade.

It had been his favorite sword in the beta—even after he'd outleveled it and needed to upgrade to something more powerful, he still kept it in his inventory for when he had to go hunting lower-level mobs for crafting or upgrade materials, cherishing its balance, appearance and upgradeability. The one he now held across his lap had yet to be upgraded at all, and he didn't trust the low skill levels of the NPC smiths to try to sharpen it for him—for that, he would seek out a dedicated player smith and spend some time gathering the materials that would maximize his chances of a successful upgrade.

It was well after noon by the time he reached Scarhill, and the midday sun had finally burned through the haze of fog that tended to accumulate at ground level in the forest. True to its name, the ruins were an ugly wound of orange stone cutting into the side of a gentle slope in the forest, a place where the land grew rough and uneven as it prepared to yield to the colder regions leading to Leprechaun territory. Although the color of the stonework framing the entrance to the underground passages stood in stark contrast to the verdant forest around it, the structure was so overgrown with moss and vines that it was easy to miss if a player didn't know exactly what they were looking for. Hovering far above, he surveyed the entrance to the dungeon from a safe distance.

If Kirito had been a few levels lower or any less skilled, the pair of tall golem-like mobs guarding the entrance would've posed an insurmountable threat—they were intended to be taken on by a party with a minimum average level of 4. Even at his level, it was still a risk, but the EXP from defeating
them would be worth it—and the alternative was to use an Illusion spell to disguise himself as a monster and hope they didn't aggro him as he passed.

The problem was that even armed with his beloved Anneal Blade he doubted he could take them both at the same time.

Considering and rejecting several strategies, Kirito suddenly swooped lower, narrowing his eyes and taking a closer look. What he saw made him breathe a sigh of relief. When he focused on them one by one, each of their HP gauges appeared individually rather than both gauges appearing at once when he looked at either mob. As in the beta, they were individuals—not a linked encounter. Had they been an encounter, there would've been no way of pulling them individually; aggroing one would bring them both running no matter how he did it.

A plan began forming in his mind. Opening his menu, he navigated until he reached the detailed info window for one of his spells, nodding in satisfaction as he confirmed its maximum casting range. Armed with this knowledge, he landed safely outside of the aggro range of the golems and looked around until he found a rock about the size of a plum.

Holding his left hand palm-up, he brought the hand up to his mouth and whispered a series of arcane syllables. As each fell from his lips, they turned into visible ripples above his palm which resembled the way intense heat would distort the air. When the incantation was complete, he held his palm out and focused on a spot about twenty meters to the left of the entrance, then clenched his fist. The magical energy disappeared as if crushed in his grip, and at the point on the ground where he'd focused there appeared a motionless replica of Kirito himself.

The red cursor of the left-hand golem flashed once, and it immediately turned and charged at his decoy. As soon as it was in motion, Kirito held the rock up in a throwing position. It began to glow as he assumed the correct posture for his Thrown Weapon skill, and a moment later it shot across the distance separating him from the second golem, striking it. Just as the first golem reached his decoy and struck at it, causing it to disappear in a puff of black smoke, the second golem charged at him, safely pulled out of the other's aggro range.

It would still have been a difficult fight, but Kirito was prepared. The golem's attacks were slow and relatively easy to dodge as long as he was only fighting them one-on-one, and Kirito used his high AGI and knowledge of the mob's attack animations to predict where it was going to strike and evade into a position for a counterattack. It took a little over a minute of this dodge-and-strike pattern to whittle down its health, until finally it gave a great shudder and crumbled into an inert pile of stone which burst into a spray of blue polygons moments later.

He had just finished clearing the second mob the same way when he heard a slow clap behind him, from the direction of the entrance. Still in the state of intense focus he went into while fighting, he spun with his weapon ready, relaxing only when he saw that the source of the noise was a full group of Spriggan players who'd just emerged from the ruins.

"Now that was well-done, kid. Solo, no less." The speaker—and, he assumed, the person who'd given him the half-hearted applause—was a tall spearwoman with a cocky posture and expression, wearing a few pieces of leather armor. Her medium-length ash-gray hair was held back by a black hairband, and she gave him a searching look as she stepped forward, followed closely by the rest of her party.

Flourishing and sheathing his sword, Kirito saw that she was the only woman in her party and put two and two together. "Yoshihara?" he asked.

The woman stiffened and sharpened her gaze. "Who wants to know?"
Kirito didn't flinch away from that intense look. "Someone with a message. Someone who doesn't have time to play guessing games. Are you?"

He could see her party members adjusting the way they stood and loosening their weapons in their sheaths, and widened his own stance slightly as a precaution. The woman held out a palm that stilled her group. "I'm Yoshihara, yes. Who told you where to find me, and what do you want?"

"A fat guard with an attitude problem, to answer the first question. As to the second, I have urgent news about what's happening far to the south."

Yoshihara rolled her eyes. "Geniha talks too much. I'm going to kick his ass when I get back. All right, speak your piece."

Relaxing a little, Kirito folded his arms across his chest. "The Salamanders launched a surprise attack against Everdark yesterday morning, killing the Imp leader and taking over their city. There's a good chance they could continue their war march up the eastern coast. Someone hired me to warn you about that, and to bring you a message from the Undine leader: an offer of an alliance against the Salamander threat."

"Right," Yoshihara said sardonically. "Because what I want to do in the first few days of this Death Game is get you, me and everyone else in my faction killed by taking sides in someone else's war."

"It'll be our war if the Salamanders crush the Undines next."

Kirito could see several members of her party giving each other uneasy looks. Yoshihara herself looked unmoved. "Look, thanks for the offer, kid, but whatever testosterone-laden dick-waving contest is going on down south, I'd rather wait and see how it shakes out. Go back to the Undine leader and tell them…" She hesitated, mulling over her words, then grinned. "Tell them the Spriggans wish them the best of luck, and maybe we'll see them at the World Tree."

"Oh man, you have no idea how happy I am to see you guys!"

Running across the small Sylvan glade in the Ancient Forest where they'd agreed to meet, Klein gave his old friend a hug—a manly hug, complete with vigorous back-slapping—and stepped back. "Not half as glad as I am to find you alive, Dynamm." He whistled. "Damn, it's uncanny just how much this character looks like you."

Dynamm reached up and stroked his wispy mustache. "You think? The game wouldn't let me pick pure black as a hair color, but this dark brown is a fair stand-in."

"It's not the hair," Klein said, grinning. "It's more like… well, the Salamander and Imp characters me and Kunimittz rolled have some pretty obviously nonhuman features. Between his eyes and my eyebrows…"

"Unibrow, you mean."

Klein whacked Dynamm lightly on the side of the head. "It's not a unibrow! They're just bushy. Anyway, you Sylphs look a lot more… well, normal. Human-like."

"Except for these," Dynamm said as he reached up and tapped one of his angled, pointed ears. Klein waved at the air. "Details."

Dynamm laughed. "So what about the others?"
Sighing, Klein found a tree stump to sit down on in the clearing and looked up at his friend. "I still haven't heard from Issin. Dale's up with the Gnomes, and Harry One's just east of there with the Leprechauns. Both of them are sitting tight until we get there, and from what they said it's pretty peaceful up on that end of things so far. But that's all the way on the north end of the continent—it's a hell of a road trip from here."

"Issin was rolling a Cait Sith, wasn't he?"

Klein nodded at Dynamm's question. "Which makes it weird that I haven't heard from him—far as I know, nothing bad's going on up there either—but I can't send him a PM. Every time I try, the system gives me this funky message saying that the recipient doesn't accept blah-de-blah."

Dynamm scratched at the scruff on his chin. "Well, the Cait Sith are just north of here, and our relations with them are—not really friendly, but not hostile, either. Once we get through Sylph territory, we can look for him there." Frowning, he glanced eastward at the dense treeline. "So what's this I hear about some heavy shit happening with the Salamanders, dude?"

Klein groaned. "My man, you do not even want to know. Some warmongering asshole took advantage of all the chaos and anger after we were all ported back to our home city, and got everyone worked up into a frenzy. They came down on the Imps like a ton of bricks, killed their leader, and took over. We just barely got out in time."

Dynamm looked pale. "Did they seriously just wipe them out? Like, kill all those people?"

Kunimittz shook his head. "Nah, I've gotten a few messages from some friends I made before this all went down—they're okay. From what they're telling me, the Sallies—that's what they call the Salamanders, though not to their faces—basically told everyone who surrendered or was captured that they work for them, now. And that if they fight loyally for the Sallies, they'll be one of the allied races that get to come along when they clear the World Tree and get out of here."

"Or they can rot in a cell until they change their minds," Klein added grimly.

Dynamm let out a low, slow whistle, running his hand over the forest-green bandana that covered his head like a skullcap. "Talk about your offers you can't refuse."

"Shh!" Kunimittz suddenly made a sharp shushing sound, waving for attention. "You guys hear that?"

Klein hadn't heard anything, but a few moments later it became a moot point. The foliage at the edge of the treeline parted as a half-dozen Sylphs emerged, weapons drawn—two of them with bows that already had arrows nocked, one a mage who had his hands held out meaningfully, obviously prepared to cast. Jumping to his feet, Klein swore under his breath, his hand moving away from the hilt of his sheathed cutlass and slowly raising into the air.

One of the Sylphs stepped cautiously forward, taking one hand off of her very long katana and signaling the others to hold their positions. Klein swallowed hard and began to sweat a little. If she hadn't been holding a weapon on him and leading a party of people who looked ready to cut him down where he stood, he would've been reduced to a stuttering puddle by how stunningly beautiful the tall, elegant-looking Sylph was—he could almost imagine how she must look in real life, without the wide-set elfin ears and dark green hair, and caught himself wondering if her hair was really that long.

From the expression on her face, though, she was in no mood to be flirted with. Her eyes flicked swiftly between the three of them, lingering on Kunimittz and finally Klein. "You're not a
Salamander raiding party," she said slowly. "And you're too loud to be spies." She glanced at
Dynamm, suspicion and anger in her eyes. "And I have no idea what you are doing here with them.
So why don't you explain yourself."

Klein coughed, trying to compose himself. "Well, it's like this—"

"I wasn't talking to you," the woman remarked evenly, still looking at Dynamm.

Dynamm looked more embarrassed than afraid. "These are my friends from the outside. We were
supposed to all meet up and party together, but we got separated when that insane GM warped
everyone back to their starting cities." He pointed at Klein. "He was our guild leader in the last game
we played."

The woman's katana lowered fractionally. She turned her gaze on Klein. "Now you can talk. Where
do you stand on the war?"

"The war?" Klein repeated blankly. "Have they attacked you guys, too?"

She looked at Klein as if he was an idiot child. "We've been repelling raiding parties from your
people since yesterday afternoon. Mostly Salamanders, sometimes with Imps mixed into the party."
She glanced significantly at Kunimittz. "We set up rotating border patrols as soon as we got word of
what happened to the Imps, so they haven't been able to come in force—just in parties small enough
to slip through the picket."

"That's not us," Klein said immediately.

"I can tell," the Sylph woman said as she slowly sheathed her katana in a long purple scabbard,
slinging it behind her. "You're much too noisy and ignorant. But we also can't have you running
freely around our territory."

Bristling, Klein started to argue the slight, then decided that under the circumstances he'd rather be
thought ignorant than dangerous. "We've got no intention of staying," he said. "There's another
friend we need to search for, a Cait Sith. All we want to do is pass through to their lands."

Scrutinizing Klein and his companions for a few more moments, she finally waved at the rest of her
party; they lowered their weapons and returned arrows to quivers. "I wish I could allow you to do
that," she said. "But as I said, I can't permit you to roam Sylph territory freely. And the next patrol
you encounter may not ask questions before attacking." She gestured at one of her group, beckoning
him forward. "Kestral, I want you flying point on our way back. If you see any other patrols, be
ready to explain the situation before they run into us."

"Where are we going?" Klein asked.

The Sylph party leader fixed him with her emerald green eyes. "I'm taking you to Sylvain, our home
city. Our leader will be in a position to grant you safe passage, if he believes your story. For your
own safety you'll be traveling as our prisoners, but if you agree to behave and do as you're told, we'll
forego any kind of bindings."

"Can't you just escort us to Cait Sith territory?"

"That's not my call to make," she replied simply, as if that settled the matter. "Will you come
peacefully?"

Klein turned up both palms in a gesture of futility. "I don't see what other choice we have."
The woman finally smiled, albeit thinly. "Perhaps you're not as dumb as you seem. Come."

Not for the first time, Klein thought it was just as well that the person who'd insulted him was a beautiful woman who was in a position to slice him into very small pieces if she wanted to—otherwise he might've been tempted to protest.

If there was anything funnier than a flying cat, Argo mused, she had yet to come across it. The very first time she'd ever seen another Cait Sith materialize yellow dragonfly-like wings from their back and start flitting around like a fairy wearing nekomimi, she'd laughed so hard she nearly hurt herself—and that was a feat, considering that actual damage in the game world didn't cause pain as such.

While she normally preferred to stick to the ground when she was trying to remain discreet or stealthy, when covering long distances there was no substitute for flight. And as she soared as fast as she could high above the surface of the ocean, she had to admit—it was a lot of fun once you got used to doing it without that obnoxious controller taking up a free hand.

The island on which the city of Freelia was built was roughly similar in shape and topography to Shoudoshima, albeit larger, spanning about eighty kilometers along the east-west axis with a harbor on the south side nestled between a pair of finger-like peninsulas. The similarity was such that she sometimes wondered if it had been intentional; sadly, Argo had yet to find a vendor anywhere in the city that sold olives. The channel separating it from the mainland was just narrow enough on the north side to be crossed in one flight, and before she descended in a glide to the opposite shore she could see far enough across the vast grassy plains to just barely catch sight of the Puca home city on the northern horizon.

The nearness was deceptive; it was probably nearly 100 kilometers away and would take her most of the day if she went by air after factoring in breaks to fully rest her wings. Spending part of the time on foot, it would be getting on towards dinner before she reached her destination, but she'd be far less likely to be spotted by hostile players and would have more chances to earn EXP along the way from solo mobs.

All of these estimates, of course, were assuming that nothing delayed her along the way. And as a flashing message icon in her HUD reminded her, that was a losing assumption—it wasn't exactly safe to fly blind while trying to respond to PMs.

「Spriggan leader's not taking sides, and she's an idiot. She said to tell the Undine leader "good luck and see you at the World Tree". I need to head to Lepu territory to get my sword upgraded. -K」

Argo blew out an exasperated breath and swore. People were so short-sighted and stupid. Her mind raced as she chewed on the message she wanted to send, then hit Reply and attached a quantity of Yuld to the message.

「I don't have time to play telephone back-and-forth with the Undines right now, Ki-bou. I need a big favor from you. Go to Parasel and tell their leader—use these exact words—'the Spriggans are sympathetic to your cause, but are reluctant to take sides and widen the conflict. Send word if the Salamanders invade.' Here's the money I promised—more if you do this for me.」

There was a lengthy silence from Kirito's end—long enough for her to deal with a weak insect mob that swooped down from above and tried to attack her. As she depleted the last of the beetle's HP with a combo from the combat claws strapped to her forearms, she got the new message notification and opened it without even looking to see what kind of EXP and money she'd gotten from the fight.

「This is way out of my way, and you're asking me to lie about what Yoshihara said. I don't like it.
Arby sighed. Kirito could be so infuriatingly single-minded and straitlaced sometimes, and she really needed to get going. Her fingers flew over the virtual keyboard that hung in the air in front of her just above waist-height.

「The Undines need to think they're not alone in this, but we can't promise an alliance we can't deliver. They need to hear this, and they need to hear it from a Spriggan. Help them if you can.」She thought about it for a moment, then added: 「This is an important job, Ki-bou. Don't let me down.」

Without waiting for a reply, Argo quickly scrolled through her game menu and began searching her expansive contact list until she found the name she wanted. Tapping the icon, she opened a new message.

「Heads up,」she wrote. 「You said you'd pay for any good intel. I just got word that the Undines and Spriggans are talking about an alliance to push back the Salamanders. If your guy moves on them, it's gonna get ugly and could bring in others. -Argo」

Under normal circumstances Argo wouldn't have delivered the info to a buyer until she was paid, but in this case the payment wasn't the point—merely a tasty bonus. And strictly speaking, nothing she'd said was really a lie. She hit Send and cautiously scanned the area for hostiles as she waited, seeing nothing in her immediate vicinity but non-aggro animal mobs.

A few minutes passed with no response. Argo started walking north, and was considering pulling one of the nearby herbivores when she got a notification. Quickly, almost eagerly, she opened the message—and what she saw there made her smile broadly, as much from the contents as from the money that was electronically added to her purse when she opened it.

「Finally, something worth paying for. I'll pass it on to Kibaou. No names as per our agreement. Send word the moment you hear anything else useful. -Corvatz」

Asuna was fairly certain she was lost.

It shouldn't have been possible to get lost. All she'd needed to do was stay within sight of Parasel and stick to the easy mobs in the low wetlands that stretched out to the sea shore on the outskirts of the city. But the terrain was wet and icky and clutched at her boots when she walked, and after about an hour of trudging through the wetlands on foot she'd thought that perhaps this was as good a time as any to learn how to fly.

So she'd opened up the now-familiar help menu and searched until she found the entries on flying, and giggled when she held up her left hand and saw what looked like a floating joystick appear in her grip. Slowly and tentatively at first she'd followed the instructions—manipulating the controller to rise a few meters into the air, then letting go of it to hover in place and free up her hand. She could feel the strangest feeling between her shoulder blades as the wings moved, and once she felt like she'd gotten the hang of going up and down she decided to try going somewhere.

The exhilaration that had filled her then was unlike any other in the fifteen years she'd been alive. She'd laughed joyfully as she soared through the air, swooping and diving and practicing until a tingling sense of weariness on her back warned her that her wings were about to give out. So as she'd read in the manual, she'd glided to the ground to give them time to recharge.

And then abruptly realized she had no idea where she was.

Asuna kicked herself for not trying harder to find a party to go out with. But she didn't know anyone
in the game other than Diavel, who was very busy now, and she knew he wasn't allowed to leave the city anyway. Besides, she hadn't been intending to go far.

Sighing, she looked around and tried to get a sense of her surroundings. In contrast to the flatness of the terrain in the area around Parasel, the place where she'd glided to the ground was punctuated by rolling hills that rose out of the swampy ground almost like islands, tall grass and cattails obscuring her view. She could see the red and yellow cursors of mobs here and there, none of which seemed close enough to bother her, and wondered for a moment what the difference between the red and the yellow was. She supposed the red probably meant "more dangerous" in some way, especially since one of the red cursors was hovering over the scaly back of an alligator that floated half-submerged in the water.

Since she was here, she reasoned that she might as well resume "leveling up", as they called it. She'd already received one such message after a battle, and it had startled her until she saw the English word "Congratulation!" at the top of the window followed by a handful of smaller messages about her HP and MP increasing.

Drawing her rapier, she allowed herself a momentary smile at how far she'd come in such a short time. The night before, she'd been petrified at the mere thought of setting foot outside of the city. And the first time she'd engaged a mob in combat, the dog-sized beaver had almost scared her into immobility before she remembered how to use the one rapier technique she'd found in her Skills menu. Now here she was lost in an unfamiliar landscape, and she was actually able to think about fighting some of the monsters around her without trembling in fear.

Perhaps even with a little bit of anticipation.

Pushing her way through the reedy grass, she got up onto the relatively dry ground of the hillside and picked a target—a large green frog the size of a post box which gazed at her indifferently as she approached. The yellow cursor over its head was slightly darker than the others, almost a light orange, but it seemed to take no special notice of her even though she had a weapon in her hand. Licking her lips and steeling herself, she held the rapier in the now-familiar posture that began the skill, and then launched herself forward in a streak of green light.

The frog gave out an extremely offended croak as she struck it, turning its cursor red, and she saw its HP meter go down a little bit. That made her frown—the mobs she'd fought before had lost nearly half their life when she hit them with that attack, something her Skills menu called «Linear». Since she had to wait a little bit before she'd be able to repeat that technique, she jabbed at the frog once more and then jumped back in disgust as a glistening tongue shot out of its mouth, narrowly missing her.

Another «Linear» took the frog's HP gauge down a little further; another strike like that would have it at the halfway point that would turn the green ribbon yellow. This time when it used its tongue attack she was ready; instead of jumping backwards she sidestepped and swung the rapier in a slashing motion that scratched a glaring red line of damage across the slimy tongue. She suppressed a brief surge of nausea and dodged again as the frog leapt into the air and slammed into the ground where she'd just been standing. She felt a wave of slight numbness briefly run through her feet as shockwaves rippled out from the point of impact, and a small amount of her HP gauge ticked away.

Sweating from exertion and nervousness, she struck with her rapier technique once more while the frog was recovering from its attack, and smiled as she saw its HP gauge turn yellow. This mob seemed to be a lot tougher than the others she'd fought so far, but if she kept this up she could handle it.

As soon as she landed her attack, the frog jumped again, this time ramming her in the midriff with its
snout and sending her flying backwards to land on her butt. Her eyes widened when she saw how much of her HP that had taken away, and she was so rattled she actually had to repeat the incantation for her heal spell twice before it was successful, recovering most of her HP but depleting a third of her MP bar.

A little panicked, Asuna picked herself up and dove out of the way just in time to avoid another ground-pounding slam attack from the frog, landing face-first in a deep puddle of muddy water that soaked her through. Scrambling to her feet, she parried another tongue attack and held her rapier out before her, green light surging up the length of it as she launched and struck with another «Linear» attack.

The rapier shattered into polygons.

Stunned, Asuna stared at the spray of blue particles as they drifted through her fingertips and dissolved into the air. She had no idea what had just happened, but it didn't take her more than a moment to realize just how much trouble she was in. She cried out as she barely evaded another strike from the frog's tongue and struggled to run, staggering through the mud and knee-deep water that grasped at her boots and conspired to restrain her.

A blow struck her squarely in the back, a powerful sense of numbness spreading out from there as she went sprawling back into the mud with a scream that ended in a mouthful of disgusting water. Turning over, her legs bicycled as she tried desperately to push herself back away from the mob, wide eyes going to what was left of her HP gauge. She tried to cast her healing spell, but kept failing as she spat to rid her mouth of muddy water.

As the frog leapt into the air, she knew what came next would be the final blow, and she closed her eyes with a choked sob and threw up her arms futilely as she waited for death.

A pressure wave washed over her, and a mortal shriek split the air accompanying a shattering sound of the death that she was certain was her own. But when she dared to open an eye and look up, instead of the amphibian mob she saw a cloud of glimmering blue polygons falling around her like cool rain. Standing over her was a slender youth in a black hooded overcoat, equally dark unruly hair settling around his face as if he'd just come to rest from a swift motion. He held at ready an elegant long sword that matched his attire, the silvered edge of the obsidian blade reflecting the attenuated sunlight that filtered through the light fog.

The boy's black eyes scanned the area intently as he slowly stepped in a half-circle before relaxing his stance. The sword slashed out and down in a movement that startled Asuna before she recognized it from samurai movies as something you did to flick blood from a blade, and in one smooth motion he sheathed it on his back and turned to look down at her.

Asuna tried to find her voice, but between her shock at still being alive combined with the lingering rush from combat and her near-death experience, she couldn't make the words come out.

Then, as the adrenaline rush left her body empty of anything except shock, it ceased to matter. Her eyes rolled back into her head as darkness swallowed her.
"Each race has a home city, which is considered a «Safe Zone» within which only players of that race (and of any races designated by their leader as an «Ally») are safe from harm. There are other towns and cities scattered throughout the world which are unaligned with any race; these function as «Safe Zones» for all players. Any place in the world not designated as a «Safe Zone» is a «Contested Zone», within which any player may be attacked by any other at any time..."

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Safe and Contested Zones»

8 November 2022
Day 3 - Afternoon

Whenever Asuna slept, she forgot that she was trapped in a Death Game.

For whatever reason—denial, wishful thinking, or perhaps just a barrier to preserve her sanity—her dreams of the last few days had been filled not with monsters and fairies and magic and the risk of death, but with memories of the real world; of schoolwork and her mother's nagging, the impenetrably technical conversations when her father talked about his work, or even occasionally of the obnoxious boy in Classroom 4 who kept bugging her for a first kiss. There was no rhyme or reason to them, and when she awoke it was to the disappointing realization that however uncomfortable her dream might've been, it was nothing compared to the reality in which she was trapped.

This dream was of her mother. But it wasn't the mother who disapproved of nearly everything she did, who pressured her to excel at her studies so that she could attract a suitable husband, and who would never let her hear the end of it if she ever escaped from Alfheim Online. In this dream, she was still a child tiny enough to hold in her mother's arms, and when she looked up at her mama the only expression she saw was one of unconditional love.

As she rocked Asuna in her arms, her mother spoke of the future that lay ahead of her, and Asuna didn't know whether they were things half-remembered that her mother had ever actually said, or merely the things that she'd always wished to hear from her. It didn't matter. She felt safe, secure, protected, and loved.

When her mother said nothing for a time, Asuna closed her eyes and smiled, letting the gentle rocking motion and the sense of security lull her to sleep. It stayed with her as the dream began to fade, the fuzzy-edged quality of dreaming replaced slowly by the sharper, clearer senses associated with the waking world. She could feel a warm pressure against her and a comforting, mesmerizing sense of motion; a chilly wind briefly gusted across her skin and brought forth goose bumps.

Slowly, groggily, she opened her eyes to the world, trying to recall where it was that she'd gone to sleep. She was lying on her back, looking up at an early evening sky—no, that wasn't correct, she realized after a moment. She was being carried. Her eyes shot open the rest of the way, and she craned her head to see above her a young boy with ash-gray skin and hair as black as his clothing, one arm supporting her back and the other under the crook of her knees. Her body swayed slightly with each of his footsteps.

Asuna screamed.

The boy jumped—literally jumped; she could hear a deep sound that she assumed must be his wings as he took flight and soared backwards a bit in surprise, nearly losing his hold on her. As he landed, she beat at his shoulder and yelled. "Who are you? Put me down, put me down!"
The boy's face darkened in a blush, and he stammered as he looked around. "Uh—um, I-I don't think you want me to do that."

"Yes I do!" Asuna yelled, pounding the presumptuous boy again and again in the shoulder and arm with both fists. If she could've reached his head, she would've hit that too. "Now get your hands off me, you pervert! I said put me down!"

He flinched and looked down at her, conflicted, and then shrugged. "Okay."

The next thing Asuna knew, she felt a shock of cold lance through her as she fell into knee-deep water. She sat up, sputtering and spitting out the brackish water, and glared at the boy with a heat that she was sure could've launched a high-level fire spell if she knew how to cast one.

The boy rubbed at the back of his neck and wore an expression like he was struggling mightily with something. Finally his chest hitched a few times and he broke out laughing, hugging his arms across his belly as he nearly doubled over.

Furious, Asuna bolted to her feet and reached for her rapier as muddy water sheeted off of her and dripped cold fingers down her back. Her hand closed on nothing but air, and she looked down at her side in surprise, seeing the empty sheath where it had been.

Suddenly, as she realized why her weapon was missing, the memory of where she'd been and what she'd been doing flooded back into her. Her face turned bright crimson as it occurred to her that the boy hadn't been taking undue liberties with her—at least, she didn't think he had been. He'd interceded when she was moments from death, destroying the monster that had been about to kill her. And then he'd laughed at her after dropping her in the water.

Forcing her hands back to her sides, Asuna found that she couldn't manage to unclench her fists as she glared at her rescuer, who had backed away a few steps with a look that suggested he was expecting her to blast him with a spell. "You could've put me down on my feet, you know," she grated out.

"Sorry, sorry," he said with an uncertain quaver in his voice. "You just… well, you were hitting me and you really seemed to want down now."

She looked down at her clothing. It had been soaked through and caked with mud after her battle with the frog mob, and her most recent dunk hadn't really done much to improve its condition—or hers, she realized as she got a glimpse of what she could see of her hair. And said clothing was clinging to her in a most indecent way that made her cheeks color once more. Fury and certainty rose in her again. "You did that on purpose."

Coughing slightly into his hand, the boy gave her a more serious look. "I saved your life, you know. A little gratitude wouldn't be out of line."

Still trembling with anger, Asuna gradually unclenched her fists and straightened her posture. She gave him a bow—a very shallow and brief one—and ground out the words as if each one caused her pain. "Thank you for helping me." That obligation seemingly settled, she took a few moments to look around her. The terrain was flatter than it had been where she'd gotten lost, but she still couldn't see Parasel. "Where are we?" And then she looked back at him. "And what are you?"

Surprise flickered across the boy's face. "Uh, you mean my character's race? I'm a Spriggan. Our territory's to the north. As for where we are…" He raised an arm and pointed at one of the hills. "We're actually not too far from your home city—once we cross that ridge you should be able to see
"We?" Asuna said. "I am going home. You are not going to follow me."

He chuckled nervously and ran his fingers through his hair. "Um, actually, I'm kind of going to Parasel myself on business. What were you doing out in that part of the swamp without a weapon, anyway?"

"I had a weapon," Asuna protested. "But while I was fighting that thing, it… well, it did the blue sparkly thing like when you kill a mob."

"Ah. You broke it," the boy said, nodding knowingly. "Its durability must've run out. When was the last time you repaired it?"

Asuna had a sinking feeling she knew what was coming next. "Repaired?"

The boy sighed, covering his face and shaking his head; it made her feel even more stupid than what then came out of his mouth. "You have to repair your equipment, you know. When you bring up an item's status window, it'll tell you how much durability is left. The better the item, the more wear and tear it can take. Here."

Following the last word, the boy opened his game menu and did something in the air with his hands; a window appeared in front of Asuna with the word **Trade** at the top. As she watched, he added a sum of money and a small handful of items to the Trade window and prompted her to accept it.

"I don't know what kind of weapon you like to use, but there's some money to replace the one you broke, along with a few pieces of light armor that dropped on the way here."

Asuna gaped. She had no idea how to judge the items he was offering her, but the money was easily an order of magnitude more than she'd started with. A slight flush tinged her cheeks and she stammered a bit. "I-I can't… I mean…" Suddenly she narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "What do you want out of this?"

"Want?" The boy gave her another confused look. "If I wanted anything in return I wouldn't have accepted the trade before you could add anything to it."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I just don't want you giving me stuff and then expecting… I mean…" Asuna was appalled at how dense this boy was. Was he really going to make her spell it out?

His face darkened dramatically as he raised his hands in protest. "N-no! That's not it at all! I j-just… I just wanted… I mean, I just didn't want you to get hurt or anything, and I thought it'd help!"

Peering warily at him, Asuna finally decided that he was actually telling the truth about his motivations—he was just too awkward to be some kind of predator. Her expression softened a bit, and she reached up and touched the **Accept** button, then made a throat-clearing noise. "Thank you. Um. My name's Asuna."

"K-Kirito," he said, still blushing.

"Kikirito?"

He shook his head quickly. "No, just Kirito. So, um, anyway, Asuna… good luck. I'd better get to Parasel before it gets dark."
Asuna nodded, trying in vain to swipe some of the mud from her clothing. "I need to get back too." She eyed Kirito sidewise, an edge climbing back into her voice. "We're not traveling together. We just happen to be going in the same direction."

Kirito smiled, which only managed to stoke her annoyance again. "Of course."

Whatever Klein had expected the Sylph home city to be like, it was as nothing compared to the quintet of spires he could already see rising above the trees a few kilometers away—four which tapered to a point, arranged foursquare at a scale he could only guess at from this far away; one in the center in the shape of a spindly hourglass, connected to the four corner spires (and they to each other) by angled walkways that looked as fragile as spiderwebs. The sun was just beginning to set on the far side of the city, backlighting the towers and making it seem to glow.

He knew they just happened to coming from the east and be here at the right time, but it felt like the city was putting on a show just for them, designed to awe their uninvited foreign visitors. Klein just barely caught a delicate chuckle from above and to his right over the white noise of the passing air as they flew; when he looked up he saw the woman with the overly long katana covering a smile. "Your expression," she said in answer to the unasked question. "You look like a kid who's just seen Tokyo Disneyland for the first time."

A little embarrassed, Klein tried to concentrate on where he was flying as he felt himself start to drift in the direction he was looking. "It's pretty amazing," he admitted. "Kinda making me wonder if I didn't roll the wrong character."

When he didn't get a response, he glanced over and saw the Sylph woman giving him a speculative look. "What?"

"Nothing," she said as she leaned into a slow turn while they all began banking towards an open platform on the central spire. Klein did his best to follow, looking back briefly to make sure Kunimittz and Dynamm were close behind.

"You haven't told me your name, you know." Klein had to focus on what he was doing during the more difficult landing maneuvers, so he couldn't see her—but he could've sworn she was laughing at him as she replied. "No, I haven't."

That was not exactly an answer. "I'm Klein. These are my friends, Kunimittz and Dynamm." He gestured to each player in turn as the three of them carefully settled themselves to the platform before dismissing their hand controllers.

His captor seemed to be one of those more experienced players who'd managed to get the hang of Voluntary Flight; she swooped down until she was less than a meter above the platform and then stilled her wings, allowing herself to drop gracefully to the floor. After a delay so long that Klein thought that she either hadn't heard him or was ignoring him, she glanced back at him over the shoulder of her elegant green yukata. "Sakuya. Come—the more quickly we deal with this, the sooner you might be able to resume the search for the rest of your friends."

As soon as they entered the central spire of Sylvain, Klein decided that his first impression had been correct: when it came to their home city architecture, Salamanders had definitely gotten the short end of the stick. The walls looked like polished hardwood with frames and decorative work in some kind of semi-translucent green crystal. Lanterns hung from the ceiling at frequent intervals, making the corridors and rooms seem to almost glow the way the city itself had with the benefit of the sun's backlighting. A wide central shaft linked the very top floor of the spire with the very bottom, and
Klein could see Sylph players coming and going in mid-flight one direction or another, more than a few of them giving him looks of distress or curiosity until noticing that he and Kunimitsu were being escorted by armed Sylphs.

A few floors above where they'd entered, Klein and his party were finally led into a large round room with wrap-around bay windows looking out in every direction across the city. In the very center of that room was a Sylph man with violet-black hair that looked like a shade he'd expect to see on an Imp, but which complemented his dark green hakama and golden half-cape remarkably well. Both hands moved through the air as if he was doing more than one thing at once within his UI, and he raised his eyes from his work as Sakuya led her party and her charges in.

Casually brushing his windows closed after a few final gestures, he rose from his chair. "Sakuya. So this is what that terse message of yours meant. And you said that they weren't part of a raiding party?"

Sakuya stepped forward and bowed. "No, not that we could tell. We had no reports of any attacks in their immediate area, and they weren't…" She trailed off.

"Weren't?" prompted the man that Klein presumed must be the Sylph leader; there was a gold star next to his HP gauge.

"They weren't behaving suspiciously," Sakuya said finally. Glancing back over her shoulder again at Klein, she deadpanned, "other than being in the wrong part of the world."

"Name's Klein. We just came here to pick up our friend Dynamm here." Klein jerked his thumb towards the named player. "Honestly, we're just trying to reunite with all our friends from real life, so we'd like nothing better than to head north and get out of your territory and out of your hair. Not that Sylvain's a bad place! It's pretty. I mean, it glows; that's pretty cool. But it's kinda between point A and point B, you know?"

Listening to Klein babble, a thin smile crossed the man's face for only a moment. "I believe I see what you mean, Sakuya," he said at last. "This one does not strike me as a Salamander skirmisher. You say there was no evidence they had been involved in any hostilities?"

Sakuya shook her head. "None at all, Skarrip. They were having a conversation about their other friends when we came upon them, and they came without incident when we asked."

At swordpoint, Klein thought, but didn't say out of an uncustomary abundance of wisdom.

"And they wish to travel north to the Cait Sith?" Skarrip asked, hands clasped at the small of his back.

Sakuya nodded before Klein could respond. "By your leave, yes. I see no harm in it, providing no one else along the way mistakes them for raiders—but I knew you'd prefer I brought them here first."

Skarrip inclined his head respectfully to his subordinate and began to pace his way around to the front of his desk. "Just so. You did the right thing, Sakuya; we have no way of knowing what our foes might try next. The Salamander surprise attack against the Imps was… unexpected. A remarkable piece of luck, really. Had they not caught the Imp leader in the open at just the right time, the Imps might have held them off indefinitely in the narrow confines of their tunnels, where Salamander numbers would count for little; their attackers would be unable to invade their Safe Zone. Now the Salamander leader has tasted victory and finds he likes the flavor, but we are teaching him an expensive lesson about how difficult it is to subdue another race when he can't simply checkmate them in the first few moves. We can hope he will soon tire of throwing people at
Klein couldn't help feeling a chill at the way Skarrip described acts of war that had claimed a number of lives—as if they were merely strategic decisions made on a game board rather than the deaths of real people, at least one of whom Klein had met and known, however briefly. He tensed, but tried to keep his immediate dislike for the man from coloring his tone. "And then who do they start throwing people at?"

Skarrip's shoulders rippled in a shrug of plain indifference. "Who can know? My sources tell me that the increase in border skirmishes here coincides with a cessation in hostilities against the Undines. Should Kibaou find that he cannot easily dominate either of his nearest neighbors the way he did the Imps, we can hope he will turn his attention away from open warfare, and north towards Yggdrasil. And perhaps in a month's time when control of Everdark reverts to the Imps and they can elect a new leader, we shall see a shift in the way of things."

"You know a lot about what's going on in here," Klein observed.

Donning that thin smile again, Skarrip tipped his head very slightly. "It is not widely known outside of this room, but neither is it any great secret that I was a beta tester. It gives one something of an advantage."

Klein was beginning to tire of Skarrip's pretentious manner of speech and know-it-all attitude on top of his earlier callousness. He cleared his throat, covering a scowl with his hand as he coughed. "Well, that's great for you and all, but meaning no offense... we've got a friend up in the Cait Sith and we don't know if he's even alive or not. We'd really like to get going. Are you keeping us here?"

Skarrip shook his head. "No, of course not. Not now. Sakuya, please take two of your team and escort these gentlemen to the Cait Sith border without delay. What they do once there is no longer any concern of ours." He made a curt sweeping gesture with his hand, and moved to return to his chair.

"Nice guy," Klein remarked tonelessly as they wound their way through the passageways back to the platform at the top of the spire.

Sakuya gave Klein an unreadable look as she walked beside him. "You don't much care for him, do you?"

"I don't like anyone who treats other people like disposable game pieces. Especially not now that getting taken off the board means a little more than losing a 1000-yen bet."

"Hm." He wasn't sure what to make of her monosyllabic reply; Sakuya went on after a moment as they stepped out into the darkening evening sky. "I will say this, Klein: he's been extraordinary considering the pressure we're all under. He got us and our defenses organized, and he did it before the Salamanders were done consolidating their gains after taking Everdark. And whoever his sources are, they're very good."

Klein had plenty of time to chew on this as the six of them—he, Kunimittz, Dynamm, and their three Sylph escorts—flew northward, stopping only when necessary to rest their wings. Nothing delayed them with battle, but the stars were just becoming visible by the time the forest began thinning out, yielding to lush prairie further to the north and a dimly-visible ocean a few kilometers to the west.

At some arbitrary point, Sakuya signaled for everyone to land at the top of a hill, pointing to twinkling lights in the distance. "You can just barely see Freelia from here. Follow those lights and you should reach the city within a few hours, depending on how often you stop to rest—though
there's a long bridge you'll probably have to cross; at a starting character's speed you can only fly across the entire channel if your wings are fully charged. You're in Cait Sith territory now, and I don't know how seriously they're taking their border protection, so be prepared for anything."

Klein nodded, trying to commit all of this to memory. "Thanks. I think we'll be all right from here. The three of us in a mixed party are probably less likely to look like one race or another trying to attack."

Sakuya smiled at that, squinting one last time at the city lights on the horizon. "Listen, I don't remember that many people from the beta, but there was a friend, Cait Sith I partied with a few times who seemed nice—name of Alicia Rue. I thought I saw her briefly on opening day so I'm pretty sure she was trapped in here—I'll try sending her a message; maybe she'll be willing to help you."

Klein's answering smile broadened at Sakuya's offer, and he gave her a courteous, grateful bow. "Thanks, Sakuya. You didn't have to go that far. And I appreciate you vouching for us with Skarrp." He started to bring up his menu, and then before he could complete the action, thought to ask. "Friends?"

Sakuya made no move to initiate a friend request of her own or encourage one from him, but there was a twinkle of mischief in her otherwise cool expression. "Don't push your luck. Now come on, get going." She swung the scabbard of her katana from where it was slung at her back and lightly whacked Klein in the behind with it, drawing laughter from both her group and Klein's friends as he jumped in surprise.

Petulantly rubbing his injured dignity, he gave one look back at Sakuya and her group as he headed towards the northwest. She had a hand over her mouth, but he could've sworn she was grinning.

In Argo's estimation, coming to Sondref had been very nearly a complete waste of time. Not only was she unable to unearth so much as a rumor of any beta testers—at least, none who would admit it—as near as she could tell, there was almost nothing happening in the Puca home city that would make it worth taking the time to cultivate any contacts. For a race that was supposed to appeal to musically-inclined people, no one seemed to be in the mood to sing. There was a pall of hopelessness that hung over the city, which itself felt something like a ghost town—it had been designed to accommodate over three thousand players, and she would've been surprised if there were half that many in residence.

Or perhaps they were all sitting in their rooms moping. Given the mood that she'd witnessed so far from those who were actually out and about, it was a distinct possibility. Scarcely anyone batted an eye at her presence in the town, despite the fact that technically any one of them could've attacked her without fear of being harmed in return.

By the time she'd fed herself, spoken with a few of the locals and caught up on all of her messages, Argo decided that in order to get anything done here she was going to have to go directly to the top. The Big Top, in point of fact. A giant, brightly-colored pavilion tent in the center of the city was Sondref's version of a castle or executive residence, and from the outside looked like nothing so much as a circus.

As soon as she pushed aside the canvas covering the front door and stepped inside, however, it was as if she'd been transported into a garish, luxurious palace. The floors were paved with rugs bearing complex and colorful geometric patterns, and tapestries in a similar style hung from fastenings to form the walls and ceilings; censers and sconces were placed over uncovered stone for safety, and they filled the rooms with light and warmth that drove away the chill which perpetually tried to claw its way in through the tent this far north.
Although the first few rooms that she entered were empty, eventually she pushed through a colorful hanging veil that separated one room from another and found a slender blonde woman in a bright green dress sitting at a simple mahogany desk, fingers moving through the air in a way Argo instinctively recognized as the movements of someone working with one of their game menus. She looked up briefly, back to her menu, and then quickly back up at Argo with wide eyes as she reached for a dagger at her side.

"What the—who are you? What are you doing in here?"

Argo sat down across one of the empty chairs in the room and put her feet up on the chair next to her, snatching an apple from the table and pushing the hood of her cloak back as her tail curled around across her lap. "Name's Argo. I deal in information. Are you Merifelle?"

From long experience, Argo had found that audacity could sometimes be far more disarming and effective at jarring people out of their usual habits and reaction cycles than slapping them in the face. The woman's jaw worked overtime as she struggled for words, hand still on her dagger. "I—yes, I'm Merifelle. Why are—"

"I'm trying to figure out why everyone in this town's acting like they're already dead and their bodies just haven't caught on. It's depressing. You're their leader, I figured you'd know." She took a bite of the apple and tilted her head towards Merifelle with raised eyebrows, both ears forward with her full attention.

Merifelle stared at Argo for a few seconds, and seemed to come to some kind of decision, perhaps realizing that there wasn't anything that Argo could do to harm her here in her own Safe Zone—quite the contrary. Her hand slipped slowly away from her weapon and she set her lips in a thin line. "Isn't it obvious?" she said, twisting the thick braid that hung over her shoulder between her thumb and forefinger. "We're never getting out of here."

"Way to inspire folks."

The woman's eyes flashed dangerously. "Oh, screw you. You know the terms for escaping this game—get to the top of the World Tree, or be one of the two allies of someone who does." She barked a bitter laugh. "How many people do you think are likely to need the Puca for allies?"

The logic behind her fatalism stunned Argo. It wasn't that she herself hadn't thought through that same line of reasoning before, it was that it had come from their leader—the person who was supposed to be their advocate and inspiration. If even she had fallen into this kind of pit of hopelessness, it was no wonder the city had such a funereal atmosphere.

Chewing and swallowing, Argo gestured with what remained of the apple. "Maybe that's not the only way out."

"Oh, there's another way out, all right," the woman said in an odd, hollow tone of voice. "I know quite a few people who've already taken that path."

Argo didn't let herself think about what that meant. "I'm talking about a way back to the real world. A way for everyone to eventually get out of here."

A glimmer of hope blossomed cruelly in Merifelle's eyes. "You're lying."

"I'm gonna let that slide, 'cause you don't know me. In the beta, they called me The Rat. I was the person everyone came to for information. If you needed to know it, you asked Argo. Same here and now, you just don't know it yet. So listen." She took one last bite of the apple, considered the core,
and dropped it unceremoniously on the rug. "You remember what Kayaba said? His exact words?"

When Merifelle shook her head, Argo quoted the euphemistically-named tutorial verbatim from memory: "The only way to escape this world is to pass through the vortex that has opened high above Yggdrasil itself—and the only way to reach it is to clear the dungeon within the World Tree and defeat the boss that waits at the top. Whosoever delivers the Last Attack to this boss will win the favor of High King Oberon, who will grant that player's race and two of its allies the power of Unlimited Flight.' That's what he said. To the letter." And, Argo didn't add, in the precise cadence in which he'd originally spoken the words.

Merifelle blanched as the exact quote brought back the far-too-recent memories of that day. "So? Then you should understand why we're screwed."

Argo stared unblinkingly at Merifelle. She could do that almost indefinitely, and she knew it unsettled people who weren't used to the fact that ALO avatars didn't need to blink. "Words are my stock in trade, and I think Kayaba chose his very deliberately. You happen to hear the word 'first' anywhere in there? Anything saying that the boss wouldn't respawn, or that it couldn't be done more than once?"

Merifelle had to finally look away from that stare. "What are you trying to say?"

One of Argo's ears flicked as an insect buzzed near her. "Think about it. Nine races. Three get to go through. That leaves six. Three more fight their way up there and meet the terms. They go. That leaves three, who do it one last time."

As Merifelle turned back to her, jaw agape, Argo said, "I'm saying I think we can all go home—but we gotta clear Yggdrasil first, and that's gonna take a long time and we'll need every player we can. So why don'cha put on your big-girl panties, stop feeling sorry for yourself, and do something useful for the people who're counting on you—and for me. Nyo?"

There was a very long, very pregnant silence. The light from the coals in the censers and the flickering flames of oil lamps reflected from the tears that trickled down Merifelle's cheeks. "What do you need from me?" she whispered as they dripped from her chin onto the white-knuckled hands clasped in her lap.

Swinging her legs off the arm of the chair, Argo leaned forward. "I need you to keep in close touch and tell me what's going on around here, how your people's leveling is going, if anyone starts attacking you, that sorta thing. I'll pay you for info, and the more useful the info, the better I pay. If you need to know something—game mechanics, quests, intel—I can sell it to you. Sometimes I might have jobs that suit a Puca, too." She hesitated as she rose to her feet, and then added: "You also might wanna reach out to your neighbors and start thinking about alliances."

Nodding, Merifelle took a deep, shuddering breath. "I'll see what I can do."

Pausing at the doorway as she pulled her hood back over her head and pushed aside the veil to the outer room, Argo spoke without looking back. "Do better."

Once Kirito and Asuna took to the air, it didn't take them long to reach Parasel. While it was more or less a straight-line route, it did not escape Kirito's notice that the Undine girl avoided looking at him the entire time except whenever she noticed their flight paths were straying too close to each other, at which point she'd give him a huffy look and make a point of veering off by a few meters. After the second time this happened, Kirito just rolled his eyes and started showing off a little, weaving and maneuvering in ways that someone using the controller interface—someone like her—simply
couldn't do.

It did not seem to improve her opinion of him, but it did make him feel a little better.

When at last they drew close enough to Parasel that they could pick out the complex network of canals and bridges that formed the city blocks, Kirito called over to her. "Hey, Asuna."

She eyed him warily as they started to descend. "What do you want?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but would you mind flying with me until we reach the castle?" When she opened her mouth immediately, Kirito—anticipating the objection—added, "I'd rather not cause a misunderstanding and get attacked by some overzealous guard. If you're with me, they're less likely to think I'm a spy or something."

Asuna looked at him with an expression that suggested he was pushing his luck, then turned her attention back to where she was going. She didn't respond, but she didn't peel off and go elsewhere either.

Before long they descended to the courtyard just inside the castle gates, Kirito touching down in a light jog while Asuna carefully came to a stop and lowered herself to the ground. A trio of Undines in armor were standing in front of an elaborate fountain in the shape of a breaching dolphin, and when the one facing his direction caught sight of Kirito, his eyes widened slightly and he gave a man in plate armor a sharp tap on the shoulder, pointing.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Kirito said as he drew within speaking distance. "I'm looking for your leader; I have a message for him. Could you tell me where to find him?"

The man with the plate cuirass gave Asuna and her dreadful, muddy condition a worried look, then turned back to Kirito. "I'm Diavel, and I lead the Undines. Welcome to our city. Have you brought me a reply from the Spriggan leader, then?"

Kirito had had plenty of time on the journey south to carefully think through exactly what he was going to say and how he was going to say it. Since he wasn't exactly bringing a message from Yoshihara, he didn't nod; instead he gave his answer and let Diavel draw his own conclusions. "The Spriggans are sympathetic to your cause, but are reluctant to take sides and widen the conflict. That said, please send word if the Salamanders invade."

Diavel sighed, and glanced at one of the men beside him, who shrugged.

"Told you so," the man said to his leader.

"Less than I'd hoped, more than I'd expected," replied Diavel with a shrug of his own. "It means that door isn't necessarily closed. We can work with this." Glancing over at Asuna and taking note again of the shape she and her clothes were in, his voice took on a tone of concern. "Are you okay, Asuna? You look like you've had a rough time."

Pointlessly brushing her hands against her dress as if it would do any good—and as if her hands themselves weren't just as dirty—Asuna nodded. "I got attacked by a tough monster and my weapon broke, but I'm okay." And then, seemingly as a reluctant afterthought, added, "thanks to him." Kirito looked embarrassed.

"Is that so?" Diavel gave Kirito a measured look, as if seeing him in a new light. "You surprise me. I'm glad to see there are others willing to set aside the artificial divisions Kayaba has sown and stick their neck out for someone outside of their faction. You have my thanks, Spriggan—Asuna is dear to us, and should not have been out alone."
Asuna's face clouded in a way that Kirito, despite their short acquaintance, was quite familiar with by now. Seeing her turn that look on someone other than him made him smile slightly. "I'm not a child, Diavel. I was doing just fine up until that point."

Diavel bowed slightly. "Of course you were. Forgive me. Why don't you go clean up and get some rest?" Returning his attention to Kirito as Asuna made a haughty noise and took off, he gave another bow. "Again, thank you—both for bringing me your leader's message, and for helping out one of my people. Please tell the Spriggan leader that your people may come and go freely within our city and territory, so long as their intentions are peaceful." When Kirito nodded, he went on. "May I have your name, so that I don't have to keep calling you 'Spriggan'?"

"Kirito. I'm a solo player."

There was a flash of something in Diavel's eyes—familiarity?—that was quickly suppressed. "I'd like to find a way to thank you for what you did for Asuna. Where will you go from here?"

Since Kirito didn't really feel like sharing his itinerary with this man, he gave a vague, indirect answer. "To get paid for delivering you that message. Then to grind some more, like everyone else."

"So that was a job, then? Not a mission from your leader?"

Kirito shrugged. "I told you I'm a solo player. A mercenary, if you like."

"You're a Spriggan, all right." Diavel's smile then was knowing, as if he had a fair idea of just what kind of play style attracted players to the race.

"Like I said." Hesitating, Kirito added, "If you want to show me gratitude, I don't suppose you can recommend a player weaponsmith yet with a useful skill level?"

Diavel shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The game is less than a week old, and weaponsmithing skills are not an Undine specialty. You'll want to find a Leprechaun for that." Glancing at something over Kirito's shoulder, he made a noise of approval. "That's a fine sword you have. I see why you don't want to use an NPC smith to upgrade it."

The conversation was getting uncomfortably close to subjects which might reveal that Kirito had been a beta tester—something he didn't exactly care to advertise. He was all but certain that Diavel had been, based on his recognition of the Anneal Blade and some of the other things he'd said—but no one Kirito recognized. "Well, if you'll excuse me…"

"Wait a moment," Diavel said quickly. "If you're for hire, would you do something for me?"

Kirito gave Diavel a serious look, meeting his eyes. "That depends on the job. I won't kill other players for you."

Diavel shook his head, holding up his hands. "No, no, nothing like that. But if you're heading to Leprechaun territory to upgrade your sword, I'd like you to convey my respects to them and offer solidarity against the Salamander war of aggression—as well as open a line of dialogue with their leader about exchanging healing services for smithing."

In other words, Kirito was to be a courier again. Boring, but since he was going that direction anyway, he might as well get paid for it—the services he sought there were likely to be expensive. "That's a long, dangerous trip. Four thousand. Half up front, half when I bring their reply—regardless of what it is."

"Why you—" One of Diavel's companions, who'd been silent up until this point, stepped forward
Diavel held up a hand sharply. "Easy, Jahala. What he asks is reasonable." Opening his menu, he initiated a trade window; moments later Kirito nodded in satisfaction as his pressed the button to accept the payment. "All best speed, Kirito. The Salamanders have been probing our borders with small groups, as if they're considering an invasion. They seem to have backed off today, but I don't know why—or how long that will—"

"Sir! Leader!" the cry was from an Undine in light scout's armor who soared down from above, one hand tilting his controller as he eased into a landing with the look of hours of practice. Kirito froze when he saw the look on the man's face.

Diavel didn't seem to like what he'd seen any more than Kirito did. He shot a look towards the man he'd called Jahala, who fell into step as Diavel closed the distance with the returning Undine. "What is it, Laffa? You look like you've—"

It was a measure of the gravity of the news that the scout actually interrupted. The words that came next justified the breach of protocol. "Sir, there's been a killing. Witnesses say it was an Imp."
Chapter 7

"«Bosses» are exceptionally powerful mobs with two or more HP gauges which spawn in a specific location. They typically act as gatekeepers to stop players from progressing until the boss is defeated —such as the «Valley Bosses» blocking the four major paths to Yggdrasil, and the «Gateway Bosses» which periodically block progression through the many levels of the World Tree dungeon. Most bosses do not respawn once killed, but all drop significantly better items than average mobs and are typically balanced for raid groups of two or more complete parties…"

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Bosses»

8 ~ 9 November 2022
Day 3 - Evening

"We weren't expecting any trouble," the Undine explained after visibly steeling himself. "We've gotten used to seeing Imps heading towards the city singly or in pairs, and these two didn't really strike us as any different. Our group was heading out to patrol, and right after we passed them we heard someone speaking a strange language—a spell incantation, I guess it was."

"Then what?" Diavel asked.

"Then everything went black," the other player said. "Literally black—I couldn't see anything but my HUD, and there was a flashing icon of an eye beside my HP gauge."

"Blindness status," Kirito said confidently, drawing a look and a nod from Diavel.

"Dark Magic," the Undine leader confirmed. "That would definitely suggest an Imp player's involvement; they get early access to a spell that inflicts a brief blindness status."

"I could hear Drake and Masumo yelling, and I knew they had to be as blind as I was. Then there were screams… and then nothing. It all took ten seconds at most, maybe—when the status effect expired, all I saw was a pair of blue Remain Lights flickering, and they expired not long after. No Drake. No Masumo. No Imps." His face fell. "I'm sorry, Diavel. I shouldn't have turned my back—"

Diavel cut him off with a curt gesture. "It's not your fault, Heigris. It's mine. I told everyone to treat the Imps as friends and to welcome them."

Jahala finished scrolling through a list and set his interface visible, showing something to Diavel. "They're dead all right," he confirmed grimly.

"We have to get people trained up with rez spells," Diavel said with an anguished look on his face. "I don't suppose you could describe the two assailants?"

Heigris shook his head. "Imps," he said, looking annoyed with himself. "Male. On the tall side; one of them pretty solidly built and with square features. I wish I could be more specific, it's just… I didn't take any particular notice of them until afterwards, you know?"

Something had been nagging at Kirito, and it finally fell into place as he listened to this last exchange. "Why are you still alive?" he asked the Undine survivor bluntly.

Jahala scowled; Heigris shook his head and looked just as upset as Diavel did. "I don't know," he said. "They had plenty of time to kill me too while I was blinded. If they had, nobody would've had any idea who did this—we would've just disappeared. It's like—"
"They wanted you to know," Kirito said, turning and looking at Diavel. "That was the point. They left him alive so that you'd know an Imp did it. The question is: why?"

Diavel looked like he'd eaten something extremely foul and couldn't simply spit it out. "I can guess." At a look from Jahala, he said, "they're trying to drive a wedge between us and the Imps. And it's working. Because between this and the border skirmishes, if we have no way of knowing whether an Imp is a real refugee or an assassin working for the Salamanders, then we won't be able to let any of them roam free—the risk to our people is too great."

"And that," Jahala said with a grimace, "will drive them right back into Everdark where the Salamanders have control over them."

Diavel nodded, sighing. "Someone working for Kibaou is entirely too intelligent for my peace of mind. And now assassins." He gave a disgusted scowl, as if simply saying the word tasted horrible. "I can understand fighting for your life. I can even understand the Salamanders who were manipulated into Kibaou's war, although I think a time will come when they have to come to terms with what they've done and live with it. But this is…"

"Premeditated," Kirito said, receiving nods of agreement from both Diavel and Jahala. "And not just premeditated, but seemingly random in their choice of targets. This was someone who either doesn't believe or doesn't care that PKing is murder now."

"And either one makes them very, very dangerous," Jahala said.

It also made them someone Kirito had absolutely no desire to meet. It reminded him that he had somewhere to be. Somewhere else—somewhere not here. Glancing at the darkening sky, he turned back to Diavel one last time. "Is it all right if I spend the night in an inn here?" he asked. Getting a nod of approval from Diavel, he uncrossed his arms as his wings sparkled into existence on his back. "In that case, I'll be off. Good luck with your assassin."

Despite his flippant tone, the incident gnawed at Kirito as he flew to the edge of the major canal that split east and west Parasel, looking for an inn he knew would be nearby. It was just as well that he was heading northward; it would be a bad idea to either get in the middle of the conflict between the Salamanders and Undines, or tangle with these Imp assassins who seemed to be preying on the latter. He could've offered to help, but that would've involved taking a job from Diavel whose implicit purpose was to hunt down another player—something he'd already said he wouldn't do.

Besides, he had another job to do.

And payment to receive, as well. So once he had rented a room for the night and flopped down on the simple bed that was provided, he stared up at the ceiling as he opened his menu and started a new private message.

「Message delivered to the Undine leader. Got his name for you if you don't know it already, and some info for you about the job he hired me to do and the incident that interrupted us. -K」

Kirito smiled to himself. That was suitably vague, and should have Argo dropping whatever she was doing to find out what he knew—which should ensure he got paid promptly. While he waited for a response, he closed his eyes and thought through his game plan for the next few days.

It would probably take the better part of the next day to cross Undine and Spriggan territories, stop in at Penwether and deliver Diavel's response, and carefully venture into Leprechaun territory. He didn't expect trouble—the Leprechaun racial affinity was for smithing and crafting, after all, and in the beta they'd welcomed players of all races on the theory that it was more customers for them—but
it wouldn't hurt to be cautious, especially since it would likely be evening before he got there.

He had just been about to drift off to sleep when he heard a loud bang out in the hallway. Generally most sound from either side of an inn room door was attenuated for privacy reasons, but shouts, knocks, and very loud noises would get through. He sat up with a start, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and stuck his head out through the door.

Nothing. No, something—there was a brief pop-up message on the door across the hall, but it disappeared before he could see what it had been. Nothing else stirred; Kirito shrugged and closed his door.

Stretching both arms high above his head, Kirito checked the time and frowned. It had been close to an hour since he sent his message to Argo, with no response. She wasn't exactly on the clock for him or anything, but it was very rare that she didn't respond to messages within a matter of minutes—about the time it took to finish a fight or find a place to land.

Or perhaps she was napping. It was getting fairly late, after all.

*It's not as if I can spend it tonight anyway*, he thought as he crawled into bed for real rest. *Need to save up for when I get to Domnann.*

Asuna had expected slamming the door to help, and was sorely disappointed when the entire building didn't rattle from the force. It was yet another reminder that she was in a virtual world; a real building would've creaked and trembled for a moment or so after slamming a door that hard, as if a small earthquake had just passed through. Here in Alfheim, the door would close as hard as she could swing it, and the sound of the impact was the satisfyingly deep bang of solid hardwood—but there were no aftershocks, nothing to indicate that the 3D model of the inn was in the least bit affected by her tantrum. Instead there was a mystifyingly vague system message, «Immortal Object», appearing for a few seconds in the center of the door.

It had not been the best of days.

At the very center of things, she knew, was the near-death experience she'd had. She'd been stupid, so incredibly stupid, and it had nearly gotten her killed. Success had made her careless, and the early part of the day had been filled with growing confidence in her ability to use the game's combat system to fight monsters and level up her character.

To make matters worse, she had been rescued by that infuriatingly smug Spriggan boy, and then condescended to by Diavel—both of them treating her as if she was some helpless, fragile thing they had to protect. The very thought nearly set her temper flaring again, and she had to force herself to calm down enough to think about what she was doing. The dive that she'd taken into one of the canals on her way home had left her feeling much less filthy and had actually been quite enjoyable—that is, until she'd felt what must've been a fish brush up against her leg, sending her clambering out of the water with a loud squawk. At least, she *hoped* that had been a fish.

Remembering what Kirito had told her about equipment durability, she tapped the leather chest guard the way he'd shown her and brought up the square purple window that showed its name and stats. As she suspected, in addition to being completely filthy it was near the point of breaking just like her rapier had. The pop-up said 17/250 with the first number in red, and she assumed that this meant it could only take 17 more… points? Damage, at any rate, and not much of it if 250 was its perfect condition. One or two more hits probably would've done it.

Sighing, she selected the option to remove it, then removed the rest of her clothing and equipment
until she stood in front of the mirror, examining herself. The system didn't seem to allow players to remove their base undergarments, so it was just as well that the water that had soaked her previous outfit didn't seem to affect these core items. It was almost as if they were there purely to affect her appearance for decency's sake.

Opening her game menu, she scrolled through her inventory menu and examined the items that Kirito had given her or which she'd received as drops before that incident. She didn't know how to judge them, and when she examined their stats it only showed her something called an armor rating and durability, but she reasoned that they had to be better than the starting equipment she'd been wearing—especially in the condition they were in.

One by one she tried selecting Equip from the icons that appeared when she tapped on the name of an item, and watched as it materialized on her body—fading in as any previous item faded out. As she kept cycling through the items, her anger and embarrassment began to fade and she found herself enjoying such a silly little thing. It was a bit like playing with a kisekae doll, and as soon as the thought occurred to her she grinned and started really getting into it, alternating quickly between two chestpieces and watching both her stats and her appearance change.

Okay, she thought. I'm starting to see where some of the fun is here. And if she was honest, she had to admit that when she'd been doing well against the low-level mobs earlier, it had been really fun once she'd gotten past her initial fears. She still felt a bit awkward swinging the rapier around, but her speed and reaction time felt… enhanced somehow, as if the game was judging what she could do by what her Agility stat said instead of by the capabilities of her physical body. And when she executed her «Linear» skill, the speed with which the system moved her body and shot her towards the target was something she could never have hoped to achieve in the real world. It made her feel a bit like a manga character who'd been given super powers. She wondered if it would get any more powerful if she yelled "Linear!" while she was using the skill, and decided against it since she hadn't seen anyone else doing anything so silly.

All in all, it was a feeling of empowerment that she could almost get used to. And it was almost enough to banish some of the nagging ache that was always there in the back of her mind, reminding her that she was a prisoner in this world and that she could die here—threatening to undo the strength that she'd begun to find.

When she was done, she posed in front of the mirror once more and smiled. She'd settled on a light, thin metal chest guard with an armor rating almost twice her old starting equipment, a pair of winding bronze bracers spiraling around her wrists which she'd picked for appearance as much as anything else, a pale blue tunic that came down to her knees and was secured with a black leather belt, and a pair of high-topped boots that seemed to increase her AGI slightly.

She looked the proper hero—a thought that nearly started her laughing at herself again. All that was missing was a new weapon, but she could take care of that in the morning. For the time being, sleep was a must.

When morning came, Asuna re-equipped the gear she'd selected the night before and set out to the commercial district of Parasel. She supposed she might be able to get a replacement for that cheap starting rapier if she went to the NPC shop she'd found before, but her experience the day before had taught her how important durability was—and she now had a lot of money burning a hole in her status menu, courtesy of that Spriggan boy.

She frowned as she found her thoughts drifting again to Kirito, grateful despite herself for the way he'd helped her. As rude and presumptuous as he'd been, he'd also saved her life and given her money and items—and asked nothing of her except that she fly with him as far as the castle so that
he wouldn't be attacked. Perhaps it was because she was a girl—so far she'd had to fend off more than a few male players who seemed to regard a pretty girl in a video game as some kind of rare animal they had to have in their party. But when she thought about it honestly, she couldn't recall him ever looking at her like that—as if she was nothing but so much meat. He'd been horribly, obviously embarrassed when she'd accused him of wanting to take advantage of her.

Asuna shook her head vigorously, forcing Kirito out of her mind and paying attention to where she was going as she almost walked off the edge of a sidewalk and into a canal. The commercial district was right in front of her, and when she looked around she could see more people here than when she'd been here before—there were a few players with what looked like mats of woven reeds who had items laid out in front of them, which she assumed must be for sale.

A few minutes of searching paid off as she found a lovely slender blade that matched her tunic. She couldn't remember what the stats on her cheap rapier had been, but when she looked at the status screen of the one this Imp player was selling, she saw the durability numbers of 2000/2000. She had to assume that meant it was considerably sturdier than the one that had failed her. It also had a stat she hadn't seen before—a minimum level of 3. When her eyes went up and to the left, she saw the number 3 in white beside her HP bar, and she remembered seeing the "Level Up" message twice while she was out.

"How much is this one?" she asked.

The scruffy man sitting cross-legged on his mat rubbed at his chin and looked up at her with dark violet eyes that seemed to be one of the dominant colors of his race. "It's not rare, but the AGI boost is decent. Call it 600?"

Asuna opened up her menu and looked at her status screen. The number 2517 glowed where her money was indicated; she had started the game with 100 and spent at least half of that on the starting equipment. It was extremely expensive compared to that junk, but she had no way to judge whether or not it was a fair price. Looking back down at the rapier and feeling a pang of longing, she made a decision. "I'll take it."

With a weapon at her side, she felt much more complete—less like she was missing an essential article of clothing. As soon as she noticed this feeling, she shook her head in mild disbelief. What am I becoming?

A soft tone sounded in her ear, and in her peripheral vision she saw a message icon from Diavel; it was marked as a system message—as a city-wide announcement. She focused and brought it up in front of her.

『Fellow players, by now you've heard the rumors of the murders that took place earlier just outside the city Safe Zone. Although the murders were perpetrated by at least two Imp players, it is important not to judge them all by these actions—least of all those who have sought refuge in our city from Salamander aggression. Unfortunately, the perpetrators of this crime are concealing themselves within said refugee population here in Parasel. We have also started seeing the Salamanders using groups of Imps working for them to sneak into our territory and ambush parties. We have no desire for hostilities with the Imps, who are just as much victims of this as we are—but we cannot ignore the risks. As a consequence, I deeply regret that we must revoke the protection of Parasel's Safe Zone effective at noon today for all Imp players, and ask that any who wish to remain to be sponsored by an Undine who can vouch for their peaceful intentions. This notice is being delivered to everyone within the city Safe Zone, so our resident Imps should be receiving it as well—with my sincere regrets for the Salamander actions which have made it necessary.』

When Asuna was done reading the message, her eyes refocused beyond it and met the wide eyes of
the Imp player who had just sold her the rapier. Before she could say anything to reassure him, he swept up his items and selling mat into his inventory screen and took off running the moment they disappeared. She checked the time, and saw that it was just after 11:30. Here and there she saw violet streaks of light slowly rising into the sky as other refugees—or were they?—decided they weren’t waiting until the deadline to leave. She had a hard time blaming them.

What would happen at noon? Would they just start killing any Imps that were still in the city and didn’t have a sponsor? She couldn’t imagine Diavel doing anything like that, but who knew what other players might do? People could do awful things when they were scared—this whole situation with the Salamanders was proof of that.

Just minutes ago the commercial district had been filled with conversation and dickering—friendly or not—as people went about their business. Now it was as if a dark blanket had fallen over it; the conversations were muted and players kept looking around suspiciously or over their shoulders, as if they expected Imp assassins to emerge from a nearby building or something similarly irrational. Asuna decided that she’d had enough, and headed down a side street towards one of the NPC vendors selling bread.

She wasn’t sure what it was about the sound that got her attention, and it was only the newly-hushed quality of the player conversations in the market that let her catch it in the first place. It was coming from the deep shadows of a narrow alley between two buildings, and when she peered into the dimness she could see a small form huddled against the wall. Something in that form or the choked sounds that came intermittently from it dredged up very recent memories of an Asuna not too different than herself who’d broken down under the pressure of her situation until pulled out of it by the kindness of a stranger.

Asuna ventured cautiously down the alley, and when she came close enough for the other person to notice, a girl raised her head and looked up at her. At least, she thought it was a girl. It was so dark in the alley that it was hard to tell anything other than that she was an Imp—her violet-red eyes seemed to catch what little light there was, and the girl made a frightened noise and shuffled away a little bit.

"It's okay," Asuna said quietly, crouching and holding up her empty hands. "I won't hurt you."

The girl barely seemed to be able to get words out through her trembling. And she was young—probably too young to be in the game; from the size of her and the sound of her voice, Asuna would've been very surprised if she was much older than 13. "A-and w-w-hat about when we're not s-safe here anymore?"

Stopping as she noticed the girl retreat whenever she drew closer, Asuna sat down and leaned against the wall the same way. "Then I still wouldn't hurt you. Why would I?" The girl shook her head and said nothing.

"Well, I won't. I'm Asuna. What's your name?"

Sniffling, the girl rubbed her eyes and looked back up. "Y-Yuuki."

Asuna started in surprise, eyes widening. "That's your name? Yuuki?" When the girl nodded warily, Asuna fought to contain her reaction, but eventually laughter burst through her smile. In answer to Yuuki's confused look, she said, "I'm not laughing at you, Yuuki. I'm..." She leaned a little closer, and stage-whispered unnecessarily. "Can you keep a secret? A really big secret?"

"Sure."

"Yubikiri?" Asuna smiled as she held up her pinky finger. Yuuki smiled too—the first time she’d
done so—and pinky-swear.

"I laughed because that's my name too—my family name, my real one. Yuuki Asuna."

The girl giggled, wiping her nose with her hand again. "Konno Yuuki. And you're right, that is funny."

Asuna held out her arm. "Come here, Yuuki, it's okay." Hesitantly, the girl scooted closer until Asuna could put her arm around her; Yuuki shivered and then leaned against Asuna. "I'm sorry you got stuck in this mess. Are your parents in the game with you?" Her arm tightened a bit as Yuuki shook her head and made a tiny mewling sound that might've been the word no. "Anyone?" Another shake of the head.

Swallowing the pity and grief she felt hearing this, Asuna reached over with her free hand and stroked the girl's hair. Yuuki hesitated for a moment before clunging to Asuna and burying her face in her shoulder. Holding the lonely little girl in her embrace, Asuna closed her eyes and tried to be stronger than she felt. "Well you've got me now, Yuuki. And I won't let anything happen to you."

Argo's eyes were closed, but her senses were elsewhere.

Most schools of magic had some form of tracer—that is, a spell familiar which would follow a person and report on what they saw and heard. The Cait Sith, who had no special affinity with any school of magic, instead had a child skill of the Beast Taming abilities unique to their race: Gokantsuki, or Sense-Possession.

It could be done with most animals, but few Cait Sith bothered to level it up due to the risks and limitations associated with it—the most serious of which being that while in "possession" of a pet, a player was oblivious to the surroundings of their own body, due to the Nerve Gear replacing the player's own senses with the input from their pet. In the beta, this had merely been an annoying disadvantage. Here in the Death Game of ALO, it was tantamount to an invitation to be killed.

To the best of Argo's knowledge, she was the only player ever to have come close to mastering it in the beta, and one of the few to use it on any regular basis. By this point she had become very good at finding hiding places to hole up while she checked in on one of her "spies". So while her real body was curled up deep within the hollow of an old tree far from the nearest dungeon or common hunting ground, her mind was seeing and hearing through one of her rats.

She was, in point of fact, spying on her own leader.

"We have to do this if we're going to break through to Arun," Raikouji said as she directed the small rodent to cautiously poke its head into his executive office. The ease of doing this was yet another reason she preferred small, simple creatures like these rats—she didn't have to have a contest of wills with them to get them to move. Tamers who dealt with combat-oriented creatures like fire drakes had to put a lot more effort into getting those intelligent creatures to do their will.

"Sir, to be honest I don't think we're ready. The average level of our group is barely 8, and you're talking about a boss." As the rat swung its tiny head to track the source of the voice, Argo could see a Cait Sith swordsman she hadn't met before—from the look of him, his group's main tank. Behind him were a pair of others, also unfamiliar to her.

He looked scared.

"A field boss, not an Yggdrasil boss," Raikouji said dismissively as he paced. "And I'm not asking you to fight it. You're there to scout. To make sure it's still in the same spot, and to get someone to
use their Identification skill to analyze it and make sure there are no surprises when we raid it.

Seriously, Thelvin, how hard is this?"

"I don't know," Thelvin said with a hard look. "You do. And that's sort of the point I'm making." He turned and addressed the others of his group who were present. "Fatewind, Issin, would you give me a minute?" As the two named players headed towards the door, Argo took advantage of the distraction and quickly nudged the rat to slink along the wall and hide under another table closer to the two remaining in the room, positioning it to hear more clearly.

When the door closed behind them, Thelvin rounded on his leader angrily. "The fuck is your problem, Rai? You know I've got a patrol group made up of newbies. There's not a single tester in the lot other than me. This is a job for one of the clearing groups; they've been leveling up more and training to take on bosses."

"Yes," Raikouji shot back in irritation. "And that's what they're going to continue to do. I don't want to risk our clearing groups scouting a boss battle."

Thelvin stiffened, ears flat against his head and tail slicing the air furiously. "In other words, we're expendable."

"Call it what you like. I call it your goddamn job. At least with you there, your group stands a good chance of getting the information we need and pulling back in one piece. If I send a group of complete noobs, we won't get anything back."

Anything, Argo noted silently. Not "anyone". You're such a dick, Rai. And I know exactly why you're doing this, even if Thelvin hasn't figured it out yet.

Thelvin seemed to take note of the same choice of words, his amber eyes burning as he stared at his leader. "You don't really give a shit whether we live or die, do you Rai? You just want your damn scouting data."

"Honestly, Thelvin? No. I'd really rather not lose a beta tester, but the most important thing here is to know for sure what we're facing so that we can clear the valley boss and get to Arun before the other races do. Other than protecting our territory, everything else is secondary until we reach the World Tree. Now are you going to do your job, or do I need to go find a group of noobs to do it for you?"

Still standing ramrod-straight, Thelvin stared at Raikouji for a few more moments before giving him an excessively, pointedly crisp salute and turning on his heel to leave. The only thing he could've done to make the implied insult clearer was to have goose-stepped on the way out. As soon as the door slammed shut, Raikouji swept the contents of the nearest table onto the floor in a fit of anger, his snarl of frustration accompanying the sounds of cups and plates as they shattered and dissolved into polygons.

"For fuck's sake, Thelvin," he muttered as he looked at the mess he'd just made. "Just shut up and get yourself killed already." Realizing the foolishness of the fit he'd just thrown, he sighed as he bent and began picking up the tray and silverware.

And came face to face with Argo's pet, which was hiding under the table he'd just assaulted.

Argo couldn't force the pet to say anything, but as Raikouji made a sound of surprise and disgust, its AI emitted a squeak on its own initiative and bolted for the front door. She tried to override it and guide it towards the more likely refuge in the nearby pile of pillows around Raikouji's work table, but the pet's AI had sensed imminent danger and in its "panic" state it wasn't listening to her.
The last thing she saw was a shadow as Raikouji's boot descended.

Having now met female players in two different factions other than his own, Klein decided that yes, he really had chosen the wrong race to play.

It was hard to think of the player in front of him as anything other than a catgirl. The only obviously feline features were her ears, tail and the tiny fangs she showed when she opened her mouth—the rest was human, or at least human-looking. But beyond that, she moved like a cat. Her tail seemed to have a mind of its own, moving and drifting in lazy motions that seemed to track her attitude at any given time; her ears twitched occasionally to track sounds and seemed highly mobile. Combined with her grace and diminutive stature, the overall effect was painfully cute.

Klein wasn't quite in love, but he really wished he had a phone number in this world to give out. The girl, for her part, seemed largely unimpressed once she got over the shock of seeing a Salamander, Imp and Sylph in the same party.

"Wish I could tell you where he is," Alicia said with upturned palms. "Truth is, I don't really know the guy. Seen him once, or someone who matches that description at least—he had a bow and was on border patrol duty."

"Great," Klein said. "Somehow we managed to avoid getting stopped by the one patrol party that would've been helpful."

Alicia laughed, tail following her in an arc as she spun in place and beckoned for Klein to follow her onto the massive bridge that lay at the base of the hill on which they were standing. "Come on. Let's head to Freelia and ask around. I'm sure someone will know your… what was his name?"

"Issin," said Klein and Kunimittz at roughly the same time. Klein went on. "Is that going to be okay? It would suck to get attacked somewhere that we can't defend ourselves."

"It's fine. Raikouji's got us keeping a close eye on the southern border, but pretty much anyone I know assumes that if you're in the city and nobody else is attacking you, you've probably got business here or are in someone's party. We're kinda laid back up here."

"That's good to hear," Klein said with considerable relief. "Things are pretty tense down in Sylph country."

Alicia's tail lashed once, hard, as she walked. "Yeah, well, they've got good reason. From what Sakuya said in her message, they've been getting hit by the Salamanders pretty much every day." Klein just barely caught the corner of her eye as she glanced back over her shoulder at him.

"Sorry," he said. "I wasn't involved in all that. I didn't exactly choose to—I mean, I chose to play a Salamander, but that was before—I mean, it's…"

Laughing at his discomfort, Alicia threw a backwards look that was slightly friendlier than the first. "It's okay," she said. "Nobody knew what was going to happen here when we made our characters. If anything, I give you props for having the guts to get out of there and go looking for your friends. It's pretty cool of you."

Rubbing uncomfortably at the back of his neck, Klein tried to move past being flustered at the unexpected compliment. "Yeah, well, they've been my buddies for years, and we were all supposed to meet up and form a guild again in this game. I couldn't just leave them."

Alicia's next look suggested that yes, he very well could've—and that she thought better of him for
Once their wings had all rested, they took to the air in order to cross the remainder of the bridge connecting Freelia with the mainland. It had been difficult to get a sense of its size from the ground, since it stretched so far as to almost disappear in the haze of distance. But from the air, Klein could see just how massive a structure it truly was. White stone arches rose every twenty meters from the water, supporting a paved span wide enough for three wagons to travel abreast. That span ran for what must've been well over a kilometer until it reached the island city, meeting the horizon like an illustration demonstrating how to draw in perspective.

Alicia seemed faster than Klein and his friends—undoubtedly due to her use of Voluntary Flight—but even capped at their cruising speed, it was only a matter of minutes to travel the length of the bridge. Klein could see yellow trails of light arcing above the city here and there as Cait Sith traveled from one place to another the more efficient way, and clusters of these flight trails could be seen here and there painting short-lived lines of color across the sky as groups headed out for patrols or questing.

"So Alicia," Klein said as they carefully maneuvered for a landing near an NPC weaponsmith. "I know Salamanders have fire, Dynamm says Sylphs are wind, and Kunimitsu uses darkness magic. What are Cait Sith good at?"

"Well, we don't really have any kind of elemental affinity, but we do have the ability to tame various kinds of animal mobs and use them as pets. At higher skill levels we can even train mounts for other players."

"Hey, that actually sounds pretty useful."

"It can be," Alicia said with a wink and a twitch of her ears as they worked their way through the crowd. "I can't wait til we start getting some people with leveled-up Beast Taming; it's a good source of cashflow for the faction. Plus, high-level dedicated Beast Tamers can solo really well with a combat pet."

Dynamm chuckled, giving Klein a swat on the shoulder to get his attention. "Hey, Issin never said anything about playing a pet class. He did mention he wanted to use a bow like in our last game, so maybe he really is the guy on patrol that she mentioned."

Alicia touched a fingertip to her lips thoughtfully. "Well, we do have better eyesight than most of the other races. But we're popular with people who want to play archers, so it could really be anyone. And you haven't heard from him yet?"

Klein shook his head. "We're using the same names we did in our old guild, but every time I try sending him mail I get some weird system message that says he's rejecting it."

Frowning, Alicia stopped in mid-stride and adopted a pensive look, displaying fangs as she lightly bit her lower lip. "Oh!" she squeaked suddenly. "I bet I know. There's an option for whether you want to get messages from people who aren't in your party, guild or friends lists. It's off by default; I bet he never set it."

Klein smacked himself in the forehead with the heel of his hand, suddenly feeling very dense. "That's got to be it. Someone showed me how to turn that off on the first day, and I forgot it was there. But then why hasn't he messaged me? He should be able to, right?"

Alicia shrugged. "Beats me. But I bet I know someone who can find out." She drew open her menu and navigated through it, hands poised in a typing position as she sent off a new message. "On my
map it looks like she's still a ways outside the city, but I should hear back before long. She knows everything. And what she doesn't know, she can find out—for a price.” Raising her gaze and grinning as she closed her menu with a practiced sweep of the hand, Alicia's eyes sparkled with a hint of teasing. "With everything you three have seen and been through on your way here, I'd be willing to bet you have plenty of information to barter. So here's some free advice: when you meet Argo, don't tell her everything you know for free. Use the info as bargaining chips to find your friend."

"It's like that, is it?” Klein was starting to take a dim view of how common this kind of mercenary attitude seemed to be in the face of their circumstances.

"Oh, don't get me wrong. Argo's awesome. Love her to death; she's one of my best friends. But she lives and breathes information. Tell her what you're looking for, find out what she wants for it, and see if you can save some money by offering news of your own. I think she'll especially want to know anything you saw while you were with the Salamanders."

While Klein nodded and tried to think of how to offer that kind of information without giving it away in the offer, Alicia's eyes darted to the side. "Oh, there she is. Hang on."

Reaching up and touching something within her view, Alicia's eyes flicked back and forth as she read the incoming message, getting wider by the moment. "Oh, that rat-fuck son of a—"

"Problem?” Klein asked, by this point doubtful that he was ever going to be able to pick up a party member without some sort of drama ensuing. He marveled at how he could immediately spot Alicia's change in mental state from the shift in body language; her ears were back and her tail moving in an agitated way that caused him to wonder if that was something she did on her own—and if so, how—or if the game was doing it for her.

"You said your friend's name was Issin, right? Isshin, spelled Ai-essu-essu-ai-en?"

"That's right," Klein confirmed as Alicia repeated his friend's name phonetically and then spelled out the English letters with which it was written, a vague sense of worry creeping up his back at the question. "What's wrong?"

In lieu of an answer, Alicia grabbed Klein's wrist and yanked him back in the direction they'd come, pushing brusquely through several groups of people before finding an open spot. As she let go of Klein and leapt straight up, bringing out her wings, she snapped, "Fly!"

Klein hesitated only long enough to make sure Kunimittz and Dynamm were right behind him, and then brought out his controller and followed his Cait Sith escort as quickly as he could accelerate. "Mind telling me what's going on?” He yelled over to her as he drew within shouting distance.

"Long story short, your friend's gotten caught up in Cait Sith politics and is in serious trouble. And if we tear a hole in the sky, we might have a chance of catching up with him in time."

"In time for what?” Klein asked, with a sinking suspicion that he knew already.

Alicia didn't turn to look at Klein. She simply kept her eyes in front of her, ears flattened to her head against the wind as she cruised, and said, "In time to keep him from being boss bait."
"Although a protected player's HP will not decrease within a Safe Zone unless they are currently in a duel, combat is still possible. Damage dealt to a protected player is converted into a knockback effect proportionate to the damage that would have been dealt by the attack, and physics forces created by any attack—the sense of impact, in other words—is unaffected. Players should be cautioned that while they may attack unprotected players without fear of taking damage in return, their target is not entirely without defensive options..."

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Safe Zone Combat»

9 November 2022
Day 4 - Morning

Argo had lost pets during Sense-Possession before. It wasn't pleasant. Aside from the transient feeling of disorientation that always accompanied transitioning between your own avatar and your pet, the abruptness of the transition when it was due to the death of the pet left a player in "stun" status for a short time as they mentally reeled from a sensory impact of an intensity not unlike getting hit by a truck.

But never before now had it been painful. It was, in point of fact, the first time Argo had ever felt anything approximating pain within the virtual world; impact and temperature could be uncomfortable, but damage always left a queer numbing sensation that she suspected was actually the system absorbing or suppressing painful stimuli in some way. She had no idea why that hadn't worked here, or why it had been changed—but if that was going to be the way of things going forward, it meant she'd have to be much, much more careful when "possessing" her pets.

Further proof that Kayaba hates the Cait Sith, she thought as she lay half-curled into a fetal position within her hiding place, twitching and forcing a guttural scream to come out instead as a muffled, drawn-out keening sound less likely to carry far. She could still feel the crushing weight of Raikouji's boot as it came down on her rat pet, the sickening sensation of its body being shattered before knocking her back into her own avatar as if someone had struck her in the forehead with a sledgehammer.

A soft, familiar noise that came from nowhere and everywhere caught her attention and drew her out of her state of shock. Opening her eyes, she focused on the flashing message icon and used it as a kind of touchstone to try to calm herself and drive out the lingering waves of pain. When at last she could uncurl her body, she rolled over onto her back and reached out with one trembling finger to open the message, eye scanning from side to side.

「Hey babe, got a fun one for you. Get this: Sakuya (you remember her, right?) sent over some Salamander named Klein with a Sylph and an Imp in his party, looking for a Cait Sith friend of theirs from IRL. Sounds like the start to a joke, right? A Salamander, a Sylph and an Imp walk into a bar... anyway, the cat's name is Issin, or something like that. Thin, medium height, short brown hair, probably an archer; might be in a patrol group. Think you can help a girl out? Klein's kinda cute for a Sallie, and you gotta love loyalty in a guy. ~Allie」

Argo couldn't decide whether to be exasperated at Alicia for chasing after a boy when they were all trapped in this deadly world, or stunned at the way that her friend's problem dovetailed with what she'd just witnessed. Alfheim might be hundreds of square kilometers of surface area, but it was a small world all the same, even with ten times the players as in the beta.

Her hands still shook; as she went to reply she fumbled the gestures a few times, then began carefully
tapping out an answer.

「Your boyfriend's got a serious problem. A few minutes ago—before the bastard killed my rat—I overheard Rai sending Thelvin out with a party of noobs to scout the valley boss, and one of the players in his group was named Issin. Thelvin was the name one of the testers who ran against Rai for leader. You do the math. -Argo」

Letting out a quiet groan along with a held breath as she hit Send, Argo shut her eyes tightly for a few seconds. "Raiko-pin," she whispered. "I am so going to burn you for this."

She needed to head south in a hurry, but her job wasn't done here. There was one more conversation she needed to have, and it was not one that filled her with joyful anticipation.

「Drop whatever you're doing and pay attention. I need to know everything you know about the boss in the Valley of Butterflies, and I need to know it NOW. -Argo」

While she waited for a response, Argo closed her eyes again and counted to ten, trying to clear her mind of the lingering trauma from the abrupt loss of her rat. Above and beyond their usefulness and the unpleasantness of the death-disconnect, she knew that she sometimes had a tendency to get too attached to her pets—they were, after all, just mobs; they weren't even really AIs in any proper sense of the word. Still, she could almost imagine each of them having a personality, and she had to give them names in order to distinguish between them in her own mind when she was maintaining more than one.

A new message icon broke into her train of thought; she was relieved for more reasons than one at the interruption, although her relief was short-lived as she scanned the reply.

「And a good day to you too, my dear. I'm afraid you're going to have to be a little more specific, though—I know quite a lot about the valley bosses. I was, after all, part of the joint clearing party between your race and mine. Also, do keep in mind the position this puts me in. -SR」

If Argo could've punched her UI, she probably would've taken a shot at it. She took a moment to purge the irritation she felt; anger was counterproductive. With the benefit of a clearer mind and steadier hands, Argo's reply went out in almost as little time as it took for her to read the message.

「Don't jerk me around, Skarrip. I don't have time for your games, and considering what your employer did to everyone here, your confidentiality clause is worth less than a slime's fart to me. Someone is going to die if I don't get some hard info right now, and you know I'll pay or trade you for it.」

「As always, your arguments are compelling and eloquent. Very well—a trade, then. I shall answer your questions about Fellrach the Ravenous. You, in exchange, will provide me with information of equivalent worth from your Salamander sources about where and when they plan to strike next. -SR」

She could almost hear Skarrip's smug tones as she read his message aloud, unconsciously imitating his voice. It tasted foul in her mouth. He'd always been a pretentious little twit in the beta, but he'd been a _useful_ pretentious twit. Something in him had changed after Kayaba had trapped everyone in this Death Game; he seemed to slip more and more into his character role every time she corresponded with him. He still had good information lurking somewhere in his head, but prying it out of him meant putting up with a ton of nonsense.

Argo didn't have to _like_ the people she did business with. But it helped smooth things along. She hesitated only a moment before sending a terse reply.
Asuna didn't really have any idea what was going to happen at noon when Imp players would no longer be protected by the Safe Zone in the city of Parasel. The uncertainty meant that whatever else she wanted to do with her day, the safest bet would be to return to her room with Yuuki and keep the girl out of sight until emotions cooled off, despite the fact that they were both very hungry. No one had harassed the two of them yet, but more than one player gave Yuuki ugly or suspicious looks, and Asuna was the recipient of a few such glares herself. She did her best to return those glares in kind.

Before heading back to the privacy of her inn room, Asuna decided that a little nourishment would probably do the both of them a lot of good. She guided Yuuki into an NPC kissaten and ordered tea and cakes for both of them, resigning herself to the extravagant splurge.

"I don't understand why they're so angry," Yuuki said bitterly as she cradled a cup of hot tea in her small hands. "I didn't do anything to them."

"No, you didn't," Asuna said gently. "But they don't know how to tell the difference between the players who want to hurt them and the players who don't, so they're suspicious of anyone who looks different." She took a sip of her own drink, felt the warmth spread through her and banish some of her unease. "How did you end up in here, Yuuki? Do you have a mom and dad who might be worried about you?"

Yuuki squeezed the cup of tea so tightly, hands trembling, that Asuna thought she might well break it. The girl wouldn't meet her eyes. "I don't want to talk about them," she said in a small voice that was choked with sadness.

"Okay," Asuna said quickly. "We don't have to. But does that mean you came in here all alone?"

A miniscule shake of the head; Asuna almost missed it. "I had my… a friend," she said, hesitating and quickly covering it. "But he… I mean, when all the Salamander people attacked, he…"

Oh, no. Asuna wanted to reach out and hug the poor girl to her, but they both still had teacups in their hands. Yuuki looked up at her through a veil of violet bangs that spilled out from beneath the crimson hairband she wore. "Did you mean what you said?" she asked. "I can stay with you, and it'll be okay?"

"I promise," Asuna said with a surge of ferocity. "And if anyone here tries to attack you, Yuuki, I'll fight them." And as soon as she said it, she realized how true it was: she would stand between this girl and Diavel himself if she had to, consequences be damned. The intensity of her protective feelings towards this young girl she'd just met surprised her—if she was honest with herself, it was as much outrage at the injustice of it all as anything else.

But the gratitude that radiated from Yuuki on hearing this filled Asuna with far more warmth than the tea she'd had. Yuuki impulsively leaned over and hugged her; Asuna could not find it in herself to care about the tea that spilled on the table when she did.

"I want to be strong like you," Yuuki insisted as she embraced her new friend.

Asuna was taken slightly aback. She almost protested that Yuuki had it all wrong, that she wasn't so strong as all that. But when she looked down into the girl's red-violet eyes and saw the faith and hope there, the words died in her throat. What this girl needed right now, more than anything else, was for someone to be strong for her. To make her feel safe, to tell her it was going to be alright, and to make her believe it. Asuna had never had a little sister, but at that moment she understood
perfectly how it must feel—and how she’d feel if Yuuki really had been her little sister and had been trapped in this world with her.

No, making her feel safe wasn’t enough. She needed to be safe. And if Asuna couldn’t protect her all the time, she needed to know how to protect herself.

"All right," Asuna said finally, smiling as she brushed a few locks of purple hair out of Yuuki’s face. "I’ll teach you what I know. But you know, Yuuki, you get stronger in this game by fighting monsters. That’s going to mean going outside where they are. And where other players are." As she said this, she looked up at their surroundings; there were no other players in the small shop where they sat, but she could see the bustle of foot traffic passing back and forth just outside the window.

For a moment, Yuuki looked again like a frightened little girl. But when the moment passed, something in her seemed to harden itself against whatever fear she felt; Asuna could see the change wash over her as the resolve in her voice seemed to age her by several years. "I don’t care," she said, lifting her chin. "I want to be strong like Asuna is. I want to go where you go. And I’m not safe anymore here in the city either, am I?"

Asuna just looked at the younger girl in amazement. Was that what she looked like to Yuuki? Was she seeing the same kind of expression of determination that she forced onto her own face, reflected back at her? Did she look like that herself, wearing that mask of strength like an unfamiliar coat three sizes too big?

Wrapping her arms around Yuuki once more and hugging her fiercely, Asuna patted her on the back before letting go and coming to her feet. "Okay, Yuuki. But the first thing we have to do is go shopping for equipment."

Yuuki bounced up from her chair so quickly that it skittered backwards and almost fell over. "Really? Can I have a sword? A really big sword?"

She had some idea of how adaptable younger children could be, but the contrast between Yuuki’s earlier timidity and her present eagerness nearly gave Asuna whiplash. She laughed and patted the top of the girl’s head. "You can have a sword if that’s what you really want, Yuuki. But are you sure you wouldn’t rather mostly use magic? That way you could stand in the back and blast the monsters from a safe distance."

Yuuki shook her head. "Nuh uh. If Asuna isn’t afraid to fight with a sword, I won’t be. I bet we’ll be the best heroes ever!"

Asuna smiled as the two of them exited the shop, holding hands. "If that’s what you want, I won’t stand in your way. We’ll be partners, then, you and I—side by side. And someday we’ll get out of this place and be friends in the real world, won’t we?"

She’d expected this to make Yuuki happy, but as soon as she said it she saw a cloud pass over the girl’s face, as if instead she’d just told her that she was never going home. "I guess, yeah," Yuuki said quietly after a moment, something that almost sounded like grief touching her voice briefly. Whatever it was passed before Asuna could ask what was wrong, and Yuuki looked up at her with a smile that might have been genuine. "Come on, let’s go look at swords!"

Yuuki’s enthusiasm was catching. Asuna grinned as she was all but pulled along by the younger girl in the direction of the market district, their laughter echoing off the walls of the surrounding buildings. Although there were still a fair number of unpleasant looks directed at them, something about the innocent and joyful demeanor of the two of them as they ran through the streets seemed to defuse some of the ire she’d witnessed before. She just couldn’t imagine someone looking at Yuuki
and seeing a threat.

The departure of most of the city's Imp players had left a hole in the market—Asuna hadn't realized just how many of the solo vendors had been Imps until struck by their absence. There were still a number of Undines vending their surplus loot or the weapons they'd crafted while grinding their Weaponsmithing skills, but the selection was more limited than it had been. It gave the place a feeling that was almost hollow—if she hadn't been there before, she might not have noticed; as it was, the contrast to only a few hours prior was jarring.

Yuuki was in the process of trying out a few practice swings with a long sword when a commotion on the other side of the market drew their attention. She could hear voices raised in anger and a stirring of unrest in the crowd as eyes began turning in that direction, and she frowned at the unsettling sound of conflict.

"Asuna?" Yuuki set down the sword she'd been trying and eased up on her tiptoes to try to see above all the much taller people. "What's going on?"

Asuna shook her head, a sense of unease growing within her as she too tried unsuccessfully to get a look at the source of the problem. "I don't know," she said as she took Yuuki's hand and guided her cautiously in that direction. "Let's find out."

Kirito had intended to get an early start, but the last few days had been exhausting and he'd forgotten to set an alarm before drifting off to sleep. Mentally kicking himself for the lapse, he blinked the grogginess out of his eyes and then noticed a flashing message icon—a city-wide announcement from the Undine leader.

What he read in there did not invest him with a strong desire to stick around.

It wasn't that he couldn't understand the reasons behind the abrupt change in policy. In Kirito's opinion, Diavel had been foolish and hasty in granting Imps what was effectively «Ally» status so quickly. But if the mood of the city was turning against Imp players, that kind of fear of outsiders could just as easily transfer to him—and there was no guarantee that most players, being brand new to the game, would even know how to distinguish a Spriggan from an Imp. It could get ugly, and it could do so in a hurry.

Kirito made a quick check of all his provisions and equipment, intending to get on with his journey as quickly as possible and make up for lost time. He sighed when he saw the durability on his Anneal Blade; it wasn't in any danger of breaking, but it was close to the halfway point and he had no guarantee that he'd be able to repair it again before it wore down—and he couldn't afford to risk breaking it.

The stares that he got when he came downstairs from his inn room seemed to validate his concerns, and made him acutely aware that any of the Undines he saw could attack him without fear of retaliation—his only choice would be to flee until he cleared the city limits. He was reasonably sure he could outfly just about anyone—especially anyone using the flight controller—but he wasn't comfortable staking his life on it recklessly. No one approached him, and he was just as glad for the breathing room.

He had just finished repairing his weapon at the NPC smith when his luck ran out. A sharp tap on the shoulder made him turn quickly to find several Undine players confronting him with severe expressions and folded arms. Had there not been a ceiling over his head he probably would've immediately taken flight without waiting to hear what they had to say; as it was he seriously considered making a break for it—the side of the smithy was open to the market, and he might've
had a shot at breaking free.

"What are you still doing here?" demanded the player who'd touched him, glaring at him from sea-green eyes and standing far too close to Kirito's personal space for his peace of mind. The player was young, maybe a few years older than Kirito himself, but that didn't really mean anything—the sword at his side would cut just the same.

Kirito did his best to put a lid on his anger and fear, and looked the other player in the eyes. "Doing business, and then leaving. I won't trouble you."

"Damn right you won't," said a second player, stepping around the other and blocking off Kirito's only potential avenue of escape. "This here's our city—we're protected here, and you aren't. You know what that means?"

"Better than you do, I'll bet," Kirito said, knowing the words to be a mistake as soon as they left his lips.

Three faces scowled at him with near-identical expressions, investing the Undine players with a sameness despite their wildly different hairstyles and builds. The foremost of them who'd spoken first gave Kirito a shove, pushing him back against the brickwork of the forge. Kirito could feel the heat crawling up his back, and under different circumstances the warmth might've almost been comforting.

"You're not so smart, are you, kid? I don't think you appreciate the position you're in. You were supposed to be gone half an hour ago, and now it's going to cost you. It's going to cost you that nice sword you've got on your back there."

"That's not going to happen," Kirito said flatly, resigning himself to the likelihood that these players weren't going to leave him alone. "So let's try a different idea: I leave. You don't harass me while I do. And I don't fly straight to the castle and tell Diavel that you three are keeping me from doing the job he paid me to do."

One of the players, a boy about Kirito's age with deep indigo hair in a conservative cut, looked uneasy; the other two laughed. "Nice try, kid," said the one who seemed to be the head of their group. "Like our leader's gonna hire an Imp player to do his work after that announcement he made earlier."

"I don't think he's an Imp, Gaitner," said the indigo-haired boy. "Wasn't the race that wears black called Spriggans or something?"

"Spriggans," Kirito said, nodding without taking his eyes off Gaitner. "You should listen to your friend."

"That's even worse," Gaitner said, hand on the hilt of his sword as his eyes narrowed dangerously. "At least the Imps had our leader's permission to be here before today. If you're not even one of them, you've really got no business here. I'll bet you're a spy!"

"You need to think about what you're doing, Gaitner," Kirito said with far more calm than he felt as he subtly adjusted his center of gravity. They were beginning to draw a crowd, and there was no way the situation was going to end well if it continued on this course. "Can you live with murdering another person?"

Gaitner scoffed, although there was a touch of doubt in his eyes. "Only gullible fools believe that crap about the Nerve Gear microwaving our brains. Now do the smart thing and give me that sword
It was one of those moments where time seemed to slow to a crawl, and Kirito's awareness of things seemed to heighten until he felt like he could hear the faint tinkling of metal buckles and armor plating as players shifted their weight, the sussuration of clothing, and even the sounds of individual birds and insects in the stillness and hush that fell across the onlookers. He could pick out each of their expressions and moods without trying; had a good idea of exactly which of them were looking on him with sympathy and which shared the anger and xenophobia of his harassers. His gaze passed briefly over a familiar face; the Undine girl he'd saved the day before was there with an Imp player who seemed far too young to be in the game in the first place. Asuna, that had been her name—and from her conflicted expression, she didn't seem to know what to make of this conflict.

Kirito's eyes only left Gaitner for a few beats as he took in all of this, and when they returned they had hardened into decision and determination that expressed itself in one single word: "No."

That one word crossed the air between them and triggered a dangerous gathering of storm clouds on Gaitner's face as his sword came free of its scabbard. "Wrong answer," he said as he lunged and swung the long sword in an overhand chop.

Kirito knew his options were limited. Here in the Safe Zone of Parasel, the HP of Undine players would not decrease no matter what he did; he could be the highest-level player in the game wielding rare weaponry from deep within Yggdrasil's dungeon, and even the most powerful multi-hit sword skills or the most potent combat magic would do no damage to them.

He, on the other hand, had no such protection.

But doing damage wasn't the only way to defeat someone. And Gaitner hadn't used a sword skill; probably hadn't thought he needed to—his attack was an ordinary swing of his weapon, and it was slow. As the blade came down, Kirito's hand flew up to his own sword and drew about a foot of it from the scabbard on his back while turning and ducking his shoulder. Steel rang as Gaitner's blow struck the glossy black metal of the Anneal Blade's exposed length, and as the other player's weapon rebounded up from the deflection, Kirito let go of his sword and let it slide back into the scabbard, grabbing Gaitner's sword arm with the newly-freed hand and his attacker's belt with the other. A twist of the hips and a shuffle-step turned Gaitner's forward momentum into a disadvantage, and Kirito used that momentum and the STR that he'd been increasing to hurl the other player over his shoulder and into the forge against which they'd cornered him.

A protected player's HP might not decrease from damage, but their senses were unaffected. Gaitner howled like a banshee as he dropped into the red-hot coals; the burning would cause no real pain, but the heat would be nearly unbearable—and he didn't seem to have the presence of mind to get over the shock of what had happened and climb out.

The immediate threat dealt with, Kirito spun to face the other two players who'd accosted them. The dark-haired boy was backing away, eyes wide and mouth moving soundlessly, but the third was already charging at Kirito and tackled him around the waist, slamming his head into the waist-high brick wall of the forge. The impact stunned Kirito, and in his peripheral vision he could see a tiny amount of HP lost from the blow. He grabbed his attacker's wrist to stop an incoming punch, and tried to grab the other arm as the Undine went for the dagger at his side. Accompanying all of this was the ghastly music of Gaitner's screams as he struggled to pull himself out of the coals.

Then, with the sound of a sword skill activating, a flash of purple light momentarily blinded Kirito. There was an explosive sound and a harsh jerk; a great weight was lifted from his chest. It was followed almost immediately by a crash and the cacophony of what sounded like pieces of metal clattering to the floor. When his vision cleared, Kirito saw the Undine girl from before standing over
him, a new light blue rapier held out in front of her and an expression of resolve on her face. Turning his head, he could see the player who'd been on top of him picking himself up from a pile of armor that had been on display before he went crashing into it.

"Are you people crazy?" Asuna yelled as she brandished the rapier. "He didn't do anything! Now cut it out!"

The boy with the dark blue hair was gone, and the assailant that Asuna had apparently knocked off of Kirito was well on his way to disappearing into the crowd. Gaitner seemed to have finally dragged himself out of the forge, and was curled up on the floor and shuddering as his clothes smoldered. His eyes were wild as they fixed themselves on Kirito from where he lay. "I-I'm g-going to f-f-fucking kill you…"

"You'd better get out of here," Asuna said to Kirito without lowering her weapon. "Before he gets up."

Kirito needed no further encouragement; he was already coming to his feet. He looked at Asuna with wide eyes, down at Gaitner as the man started to shakily push himself upright, and then back at the girl who seemed to have saved his life. "Thanks. I—"

"Don't," she said, not turning to look at him. "This makes us even."

Not being in a position to argue, Kirito nodded once, took three running steps to get clear of the smithy, and shot into the air as his wings burst from his back and hummed into motion.

"Fellrach the Ravenous," Alicia said, raising her voice as she leapt into the air and took flight again, their brief rest stop finished.

"Fe-whozawhat?"

Having to pay attention to where she was going spared Alicia from the temptation to roll her eyes at Klein as she slowly sounded out the name. "Ferurakku za Rabinasu. Like most boss names, it's in English; it means Donshoku no Ferurakku. That's the boss that spawned in the Valley of Butterflies during the beta, and it's an apt name."

"And you're telling me your leader sent Issin to go fight this thing?" Klein's tone was outraged. If Issin didn't make it out of this…

"Him and his party—don't know how many, but they've got one veteran player with them. They're supposed to just scout the boss, but if Rai didn't warn them about what they're going to be facing, they could be in serious trouble."

"Did you fight this thing? In the beta, I mean?"

Alicia shook her head. "No, but I heard what the boss was from the clearing group that did. It's a nasty, nasty mob." And then she did turn her head slightly, enough to dart her eyes to the side and catch Klein's gaze. "I hope you're not arachnophobic."

"Kumo-kyoufushou?" Klein thought, face going pale. "Uh, please tell me that doesn't mean what I think it means."

Alicia laughed; there was no real humor in it. "Suck it up, Klein. We're almost there." Her body bent as she altered her course slightly, aiming due eastward into the mountain range that dominated that horizon. Klein glanced to either side to make sure Kunimitz and Dynamm were still right on his
heels, and followed suit.

As they approached the mouth of the valley that cut through the otherwise impenetrable mountains, Klein immediately understood where it got its name. Grassy plains began to give way to thicker and more lush vegetation where small brooks trickled down from the highlands to either side of the valley, and the ground was almost carpeted with flowers and scattered stands of trees in every possible shape or description. The air was atwitter with motion as butterflies—along with other non-aggro insects—flitted from perch to perch or simply rode the thermals in the air, ranging from the size of Klein's fist to nearly the size of a horse.

It could very well be an outstanding place to grind; none of the mobs seemed to have the red cursor that meant they'd attack if you so much as looked at them funny, although here and there the dark mouths of caves lurked ominously in the underbrush and suggested that not everything in this valley was visible at a glance.

Alicia pointed excitedly. "There! I see their flight trails."

Klein couldn't see anything, no matter how hard he strained. "You sure? All I see is empty valley. No boss, no nothing."

"Trust me," Alicia said. "My eyesight's better than yours. That's gotta be them. Come on!" Her arms pressed tighter to her sides, and Klein felt a blast of displaced air as she shot forward in a burst of acceleration.

"Hey, wait! I can't do that! Wai... oh, hell. Kunimittz, Dynamm, fast as you can go!"

As they raced onward, Klein did catch sight of the yellow trails of light that Alicia had mentioned—far, far ahead. Alicia was rapidly putting distance between herself and Klein's group as well, and as he fought to keep sight of her he frowned in puzzlement as he saw the flight trails of the other group suddenly disappear. Moments later, Alicia's as well. It looked like she'd run ahead and caught up with them in time to warn them; they all must have stopped. As he approached, he could see them all hovering in the air near each other, gesturing wildly.

No, not gesturing, he thought suddenly in alarm. Thrashing. He was close enough now to see just how wrong their movements seemed, and before long he could also hear them yelling. Alicia waved at him frantically with one arm as if shooing him away.

It was only the faintest, most fleeting glint of light. In any other circumstances he would've thought nothing of it. But between the way the Cait Sith were moving and yelling, and what Alicia had told him before, something fell into place in his mind and he jerked back on the controller and flipped his legs under him to halt himself, yelling for Kunimittz and Dynamm to do the same.

Now that he was hovering in place, he could just barely see the thin, nearly invisible filaments stretching across the valley and criss-crossing each other, interwoven into a coarse organic net that occasionally caught the sun just right and glistened briefly with reflected light. Nobody had warned the Cait Sith, and they had flown straight into the web.

"Klein!" Issin's eyes were wide as he fruitlessly tried to yank himself free of the trap, one arm pinned to his side by the twisted strands of spidersilk. "Oh my God, it really is you! Get us outta here, man!" Alicia was snarling and slashing at the webbing with the steel claws on her forearms, but there was fear in her eyes as her efforts served only to further entangle herself.

Klein's own fears took form as he prepared to swoop in and try to help. Far below, on the valley floor, a large sinkhole sat yawning underneath the center of the web, and horror filled him as four
pairs of glowing red eyes loomed out of the darkness. All eight of those eyes were attached to a massive brown form the size of a school bus that lunged from the depths of the cavern, landing with deceptive delicacy on the surface of the web and scuttling across it. Alicia and a few of the other Cait Sith screamed as they caught sight of it, and Klein's heart dropped into his gut when he focused on the giant spider and saw not one but three green HP bars curling around its left side.

Kunimittz was the first to act. Following a series of chanted syllables, a bolt of seething violet-black energy leapt from his free hand and struck the spider squarely between the eyes; Klein caught a fleeting glimpse of a status effect icon beside its HP gauge as it emitted a high-pitched shrieking sound and tumbled back to the ground with a booming crash. Not wanting to waste the window of opportunity, he flew as close as he dared to Issin. He slashed at the webbing with his cutlass, but the strands actually seemed to stick to it—he had to use a sword skill just to free his weapon.

As he glanced in Alicia's direction, he saw her freeze for a moment and flick her eyes to the left. With her free hand, she reached up and did something—it looked like she was using her menu or receiving a message—and suddenly she yelled, "Klein! The webs are flammable!"

"Get ready to fly, Issin!" Klein shouted as he raised a hand, realizing what Alicia's advice meant. "Hitto kachi rakun!"

Motes of light stirred around Klein as he spoke, forming into arcane symbols which circled around him and froze in place when the incantation was completed. He felt a warm rush down his arm, and from his fingertips a spray of fire fanned out as he waved his arm in a rough oval. Some of the flames licked at his friend, singeing clothes and doing a small amount of damage, but little bursts of blue fire raced away from Issin as the web filaments ignited and evaporated. As Klein clenched his fist to terminate the spell, Issin started to fall forward, and then caught himself as his wings emerged and bore him quickly away from the web.

Klein's jaw dropped. Issin hadn't used the flight controller. "Wait, you can—?"

"I'll show you later!" his friend shouted. "And thank—watch out!"

The warning came just in time. Klein caught motion out of the corner of his eye and instinctively veered to one side, swinging his cutlass around and deflecting an impaling attack from one of Fellrach's legs. Each legtip was like a spear point, and it started to lunge at him again. Before it could strike, a bolt of yellow light lanced in from behind him and struck the spider boss, leaving the afterimage of an arrow embedded in one of its eyes and produced another grating shriek from the mob. Kunimittz and Dynamm flew into the opening, parrying stabs of the spider's forelegs with sword and staff, respectively.

Klein knew they wouldn't be able to sustain that defense forever—not against a boss. They were buying him time, and Klein fervently hoped they didn't end up buying it with their lives. Klein maneuvered over to where Alicia was still trapped, flailing and slashing and yelling as if she could free herself with sheer outrage. "Hold still and brace yourself!" he yelled, raising his hand again.

Eyes wide, Alicia curled herself up as tightly as she could. A moment later, another fan of flame burst from Klein's fingers and washed across the entrapping web, little blue incandescent flashes flaring up as the barely-visible silken prison curled away and evaporated into acrid smoke. Alicia's wings sparkled immediately into action; she shot away from the web and smacked directly into Klein in what was almost a tackle, arms wrapped around him. Klein very nearly dropped his scimitar in shock as she pecked a kiss onto his cheek and then kicked off of him, taking flight again. "Get the others!"

That, Klein saw, was going to be easier said than done—although his three friends were putting up a
valiant effort to fend off the boss, they were doing very little damage to it and had no way to really keep it away from the Cait Sith who were still trapped in the web, short of trying to keep its attention by drawing aggro. One of the helpless Cait Sith screamed as one of Fellrach's hind legs stabbed into him again and again, and even another startlingly accurate shot in the eye by Issin wasn't enough to keep the victim from bursting into a flare of yellow flames, leaving behind the dim flicker of his similarly-colored Remain Light. The screams echoed off the sides of the valley for several seconds afterward, and not all of those screams were those of the dead player.

Klein glanced at his HUD, and swore loudly. His Fire Bolt spell didn't use a great deal of MP, but he couldn't target the hair-thin filaments of webbing with it. The Flame Spray that he'd been using to free people had an area effect, but it drained MP quickly—and the blue bar beneath his HP gauge was more than half gone. He looked to the others for help, but it was taking the combined efforts of Alicia and his three friends just to fend off the boss and keep it from killing anyone else. And their HP was rapidly dropping from blocking damage.

He had enough mana to free one person, maybe two, and there were still four Cait Sith trapped. They were running out of time.

A pair of terrified shouts yanked him out of his indecision. He looked in the direction of the sound in time to see Dynamm and Alicia go spinning backwards as Fellrach slashed with both front legs and knocked them away, their HP nearly to the red zone. It took them a few moments to regain control of their flight, but at least it carried them out of immediate danger.

However, it also left Fellrach with an opening. The spider boss charged through the gap and prepared to attack the players immobilized in its web.

And then, in a bolt of inspiration, Klein realized what he had to do. As he raised his left hand and began chanting the words, he accelerated to his top speed and prayed that it would work.

Author's Note 12/23/14:

Thank you to everyone who has read, reviewed, faved and followed this story so far! It really means a lot to me that people are enjoying it so much, and I read every single review you leave. I have the broad strokes of the plot fairly well defined from beginning to end, and a chapter-by-chapter outline for Part 1 (into which we are currently a little over halfway)-so while I may not always be able to update as frequently as I have been, rest assured that I have a very good idea of where this is going and every intention of getting there.
"Beyond the automated actions of the «Crime Prevention Code», Faction Leaders have the power to unilaterally issue a variety of consequences to those of their faction who transgress against them. These range from the ability to levy arbitrary fines, all the way up to «banishment» and «exile». A banished player is stripped of their rights and privileges as a citizen of their home city, and no longer receive the protection of that city’s Safe Zone. Exile is far more serious, and is the ultimate punishment that a Faction Leader can deal out: the offending player is not only banished, but set as an «enemy» of the faction so that even the NPC guards in their former home city will attack them on sight.”

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Crime and Punishments»

9 ~ 11 November 2022
Day 4: Afternoon

Klein didn't know precisely how far the web of Fellrach the Ravenous stretched, or how it was secured. For all he knew, the trap laid by the spider boss floated in the air unmoored to anything whatsoever, and the idea that had flashed through his head would simply waste the last of his MP rather than saving the four Cait Sith still trapped in the sticky, nearly-invisible strands.

It didn't matter. There simply wasn't any more time to think it through or try to come up with something better. Klein could see Alicia and then Dynamm get control of their fall, but both hesitated to rush back in—and with their HP gauges nearly to the red zone, he couldn't blame them; one more solid blow would deplete the last of their health and cause their avatars to erupt into colored flames. And with the lack of any revival items or spells this early in the game, their Remain Lights would dissolve into nothing a minute later and end in their deaths both here and in the real world.

As Klein accelerated rapidly to his maximum speed, Fellrach skittered upwards across the web and through the gap left when it knocked aside the two defenders, rearing back and preparing to strike at the nearest Cait Sith. The player—a young boy with brown hair that flowed past his triangular feline ears almost to his shoulders—gave a cry and tried to get his spear up in front of him, narrowly deflecting the first strike. The impact caused him to shake back and forth in the web, and he nearly lost the grip on his spear.

Klein had had to sheathe his cutlass in order to free up a hand for casting while in motion, but at this point the weapon wouldn't have made any difference anyway. The relatively short spell incantation transformed words into arcane light, and the heat and energy flowed down his left arm and erupted from his fingertips in a sheet of flames that would continue as long as he held his hand that way. Still accelerating, he skimmed about a meter away from the web and shot past and in between Fellrach and the trapped players, the curtain of fire from his outstretched hand cutting through the web like a white-hot knife through plastic wrap.

An impact jolted his leg and almost knocked him into the web; he could see his HP drop and had to assume that the boss had struck him as he passed. As soon as he swooped clear, his MP nearly depleted, he pulled up and terminated the spell, turning to see if he'd managed to pull off what he thought he would.

Tracers of blue like butane flames still flickered away from where he'd fanned the spell across the web, a foul odor stinging his nostrils with every strand that ignited and disintegrated from the heat. He could hear a sickly creaking and ripping sound, and although the web itself was almost impossible to spot except where it caught the light, he could imagine what was happening as Fellrach
flailed its legs, a huge section of the web peeling back under the spider's weight below where Klein's flames had cut a long gash across the strands.

"Use your weapon skills to get the rest free!" Alicia shouted at Klein's friends. "If you just hack at the web it'll trap your weapon, but sword skills should cut through!"

As high as they were, Fellrach took a long time to fall to the ground. When it struck, it was with a heinous shriek and a thunderous impact that scattered dirt and foliage in every direction. The spider's legs thrashed and twitched as it fought to right itself, and as Klein focused on the mob, he could just barely see that the falling damage had cut off more than half of one of its HP bars.

It was worth remembering the tactic if they ever faced it again, but even with that slight advantage there was still no way the nine of them had any chance of taking out this boss—not at their level, and certainly not with everyone hurt to one degree or another. Klein turned quickly and went to help Alicia and his crew free the remaining Cait Sith, expending the very last of his MP on a brief burst of flame that loosened the last of the strands trapping the young spearman who'd almost been impaled.

The last player came free from their entrapment just in time. Alicia had to rapidly zip backwards to avoid a hissing, acrid stream of venom that shot past her from below. Klein supposed it made sense that the spider had ranged attacks—otherwise, players could simply fly out of its reach and cheese the battle with spells from afar. But it would've been a lot more comforting if the game designer had overlooked that little detail for once. Needing no further urging, the group of players all flew westward as fast as they could, zigging and zagging their flight to avoid any parting shots from Fellrach until the boss disappeared completely from view.

Even so, they continued flying at top speed until they were well clear of the valley, landing in the vast plains east of Freelia once the first players started running out of charge in their wings. Everyone sat, lay down, or simply sprawled in an undignified way on the ground, some breathing heavily out of reflex despite the fact that their avatars didn't require oxygen. Klein himself sat with his legs almost drawn up to his chest, head in his knees as the ebbing adrenaline in the bloodstream of his real body left him feeling completely drained. The whole battle couldn't have taken more than a few minutes, their travel time getting there less than an hour, but Klein felt like they'd been in pitched combat all day.

A soft presence against his back pulled him out of his thoughts, a pair of slender arms snaking around and lacing the fingers of their hands in front of him. A chin came to rest on his shoulder, and Klein could feel someone's warm breath on his ear and cheek. "Thank you," Alicia whispered. "You could've just saved your friend and left us."

Heat rose to Klein's face, about a hundred possible responses racing through his head and colliding with each other, resulting in a multi-car pileup in his brain that caused his train of thought to come screeching to a halt. Bereft of reason or the benefit of intelligent thought, his mouth continued forward on autopilot to the best of his ability.

Which is to say: Klein gibbered incoherently.

"I uh… er… I couldn't just… I mean, uh… that's very… um… could you say that again?"

A soft giggle sounded in his ear, and Klein could not manage to care too much that he was being laughed at. There was a warm, soft person pressed against his back and she was hugging him and it was very… very. It was very. That was the best Klein's brain could come up with under the circumstances.

"For crying out loud, Klein, get a room!"
Klein's head jerked towards the voice, and he glared about as well as he could considering how beet-red his face was. "Shut up, Dynamm."

Several others laughed, and Klein grumbled without looking to see who they were. Alicia's lips brushed his cheek as she slipped away, laughing. Klein tried to pretend that no, that really wasn't her tail that had touched him in an excessively friendly way as she left.

The sound of a cleared throat brought Klein's head back up, and he rose quickly to his feet as one of the Cait Sith—a tall swordsman in light plate with sleek black hair and a shield slung on his back—approached and bowed deeply to him. "I'm Thelvin, and I'm the leader of this party. Whoever you are—Klein, your friend said?—I can't thank you enough for what you and your friends just did for us."

Still a bit flustered from Alicia's display of affection, Klein rubbed at the back of his neck and gave a weak chuckle. "Klein, yeah. And no biggie. I came to get my buddy here," he said with a jerk of the thumb at Issin, "but it wouldn't have been right to just bail on you guys."

Thelvin glanced over at Issin. "I suppose that means you'll be leaving us, then." He sighed. "You're lucky to have a friend like this, Issin."

Issin came over and punched Klein in the arm. "He's ugly as a tengu, but he's always been a great guild leader." He laughed as he dodged the wild swing that accompanied Klein's outraged complaint. "But yeah, I don't see Harry or Dale with him, so I guess we'll be heading out after this. Sorry man."

Shaking his head, Thelvin waved off the apology. "It's okay. I'm not going to keep you from friends that care that much about you. Everyone can use all the friends we can get in this world, considering the circumstances. You planning on coming back at any point?"

"We might," Klein said. "We were going to re-form our old guild once we all got back together, and strike out on our own. We don't want to be part of all the political crap going on, just fight to clear the game."

"You may not want any part of Alfheim politics," Alicia said as she slipped an arm into Klein's, "but you've already stepped into them without realizing it." She looked meaningfully at Thelvin. "I don't think this was Rai being stupid or callous, Thelvin. I think he was trying to kill off a rival."

Thelvin's hands balled into fists, his face darkening. "I'd wondered. Raikouji was a bit of a conniving asshole in the beta, which was one of the reasons I put my name in for the vote. Couldn't stand the idea of seeing him as faction leader. But when he won, I just shrugged and decided to make the best of it. I didn't think he'd go this far, not with the stakes being what they are." He stared at Alicia with such an intense gaze that she had to look away. "Are you sure about this? And I mean absolutely sure. Because if Raikouji really did try to get me and my entire group killed off… that's unforgivable. Keppino died out there because Rai didn't warn us what we were running into. The rest of the Cait Sith wouldn't stand for it if they knew."

"Argo told me," Alicia said simply. "And I believe her."

Thelvin hung his head and sighed. "Damnit, Alicia. If you'd said any other name, I would've asked for more proof."

"I know. But she said she overheard him talking about it. Have you ever known Argo to be wrong about something like that? Or to lie to us?"

"I don't really know Argo," Thelvin replied, tapping at his armor and checking its condition in the
resulting pop-up. "Not like you do. But I don't think there's a Cait Sith beta tester who doesn't know her by reputation, even if they haven't done business with her directly." He glanced over at Klein, realizing that they were leaving him out of the conversation. "We should probably part ways after this. I'm not sure how this is going to go down once we return to Freelia, but I doubt Raikouji's going to go quietly—and as outsiders, you'd have no protection in the city."

Alicia made a disappointed face; Klein caught it out of the corner of his eye and marveled how she could manage to make even a pout look adorable. He didn't know if she was seriously attracted to him or if that was just her personality, but it presented him with an uncomfortable dilemma. A sharp blow on the back sent him staggering forward and jerking away from her grasp; he looked back and saw Dynamm standing behind him and shaking his hand as if it stung.

"That'll teach you to smack someone in armor," Klein grumbled, glaring daggers at his old friend.

"Come on, Leader. Harry and Dale are waiting for us. If we ever make it back to Freelia, you can claim your hero's reward then." Alicia laughed and swatted Dynamm half-heartedly, covering her mouth; Klein flushed again.

"That's amazing," Kunimittz said, his black eyes twinkling. "I haven't seen Klein that red since that girl on our track team—"

"Leaving now!" Klein said loudly, clapping a hand over his friend's mouth and dragging him back to the others in what almost amounted to a chokehold.

"Explain yourselves," Diavel said curtly from behind his desk, annoyance plain on his face.

Asuna bristled at her leader's tone, and folded her arms across her chest. She didn't care for being summoned by anyone, nor did she appreciate being called to the carpet for something that hadn't even been her fault. She hadn't been the one harassing that Spriggan boy, Kirito. She hadn't been the one to attack a visitor to the city without provocation. Only Yuuki's presence at her side kept her from unloading on Diavel with exactly what she thought of the whole situation in a very colorful way; Asuna bit her tongue to hold back the words she really wanted to use.

"He and his friends were attacking some boy," Yuuki said, indicating the Undine man standing several paces to their left. His clothes were scorched and in terrible condition, and it seemed like his armor was the only thing keeping the outfit together. The man clenched his fists and glared over at Yuuki, who thrust out her chin defiantly at him as she went on. "It wasn't fair. He couldn't fight back. So Asuna stopped the fight.

"Look at me! Do I look like he couldn't fight back?" the man snapped. "He was a spy!"

"He was not!" Yuuki and Asuna said at virtually the same time. It wouldn't have been worth a laugh if the situation had been any less tense. Asuna couldn't stop herself from piling on. "And it serves you right!"

"That's enough!" Diavel said, impatience rising in his voice as he interrupted before the argument could escalate. Squinting and pinching the bridge of his nose, he sighed and addressed the man with the scorched clothes more calmly. "How do you know he was a spy?" And then, to Asuna: "And how do you know he wasn't? One at a time, please. Gaitner?"

"He was sneaking around the market, and he mouthed off to us. He's not one of us; he wasn't even an Imp—what business did he have being here?"

"That's not a reason to attack someone," Diavel said evenly, his forehead creasing as he frowned.
"Just because someone from another race comes to our city doesn't mean they're automatically an enemy. And need I remind you of what happens when someone dies in this game? You could've killed that player, Gaitner. A living, breathing human being. Someone with a family on the outside." When Gaitner opened his mouth to protest, Diavel cut him off with a sharp sweep of his hand. "No, you're done talking. Asuna, did you know this person? Or have some other reason to put yourself in the middle of this?"

"If you'd bothered to ask me first," Asuna said shortly, "I would've told you that it was that Spriggan who came with me to see you yesterday."

"Kirito?" Diavel said in surprise. Gaitner paled, perhaps realizing that he'd stepped in it and that the boy really had been someone known to his leader. "This is the Spriggan we're talking about?" When Asuna nodded, he turned back to Gaitner, who took a step back when he saw Diavel's expression. "That player was here on legitimate business, Gaitner. I hired him. I appreciate that you thought you were defending our city, but that's not how we do things around here. If in the future you think a stranger is up to something, you call a guard." He leaned forward, fixing the man with a gaze that made him shrink back. "But if I ever again hear of you attacking someone in this city without provocation, I will banish you. Are we understood?"

"What about her?" Gaitner demanded, pointing rudely at Asuna and Yuuki. "She attacked my friends! And she's running around with an Imp!"

"A GIRL!" Diavel roared, slamming his palms on the desk as he stood abruptly, causing everyone in the room to jump in surprise. Asuna could not recall ever hearing him raise his voice in anger like that, and from the expressions of the others in the room neither had they—even Jahala looked shocked as the words echoed off the walls. More quietly, but no less angrily, he went on. "Not an 'Imp', Gaitner—a girl. A little girl who can't be much older than what, twelve?" Diavel gestured dismissively, disgustedly. "Get out of my sight. Jahala, please escort him to the castle gates."

When the door shut, it left Asuna and Yuuki alone in Diavel's office. Before Asuna could ask if they could go, Diavel spoke up. "Gaitner might be a distasteful person, Asuna, but he raises an uncomfortable issue." He nodded towards Yuuki as he approached them, hands clasped at the small of his back. "It's going to be... problematic if she stays here in the city with you. People will talk. Some of them will do more than talk."

"Let them talk," Asuna replied, reaching over and taking Yuuki's hand in hers to reassure her. "And if anyone does more than that, I'll deal with them myself."

Diavel's smile had a hint of wistfulness to it. "How you've changed in the few short days since I met you. I knew you were stronger than you seemed."

"I haven't changed," Asuna stated, her voice even. "I'm still the person I was when you found me. I'm just not afraid anymore." She glanced in Yuuki's direction. "And I have someone I have to take care of."

"There's no dissuading you from this course, is there?"

The look Asuna gave Diavel as she turned to face him again was so blistering, it almost made him retreat a pace. "What would you have me do? Abandon her? Send her back to the Imp home city? To the Salamanders? None of those things are going to happen."

"Please," Yuuki said suddenly, her expression pained. "Don't fight over me. I don't want to be a burden—"
"You're not," Asuna said quickly to her. Giving Diavel a fierce look, she added, "no matter what anyone else says."

Closing his eyes briefly, Diavel took a deep breath and nodded. "I understand. It's just..." He took two steps, a third, and placed his hands on Asuna's shoulders. Her mouth dropped open slightly, but she found herself unable to move or muster words as he looked down at her. "I worry about you, Asuna. I worry that you're compensating for your fears by taking these risks. I can only protect you up to a certain point, and with a vote every thirty days, there's no guarantee that I'll always be leading the Undines. A future leader might take a much harsher view on your actions or the company you keep, and there wouldn't be anything I could do to help you then."

Asuna was frozen in Diavel's gaze and the light touch of his grip as he spoke, her thoughts racing. It was true, what he said: the faction leader had a great deal of power, including the ability to banish a player—to expel them from the faction and deny them its services or the protection of the city Safe Zone. She knew—she hoped—that Diavel would never do anything like that to her just because she'd committed herself to taking care of Yuuki. But someone else might. If there was one thing the last few days had taught her, it was that there were a lot of very ugly, hateful people in the world—people who were all too willing to cast aside their common humanity and see everything through the lens of us and them.

And then, as he finished speaking, she angrily shrugged his hands from her shoulders and pushed his arm aside so that she could stand closer to Yuuki and put her arm around the girl, who had tears in her eyes and looked as if she might flee at any moment. "I didn't ask for your protection, Diavel, and I don't need it. I'm not yours to worry about, so stop treating me like a helpless child! If there are consequences for taking in this girl and being the only friend she has in this world, those are consequences I'll just have to live with. Are we done here?"

Diavel looked shocked by her speech, almost hurt. Asuna couldn't manage to care; she was too angry. After a moment he shut his eyes and bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I've upset you, and that wasn't my intention. Of course you may leave anytime you want."

Asuna took him at his word on that, and when she reached down Yuuki's hand almost flew into hers. As the two of them turned and walked towards the door, she heard Diavel's voice call her name once more. Despite a desire to simply keep walking, she stopped with her hand on the doorknob and spoke without turning. "What?"

"Be careful. Please."

She hesitated only a moment after pulling the door open. Then she did look back, and the genuine expression she saw on his face as he stood calmly in the middle of the room softened her ire somewhat. She said nothing more as the door closed behind her, leaving him alone in his office.

Argo breathed a deep sigh of relief as she read the new message she'd received, grateful both for the chance to rest her wings and for the news that came with it.

「Have I mentioned lately how awesome you are? That info you sent saved our butts. We lost one person (no one I knew), but Klein was able to use his fire magic to get everyone else free, and we hightailed it out of there. Looking at the map, I'd guess you're less than an hour out from Freelia. We're going to confront Rai, but we could really use you there when we do—you're the one who knows what he said, after all. Meet us at my place once you get in. ~Allie」

Argo had every intention of doing exactly that—but there were a few things she had to take care of first, and they couldn't wait. It would be nice if Raikouji would do them all the favor of confessing
what he'd tried to do straight out—or better yet, if he'd just resign his position and save them the trouble of having to go through this mess.

Nice, but highly unlikely. If he was willing to go so far as to try to have a political rival killed off in order to secure his position when the next vote came around, he wasn't going to give up so easily. To the contrary, there was every possibility that he'd try to concoct some reason to have them imprisoned—or, more likely, simply banish them. She wouldn't even put it past him to consider exile if he was desperate enough, although banishments and exiles were announced to the entire faction in a system message—they were not exactly a subtle punishment.

It was for this reason that Argo's final errands before going to Alicia's home included a trip to an item shop, where she stocked up on every form of traveling supplies she could think of for a long journey. If she ended up expelled from the Cait Sith at the end of this confrontation, she wanted to be absolutely certain she was provisioned for the long haul. She didn't think it would come to that, but she didn't care to count on Raikouji's sense of restraint.

When Argo finally arrived at the room Alicia was renting, she entered without knocking and found her friend sitting at the same low table where some of the beta testers had gathered on the first night they were trapped here, sipping at some kind of improbably-colored fruit drink and conversing with another player that Argo recognized as Thelvin from the scene she'd witnessed earlier in the day. As the door opened, they both fell momentarily silent—Thelvin started in surprise, but Alicia grinned as her ears twitched in amusement; she was used to Argo's habits.

"Come on in, we were just going over how we wanted to approach Rai. Argo, this is Thelvin. Thelvin, Argo."

"We've met," Argo said. At Thelvin's puzzled expression, she smirked and added, "in a manner of speaking. So what're you thinking?"

Thelvin rose to his feet, looking down at the both of them. Argo knew she was short, but even accounting for that he still towered over her; he had to be easily over a hundred and eighty centimeters in height, and that was impressive considering it had to be his real-life build as well. He smacked a fist into his other palm for effect. "We confront him together. He killed one of my friends trying to get me, and now we have a pretty good idea why. I can bring my party along both for backup and as witnesses. Alicia has a lot of pull with the other beta testers, and you have both the eyewitness account of what he said and a reputation that no one will question."

"What exactly did he say, anyway?" Alicia asked.

Argo related her account of the meeting between Thelvin and Raikouji word for word, to the point of closely imitating Thelvin's habitually formal speech patterns and Raikouji's strong Ibaraki-flavored accent. By the time she got to the words the Cait Sith leader had muttered after he thought he was alone, Thelvin's jaw was hanging agape. Alicia just grinned as she looked up at his reaction. "You've never heard Argo do her impression thing, have you?"

Shutting his mouth abruptly, Thelvin shook his head. "It's not just that, it's... how the hell did you know all of that? Were you eavesdropping?"

"Something like that," Argo agreed as she paced around the room, forcing him to turn to face her. "So here's the thing: your plan sucks."

Thelvin's mouth opened again. Before he could make sound come from it, Argo explained. "It's not gonna matter how many people we bring—as far as Raiko-pin's concerned, we got nothing. And he's right. It's my word against his about what he said in that room, and without proof he's not guilty
of anything other than sending you guys on a crap mission. And the more witnesses we have, the less likely he is to let slip anything incriminating. Given enough time, I could probably gin up a whisper campaign to undermine him—but that just gives him time to come up with another way to get rid of you. And if Alicia shows up with us, that just puts a target on her back, too."

"Assuming there isn't one already," Alicia pointed out. "I ran against him too, you know."

Argo nodded. "I know. But I'd rather not give him an excuse unless we're sure we can take him down."

"'If you strike at a king, you must kill him,'" Thelvin quoted, his expression grave.

Argo grinned and nodded. "You got it."

"I'm assuming this means you've got something better in mind?" Alicia asked, finishing her drink and setting the empty glass on the table.

Argo explained. And as she did, smiles slowly spread across the faces of the other two Cait Sith, the tips of their tails quivering in excitement. They were the smiles of cats that had just discovered a particularly juicy songbird and were trying to decide how to divvy up their prize.

"You," Alicia said as she stood up and stretched, "are insane." She had a silly grin on her face, and she wasn't the only one.

"Undoubtedly," Argo said as she drew her hood up over her head and made for the door. "Be ready for the signal."

It wasn't a long walk to the castle that loomed over Freelia's skyline, but it gave her plenty of time to think. She could've just flown, but by this point she'd spent enough time observing Raikouji's habits and schedule to know that he probably wouldn't be finished with dinner for at least another five or ten minutes—and she wanted to catch him when he was alone in his office on the bottom floor. As a citizen of Freelia, the NPC guards didn't bat an eye at her, and their leader didn't seem to think that player guards were necessary—any players who would be worth anything as guards, he wanted out leveling up or patrolling the borders.

She was counting on that single-minded arrogance. She understood it—shared it to a degree. Argo worked to clear doubts and stray thoughts from her mind as she walked through the expansive foyer of the castle, ignoring the rote greetings from the NPCs stationed there. She took a side hallway, turned right, and pushed open the doors to Raikouji's executive office without preamble, savoring the look on his face as the doors shut behind her.

Raikouji stood at once, sweeping his menu hastily closed with one hand as he mastered his surprise and glared across the room at her. "You know, Argo, there's this thing called knocking. You should try it sometime. Now what the hell do you want?"

"Your resignation," Argo said, pushing back the hood of her cloak.

For a moment, Raikouji looked just as stunned as he had when she'd walked in the door, eyes widening and mouth forming a perfect 'O'. Then he began laughing loudly, sitting back down and waving at the air. "You had me there for a moment. Here I thought you had some kind of serious business for me, but it seems you've come to tell me jokes instead. Are you applying for the position of court jester?"

"Your resignation," Argo said, pushing back the hood of her cloak.

For a moment, Raikouji looked just as stunned as he had when she'd walked in the door, eyes widening and mouth forming a perfect 'O'. Then he began laughing loudly, sitting back down and waving at the air. "You had me there for a moment. Here I thought you had some kind of serious business for me, but it seems you've come to tell me jokes instead. Are you applying for the position of court jester?"

"I look like I'm here to clown around with you? You're done, Raiko-pin. We know you tried to have
Thelvin killed, and why. One of his group is dead, but Thelvin himself is just fine—and he sends his regards."

"Now just a—"

"So here's what's gonna happen," Argo continued, talking over his attempt at interrupting her. "You're gonna open your faction menu. You're gonna select the option that resigns your position. You're gonna walk out of here. And when the system holds a new vote tomorrow, you're gonna stay out of it—and never run again."

Raikouji stared at her incredulously. "You're completely mental."

"So I've been told," Argo said agreeably. "But I'm not wrong about this. You're gonna do what I just said, because if you don't then by this time tomorrow everyone's gonna know what you tried to do."

And now she let her mask slip, grinning at him wickedly. "It'll be pitchforks and torches, Raiko-pin. You'll be lucky to survive the night. Or… you can bow out gracefully and go join a clearing group. Your choice."

"You're bluffing," he said after several moments of uncomfortable silence. "You don't know a damn thing."

Rather than arguing the point, Argo cleared her throat and deepened her voice, affecting the subtle differences of pitch and consonant voicing distinctive to the Ibaraki region. "For fuck's sake, Thelvin. Just shut up and get yourself killed already."

Raikouji's face went as white as bleached rice when as he heard his own words echoed back to him in something very close to his own voice. "How… but nobody was there! How could you have heard…?"

Argo simply grinned.

And then Raikouji's eyes widened. "The Rat," he whispered. "You fucking bitch. You were spying on me." His hands moved in the air, and Argo knew he had to be opening his menu. "If you breathe a word of this, I'll banish you—no, exile you."

Argo planted her palms on the edge of Raikouji's desk and leaned over it; at her height, she would seem to be staring straight at him through his menu screens. "Oh, do it. I dare you. Do you have any idea what kinda shitstorm you'd stir up by exiling The Rat? If you think that'd put a lid on this whole thing, you're an idiot. I couldn't buy better publicity with every coin in my purse."

Hands trembling with rage, face a mask of hate, Raikouji jerkily closed his menu. "You still don't have any proof, you know," he seethed, visibly trying to get control of his anger.

Argo gave him another infuriating smirk. Her right hand stole into her cloak, and when it withdrew, she held in her fingers a tiny eight-sided object that seemed to be made of some kind of opaque blue crystal. "I do now." And so saying, she stomped her foot twice on the floor, hard. Almost immediately, the doors behind her opened, and Thelvin rushed in with Alicia and his party, who surrounded Argo on either side in order to discourage Raikouji from doing anything rash. "Got it all," she said to the new arrivals.

His eyes were as wide as saucers, and now they showed real fear as his ears flattened against his head in a defensive reflex. "Is that…? But you couldn't have a recording crystal yet. They don't start dropping until we get closer to the World Tree!"

Grinning, Argo quickly slipped the crystal back into her cloak. "You willing to bet your life
that I don't know where else to find them? I'm gonna be keeping this in a safe place, Raiko-pin. And as long as you resign before you walk out of this room and never run for the leadership again… that's where it'll stay." It wasn't necessary to explain what would happen if he didn't.

Raikouji got the message loud and clear. Still trembling with a mixture of fury and cold fear, he manipulated his menu for a few moments, finger hovering in the air as he wrestled with his fate, staring hatefully at Argo's smiling face. Finally, he stabbed the confirmation dialogue as if he could kill it by doing so. Every Cait Sith in the room—and, Argo knew, anywhere else in the world—immediately received a system message announcing Raikouji's resignation and the scheduling of a new election the following day.

The seething ex-leader stormed out of the room, followed by Thelvin's cold glare until he slammed the doors behind him. Immediately the other remaining players aside from Argo erupted into cheers. Alicia grabbed Argo and swept her into a hug, laughing as tears came to her eyes. "I cannot believe you pulled that off. Where the hell did you get a recording crystal, anyway?"

Argo pulled out the crystal and looked at Alicia with innocence so perfect that it couldn't possibly fool anyone. "This?" She popped it into her mouth and made an appreciative noise as she sucked on it. Six jaws dropped almost in unison.

Since no one seemed to be able to form words well enough to ask the question, Argo reached up and spat the crystal back into her hand. "What? I like rock candy. It's not my fault he's never seen a real recording crystal before."

"So we can come and go in Undine territory as we please? Well that's mighty big of him. What did you have to pay him for that favor?"

Kirito shook his head at Yoshihara and gave her a straight answer, even though he was fairly certain she was jerking his chain. "Nothing. He just seems to be a genuinely decent person who doesn't buy into the artificial divisions Kayaba forced us into." It didn't seem like a good idea to mention the liberties he'd taken with her reply at Argo's behest.

Yoshihara barked laughter as she retrieved her spear from the NPC smith and confirmed its condition after tapping to bring up the status window. "Isn't that special of him? And by special I mean fucking retarded. He might not buy into these 'artificial' divisions, but they exist whether he likes it or not." Kirito had to jog to keep pace with his nominal faction leader as she headed down the street, and with her back turned he was thankful he didn't have to try to hide the expression her words provoked from him.

"Look kid, you seem nice, but you don't seem to get how this works. One race gets to the top and gets out of this game—them and two of their allies. This Diavel could be a goddamn saint for all I care—he's an idiot if he thinks we're all in this together. For us, it's all about everyone getting as strong as we can so that we can get jobs with clearing groups. At this point, chances are good that the Salamanders are going to be the ones who end up on top—and I'll be damned if I'm jeopardizing our chances of landing that contract by being all officially buddy-buddy with your blue-haired friend. You can do whatever you want."

Kirito had had enough. "Were you born to be this obnoxious and unlikable, Yoshihara, or was it a skill you equipped when you made your character?"

The swing that came at him then was easy enough to dodge; the butt of the spear whipped a few centimeters past Kirito's nose as he leaned back. They were still in Penwether's Safe Zone, so there was no actual danger, and when he saw that there was no follow-up or intent to seriously fight he
folded his arms as Yoshihara glared at him. Then a lopsided smile cracked her long face, and she laughed. "Okay, that was a good one. But my point stands."

"Your point being?"

Yoshihara planted the butt of her spear in the ground and leaned on it. "That I don't really care what you or anyone else does, kiddo. You're a free agent, like the rest of us. If you want to be Diavel's errand boy, that's your lookout. Hope you make lots of money at it. Me, I'm going to keep leveling up—and maybe next month someone else will want this thankless shit job so I can actually go join a clearing group. And speaking of which..." She waved at something over Kirito's shoulder. "Hey, Mouse! Shake a leg already, daylight's burning!" She didn't offer any parting words to Kirito; she simply walked past him and went to join the person Kirito supposed must be a member of her party.

Kirito turned away with a sigh and headed towards the exit of Penwether's central ziggurat, bringing out his wings as soon as he reached open air and heading northward without wasting any more time on the person he had the misfortune to have for a faction leader.

It was a long trip to the Leprechaun home city of Domnann, and by the end of the first day Kirito was extremely grateful that he'd visited an NPC tailor and bought a simple but warm fur-lined outfit to equip in place of the lighter-weight one he usually wore. The further north he got, the more he envied the tank types their heavy plate armor, which got very hot to move around in—but which also insulated them quite well in cold weather, with all the padding underneath.

When morning came, he wasted no time vacating the inn room he'd rented for the night in a small neutral village at the edge of Spriggan lands, and struck out to the northwest. His path immediately took him clear of the gradually-thinning forest, the hills covered with sparse brush and frozen soil rather than evergreen trees, although stands of those cropped up out of the ground here and there as well. He was not at all surprised when he felt the first snowflake wet his face; although the game's weather engine was supposed to follow the seasons of the real world, even in the beta the northern reaches of Alfheim had been chilly and prone to frequent snowstorms. He suspected it was only going to get colder as winter pressed on. One of the many islands floating hundreds of meters in the air above the surface of Alfheim even treated him to a rare sight: the waterfall that trickled over the edge of the island was frozen solid, turning it into something that was almost a vertical glacier and made it look like the island was resting on a thin sheet of ice stood on its end.

Kirito could smell Domnann long before he got close enough to see it. The crisp, cold air was devoid of the usual scents of the forest as he skimmed twenty meters above the snow-covered tundra, and as he drew within a few kilometers of the Leprechaun home city his nostrils began to burn with the industrial odors he automatically associated with a smithy: burning wood and coal smoke, heated metals of all sorts, and the acrid stink of the smelting and refining processes and their by-products. The smell got stronger as he approached, to the point where he was thankful anytime he spotted a mob he needed or wanted to pull, because the odor was far less pronounced at ground level.

At last as he crested a particularly steep ridge he caught sight of the city at last, a sprawling collection of low medieval stonework buildings and ceramic tile roofs that crawled down a series of hills until flattening where it met the ocean. The coastline by the city was all steel- and wood-clad hard angles and straight lines that never existed in nature, shaped by the inhabitants into an NPC-run seaport that supposedly shipped goods to unknown destinations far across the sea. Once during the beta, Kirito had stolen aboard one of the ships as it departed and spent several hours on deck waiting to see where it went. He had been disappointed to discover that as soon as the ship lost sight of land, he received a system message warning him to return to the playable area or be forced to respawn at his home city. He had no desire to try the same thing now; he suspected it would end in his death.
No one harassed him as he approached the city and touched down just inside the gates—in fact, he quickly saw that he was far from the only non-Leprechaun in evidence. There were dozens of Gnomes just in the immediate area that Kirito could see, and he also spotted a few other Spriggans, an Undine that looked like he was traveling with a mixed party of Leprechauns and Gnomes, and even a man that Kirito was fairly sure was a Puca looking over a selection of instruments at an NPC vendor. It was a stark contrast with the rampant paranoia of the more southerly regions he'd been spending time in since being trapped in this Death Game, and for the first time in days Kirito almost felt like he could relax.

It was time for the business he came here to do. He opened up his game menu, went to his saved messages, and reviewed the information he'd paid for the day before.

「 My contacts in Domnann came up with a few dozen crafters putting a lot of time into leveling their Weaponsmithing. Of course, this early in the game you're obviously not gonna find any master smiths yet, but they'll be plenty skilled enough to upgrade an Anneal Blade if you've got the money and mats. I can give you a further list of names for 100 each, but there's one who stood out in particular…」

The directions Argo gave took Kirito down by the seaport, where Domnann's industrial odors were layered with the briny scents of the ocean—a smell that he actually found pleasant and nostalgic. On the southern end of the port there was a two-story rectangular building that contained a number of facilities that could be rented by blacksmiths who didn't have their own shop—which at this point, Kirito reasoned, was pretty much everyone.

So much heat radiated from the wide archways that led into the building, the thick snowfall actually began melting before it fell to the ground, resulting in an area of paved cobblestones just outside the entrance which was quite wet but clear of snow. And as soon as he set foot inside, he understood why—it had to be a minimum of five or ten degrees warmer inside than it was out on the street, and Kirito found himself wishing that he'd stopped somewhere to change into his lighter-weight clothes before paying a visit here.

Kirito didn't have a physical description for the person he was seeking, only a name which he'd tried unsuccessfully to message and a location where they could most likely be found. But when Kirito looked around the shared space at all the different people working the equipment, he felt fairly confident about his guess: Lisbeth sounded like an English-language female name, and there was only one girl in the entire building that he could see. Her back was turned to him as she hammered at a glowing length of metal laid across an anvil, but the slender body that filled out her pink dress was definitely feminine in shape, and from the number of plain but serviceable-looking swords stacked against the nearby forge, he guessed that she was in the middle of grinding her skill. It spoke well for Argo's information—not that he had ever really doubted it.

"Excuse me," Kirito said once she'd finished the weapon she was working on and set it on the growing pile. "Are you… Rizubetto?"

The girl turned, wiping the sweat from her forehead with a handkerchief and stuffing it down into the pocket of an apron that was improbably white for the kind of work she was doing. She seemed about his age, though it was often hard to tell with avatars. She took a moment to push her collar-length brown hair away from her face and smiled at him. "I'm Lisbeth, yes. Is there some work you need done?"

In answer, Kirito unslung the Anneal Blade from his back, still in its scabbard, and held it out before him. "I need to have this upgraded, and I've brought the necessary materials. May I ask what your Weaponsmithing skill is?"
Lisbeth's smile broadened as she cocked her hips and folded her arms under her modest bust. "I'll have you know that I just passed 200 this morning."

She sounded exceptionally proud of it, and in Kirito's opinion she had a right to be. "I'm impressed. The game's what, only a little over a week old? In order to get your skill that high so soon, you must've been grinding it every day without many breaks."

Nodding, Lisbeth gestured to the pile of swords near her. "Please don't judge the quality of my work by these swords. This is a commission from the militia our leader is organizing—they need a large number of inexpensive but well-made weapons. I'm actually right in the middle of it, but I should be done by this afternoon if you want to come back around, say, three?"

Kirito considered. He could probably pay Argo a nominal fee and get the names of a few other smiths to try in the meantime, and it could mean getting done here a lot sooner. On the other hand, this Lisbeth had a lot of points in her favor: she was the first name Argo recommended, she had a high skill level and was obviously dedicated to her craft, and her work was trusted enough for her own faction leader to give her an important commission. All those things argued for patience, and he still needed to go bring Diavel's message to said leader—he could kill some time doing that while he waited.

"All right," he said, giving the smith a friendly smile as he returned the Anneal Blade to his back and secured the buckles that kept it sheathed there. "I'll be back at three, and then I'll entrust my blade to your skill, Miss Lisbeth."

"Please, call me Liz." The girl bowed at the waist.

"Kirito." He returned the gesture of respect at the proper angle for a customer meeting a skilled crafter. "I'll leave you to your work."

The leader's keep would be easy enough to find, situated as it was at the very highest hill on the west side of Domnann—it was hard to miss, really. Now that Kirito wasn't searching for a place he hadn't been to before, he decided to save time by taking to the air, his wings leaving a flight trail that almost seemed like a shadow behind him. Getting in to see the Leprechaun leader proved less easy—there was a line of people waiting to see him, most of which looked like crafters of one sort or another who were there on business. By the time Kirito reached the front of the line, it was well past two in the afternoon and he was starting to wish he'd gotten something to eat before coming to wait there.

At last Kirito was escorted into a small office that was just on the other side of a door in the waiting area. Like most buildings in Domnann, the stone walls were decorated with intricate knotwork patterns and wrought-metal sculptures, and heat was provided through vents at floor level which were connected to the furnaces and hypocausts in the extensive network of underground chambers beneath the streets. A man in a dark forest-green tunic with wavy brown hair and the sparse beginnings of a beard looked up and gave him a weary but sincere smile; from the way his hands were moving in the air Kirito assumed he had his faction menu open. "Welcome to our city, Spriggan. My name is Thinker, and I'm currently serving as the leader here in our corner of the world. Is there something I can help you with?"

Kirito introduced himself and got straight to the point. "I'm here to bring you a message from the Undine leader, Diavel. He sends his respects and offers two things. First, he's looking for allies to discourage the Salamanders from any further aggression—I assume you've heard about that." When Thinker nodded cautiously, Kirito continued. "Second, he'd like to set up some kind of trade agreement where the Undines provide your groups with healers in exchange for you providing them with skilled smithing services."
"Well now."Thinker rubbed at the scruff on his chin, leaning back in his chair. "With regard to the second request, I think we can definitely come to a deal. I'm putting together a militia to patrol our territory and help any players who get in trouble, and we also have a few clearing groups leveling up who could use heals. From our end, I don't doubt there's any number of crafters who would jump at the chance to relocate to another city where their skills would be uncommon and in high demand."

Kirito nodded. "And the first?"

Thinker sighed. "I'm afraid there I have to disappoint our friends to the south. We're already in talks with the Gnomes and the Puca to form a commercial alliance for sharing skilled crafters and mutual protection. Once we have the details worked out, I'm sure there won't be any problem connecting your neighbors with whatever skilled services they need—but when it comes to war and faction politics, it's in the best interests of our alliance to take a neutral posture. I hope you can understand."

Shrugging, Kirito looked more indifferent than he felt. "It's not my request—I'm just the messenger." He paused for a moment, brow scrunching up as he thought. "You said your name was Thinker… you wouldn't happen to be the admin—"

"Of MTD?" Thinker grinned; it clearly wasn't the first time someone had asked him about MMO Today, a popular gaming news website that Kirito used to check every day back in the real world. "That would be me. At least, it was me." His grin waned a little bit, turning to a rueful smile. "Now I'm just a man with a responsibility for taking care of over 1500 people—plus all the visitors who come here." He glanced towards the door. "More of whom, I'm guessing, are still waiting to see me for one reason or another."

It was an obvious hint; Thinker seemed like a nice guy but he didn't exactly have time to chat about a website none of them might ever see again. That suited Kirito fine—he needed to get going anyway. "Well, thank you. If you'll excuse me—"

Thinker gestured towards the door. "By all means. Thank you for bringing me the message."

Once Kirito had sated his hunger, it was almost three o'clock; he made straight for the port district and touched down outside Lisbeth's rented facilities just as the snow was starting to thicken into the beginnings of a blizzard that made him thankful for the warmth of the smithy. The brown-haired girl was going through the large pile of swords she'd crafted, occasionally setting one aside and counting the others as she arranged them in a neat stack on top of a blanket. She looked up and broke into a wide smile when she saw Kirito there. "You came back! Thank you so much for your patience. All I really have left to do is get these organized, and I can do that later if you want me to work on your sword now."

Unlimbering the scabbard and its straps, Kirito held it out in front of him. "Please. I'd like the first three upgrades to be two Sharpness and one Durability, and I've brought all the necessary mats to maximize the success rate. How much will you charge?"

Lisbeth named a price that almost made Kirito wince—it was a fair price, but he'd hoped to get a smith who didn't have such a good grasp of exactly how much their services were worth. It amounted to most of the money he'd saved up. Once they'd agreed on the terms and he'd traded the required mats to her, Lisbeth took the Anneal Blade from Kirito and drew it from its sheath, letting out a small involuntary gasp of admiration. "It's beautiful. I haven't seen anyone bring anything like this in yet—is it a rare drop?"

Kirito shook his head. "A quest reward. They're very valuable on the market; I doubt anyone would be selling one yet."
Tapping the blade, Lisbeth's eyes scanned back and forth as she read the weapon's properties. "Well, the upgrades are pretty routine stuff, and they'll only take a few minutes. You can wait right there if you like."

Kirito accepted the offer, sitting down on a wrought iron chair that probably would've been far more comfortable if it had a cushion. He was just grateful to get off his feet for a few minutes. Lisbeth laid the Anneal Blade out on the anvil and began the upgrade process, adding the components Kirito had brought her to the window that came up and hefting the hammer that hung from her belt. Her strokes were swift and sure, and each one added another loud ringing sound to the metallic chorus that filled the room as each crafter worked at their own station. At last there was a flash of red that ran up the length of the Anneal Blade, indicating the completion of the process. "Anneal Blade +1," Lisbeth said. "I did Sharpness first. Do you want the second Sharpness next, or the Durability?"

"Durability, please," Kirito answered, gesturing for her to continue.

Lisbeth grinned, twirling the hammer in her hand once. "Coming right up." As she tapped on the weapon again and began setting up to begin, she asked, "so what's the quest?"

"Kimiko's Request," Kirito said. "The starter's in the town of Lithjagg on the edge of Undine territory. You wouldn't want to try it if you've been doing nothing but grinding your tradeskills, though—you have to kill a lot of mobs for the drops, and some of them are tough."

"That's a shame," Lisbeth said as she began hammering the weapon again with a steady rhythm, the blows having nothing to do with actual blacksmithing as it once existed in the real world—they were simply the motions a player was required to go through in order to execute the crafting sequence. As a blue glow flickered across the sword, she gave a satisfied grunt. "I was thinking I could make a lot of money if I got one and upgraded it properly."

"You could," Kirito said, nodding. "You'd just have to get a group to go with you, or hire someone to do the quest and sell you the weapon. But you'd want to keep it unmodified until you found a customer—not everyone will want the same combination of upgrades."

"That's true," Lisbeth said, smiling at him as she began the process one last time. "You're pretty smart about all this for someone who isn't a crafter. You even had all the mats and everything."

Kirito looked away, momentarily embarrassed by the compliment and uncomfortable about revealing exactly why he knew so much. "Anyone who uses a weapon should know how to make the most of it." It wasn't really an answer, but he hoped it sounded profound.

From the sound of her laugh, Lisbeth knew he was holding something back but wasn't going to press the matter. "Well it's a gorgeous sword—I'm glad I got the chance to work on it. Almost done now… fifteen… sixteen… seventeen…"

With a heartwrenching sound of broken glass, the Anneal Blade shattered into polygons.

Author's Note 11/26/12: A few things.

First, Kirito's leveling. It's noted in passing more than once throughout the story that Kirito (and anyone else on a long journey) is typically pulling mobs as he goes. Along with the need to rest the wings, that's what makes these trips take so long—even in the air, there are mobs flying around that you can't always just bypass or train through. Moreover, Kirito has amassed the huge number of materials necessary to upgrading the Anneal Blade and saved up a lot of money—all that had to come from somewhere, and where it came from was the mobs he's been fighting "off-camera".
Perhaps I need to be clearer about that.

I choose not to waste time writing about these countless random fights because they're *boring*. Speaking as someone who's spent years in MMOs, there are few things more tedious and uninteresting to a player than the repetitive grinding of trash mobs. It's even less interesting to read about. Be assured that if there is a fight that is significant or interesting in some way—such as the golem battle a few chapters back—it'll get written in.

As in canon, Kirito is spending a lot of the early part of the game grinding. I'd rather focus on the other things he's doing. For those of you looking forward to some badass Kirito action, you won't be disappointed when the time comes. :)

Second, **the breakage of the Anneal Blade**. Yes, the *usual* consequence for an upgrade failure is the loss of an upgrade level. But there is a tiny, extremely rare chance for the weapon to be lost altogether. The original idea for this being a possibility comes from one of the side stories, *Rondo of the Transient Sword*. However, regardless of the actual reason for the breakages occurring in that story, I decided that in *this* story it was a legitimate game mechanic—one that is not at all uncommon in real games.

As with all other perceived discrepancies in game mechanics between this story and canon (such as there being "sword skills" in ALO), please remember the foreword I wrote in the first chapter: that I've put a lot of time and meticulous research into this story, and that if you find such a discrepancy (and you will), it's almost certainly intentional and it's best to keep in mind that this is an AU.

Above all, though, **thank you for reading and reviewing!**
While all players can fly for a time using the virtual controller in their off hand, most players will find it far more convenient and effective to learn the technique of «Voluntary Flight», which involves manually controlling their wings by training the Nerve Gear to redirect certain nerve impulses towards the wings themselves. While difficult at first, those who master «Voluntary Flight» will find that it frees up both hands—essential for those who use two-handed weapons, or who wish to use magic with one hand and a one-handed weapon with the other...

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Voluntary Flight»

11 ~ 12 November 2022
Day 6 - Afternoon

Despite the cacophony of noise from all of the different players working at their crafting stations, the sound of a hammer striking an anvil was markedly different from the sharper, longer sound of an item breaking. Before the constituent polygons of the Anneal Blade had even finished dispersing, the other hammers in the room had fallen silent as all eyes turned towards the unexpected and extremely distressing sound.

Lisbeth stared at the anvil for several seconds with her mouth hanging open, completely shocked. Kirito was no less stunned than she was, and had lunged to his feet and started to reach for his beloved blade as if he could stop it from disappearing by grabbing it, hand outstretched in futility. The hammer fell from Lisbeth's nerveless fingers, narrowly missing her foot as it struck the dirt floor with an empty thud. She sank to her knees as if she were a puppet whose cords had been cut, shoulders slumped and tears starting to well up in her eyes. Her mouth worked noiselessly, trying to make sense of what had just happened and completely failing to make words happen.

Kirito made a small whimpering noise deep in his throat, hating the weak sound of it. No matter what, the chance of a successful upgrade would never be greater than 99% even for the first one—there was always a chance, however small, that it would fail. But that should normally result only in a weakened weapon, the loss of one of its limited number of upgrade slots. And with Lisbeth's skill level and all of the mats he'd managed to farm from trash mobs, the chance of success for the third upgrade should've been 95%.

Intellectually, he knew that any failed upgrade had a 1% chance of resulting in the breakage of the weapon itself. But—and there he took a moment to work out the simple arithmetic in his head—that should've meant that the chances of this happening on that third upgrade were five ten-thousandths of a percent. A one-in-two hundred thousand chance. There were extremely rare and powerful items that had a greater chance of dropping than that.

Burying his grief in the numbers was the only way Kirito could keep from crying out and screaming at the blacksmith just then. He knew it wasn't her fault, and it wouldn't be fair to take it out on her. But the temptation to scream at something, someone, was overwhelming.

And in any event, Kirito doubted he could make her feel any worse than what she was probably feeling right then. Tears streamed down Lisbeth's face as she prostrated herself on the ground in front of Kirito, forehead pressed to the dirt. "Forgive me! Please, please, forgive me, I'm so sorry! I've never had that happen before! I shouldn't have been talking while I was working, I must've been distracted and done something wrong… please, I'm sor—"

Lisbeth's sobbing apologies cut off as Kirito knelt beside her and rested a reassuring hand on the back of her head. "It's not your fault," he said, trying to force calm into his voice. "It's just random
numbers in the system. There's always a very tiny chance of that happening, even with the probability of success maximized. It was just bad luck."

When Lisbeth raised her head, there was dirt stuck to her face where it had been wet, and the sight of it helped Kirito smile—something she probably needed to see from him. "I... I can't accept that. Please, Kirito, let me redeem myself. Of course I'll refund all of the money you paid me, and I'll make you a new sword."

Kirito shook his head sadly. "I'll take the refund, but you can't replace the Anneal Blade. It's a quest reward, and it's better than anything you could make with normal components."

"Then let's do the quest! Take me south with you, and I'll give you my quest reward when we're done." Lisbeth reached over and grabbed the collar of Kirito's fur-lined shirt with both hands, pleading with him. "Please, Kirito, I'm begging you. My pride won't allow me to accept this. I have to make it right."

Reaching up, Kirito gently brushed the dirt away from her tear-streaked face with his thumb, bringing a slight flush to Lisbeth's cheeks. "I'm grateful for the offer. Really, I am." Her hands slipped away from his shirt as he stood, sighing. "But I'm not going south. That area's getting dangerous right now, and anyway I can't take the time away from leveling up to farm the low-level trash mobs for that quest."

Standing, Lisbeth wiped at her face with her sleeve. "Then maybe there's something else I can do for you." When Kirito raised his eyebrows, she said, "You're right that there's nothing I can make with normal components that can replace your sword. But I might be able to get my hands on an ingot of Gnomish Carbon Steel."

That got Kirito's attention. Of all the varieties of Gnomish metals, Carbon Steel was the strongest that didn't require the help of an alchemist to manufacture. But it was an alloy of several different materials—some of them rare—and was extremely time-consuming to create. By the time they started clearing the World Tree, better materials would become available—but at this point in the game, it would still be very hard to come by, assuming there was anyone at all who had the skill to manufacture it. It was surprising that she even knew about it; he didn't think she had been a beta tester.

In the hands of a skilled weaponsmith, it could certainly forge a sword that would compare to—and possibly even surpass—his Anneal Blade. And despite the appalling blow the game's random number generator had dealt them, he was still certain he was looking at a very skilled smith. One who stared back at him with light violet eyes that pleaded with him for a chance to prove that skill. Gradually the sharp rapping sounds of hammers started back up as it became clear that there wasn't going to be any further interesting drama, and the rhythmic sounds helped Kirito track the seconds that passed while he thought over Lisbeth's offer.

"That could work," Kirito said finally. "But how do you plan on getting some this early in the game?"

Although she still looked fairly mortified at what had happened, Lisbeth's face brightened a little at the prospect of being allowed to set things right. "In the last few days, we've been establishing trade between us and the Gnomes. Raw materials for finished products, that sort of thing. We have a few beta testers who've been tutoring new crafters, and I overheard one of them talking about a Gnome with a Refining skill high enough to make Carbon Steel—someone who's been assigned to grind non-stop in order to be able to outfit their clearing groups." Lisbeth gave Kirito a deep bow. "Take me to Nissengrof, and I promise you, I'll spend whatever I have to spend to get an ingot for you. Even if I have to vendor my entire inventory."
The idea provoked immediate resistance from Kirito, who held up both hands, palms-out. "Bad idea. That's over a hundred kilometers across the Glitafrost Wastes—it'll take most of a day when you factor in the time spent fighting through aggro mobs. I can't be babysitting a level 1 player through that."

It was the wrong thing to say. Lisbeth was up in Kirito's face before he'd finished his last sentence, her nose centimeters from his as her cheeks reddened. "Excuse me? I'm not a complete newbie, you know! Are you saying I need a babysitter?"

Looking a little uncomfortable, Kirito took a step back and looked aside, eyes going back to hers after a moment as he proceeded to forget the first rule of holes and digging. "Um... yeah, kind of. I thought you spent all your time grinding smithing. Have you even left the city yet?"

Lisbeth crossed her arms, a stubborn look on her face. "Of course I have! I'm probably not as high-level as you, but I had to go out and earn some money in order to buy tools and materials, after all."

Kirito sighed, resigning himself to the fact that he was going to have to sign on for an escort quest if he was going to get a new sword. "You're assuming they'll even sell it to you." A point about which he had his doubts.

"They have to," Lisbeth insisted, her assurance seeming as much wishful thinking and hope as anything else. "I've made a lot of money in the last several days, and once I deliver this commission to Thinker's militia in the morning, I'll have a lot more. Whatever I have is yours if it will get us an ingot I can use to forge you a new sword." She opened a trade window, fingers dancing across the numeric pad that popped up. "Here's the fee you paid me for the upgrades. I wish I could return the mats, but... I guess you know they get used up no matter what happens with the upgrade attempt."

Kirito mourned the loss, but more because it had taken days of farming to collect all the drops he needed. And if memory served, he wouldn't be able to farm the components for upgrading a Carbon Steel sword until they broke through one of the valley bosses and got closer to Arun. He accepted the trade and nodded. "I understand. Thanks for trying, Lisbeth."

"Liz," she insisted. "Meet me here in the morning, and we'll head west to Nissengrof."

After setting out the following day, Kirito was relieved to find that Lisbeth proved to be telling the truth about her ability to fight—she was clearly lower in level than he was, but she held her own with her mace as they cautiously cleared a path through the Glitafrost Wastes.

If they'd been able to fly in a straight line across empty space with no interruptions, a pair of players at his and Lisbeth's levels should have been able to make the trip in under an hour. What made it a journey was the fact that that space wasn't empty and free of interruptions; a player had to rest their wings about every ten minutes at most, and there were aggro mobs to clear along the way even in the air. Players could try to ascend and fly above them, but the higher they went the more quickly their wings became fatigued—potentially forcing them to land too soon without a safe place to do so, or spend even more time recuperating.

From experience, Kirito knew that it was safer to take your time and clear hostile terrain as you went, even if it meant taking far longer than necessary at times. As a solo player who preferred keeping a solid safety margin, he didn't begrudge the extra time—and after a few hours of fighting alongside her, he didn't begrudge the necessity of bringing Lisbeth along either. He did begrudge having to use his backup weapon in the meantime, but against trash mobs it wasn't a serious liability—just another reminder to be careful.

The better part of the day passed uneventfully as Lisbeth learned the cautious rhythm with which
Kirito covered hostile ground: bursts of speed as far as was clearly safe, a pause to scan the air ahead for aggro mobs, repeating this until their flight gauges were depleted and they had to land in order to rest their wings. Once on the ground, they continued at a walking pace, stopping every few minutes to pull and clear any mobs in the way, proceeding in this way until their wings were fully rested.

It was excruciating, but necessary. In the beta, Kirito had become quite familiar with the usual outcome of trying to "train" your way through the wilderness—that is, fly at top speed and hope that the dozens of mobs you aggroed would tether before catching up to you. Most mobs could fly faster than players; the time saved wasn't worth the risk—especially not now, with the penalty for failure more than just the loss of some EXP and skill progress.

With a steady snowfall that hadn't let up since they left Domnann, the sky was a blanket of grayish-white which diffused sunlight and obscured distance and the passage of time, not to mention a person's sense of direction. Despite the discreet compass in his HUD, it was still very easy to stray off-course or to be forced to take the long way around a higher-level mob or other hazard.

Around early evening—the clock in his HUD said 5:38 PM—he caught sight of one of Alfheim's many floating islands that stirred a flicker of recognition; here in the far north they resembled nothing so much as great icebergs hanging in the sky, but the faint gray silhouette of a temple was one he'd seen before in the beta.

Descending to ground level and stopping to rest, he checked his map and nodded in satisfaction—they were only a few kilometers east of Nissengrof, and the structure he'd spotted on the floating island was a popular low-level dungeon. If it hadn't been snowing, they probably could've seen Nissengrof itself.

"It's not much further," Kirito said quietly as he sat down on a rock near the edge of a vast crevasse, opening his menu and materializing an object from his inventory. The dissipating puff of warmed air from his words was followed by the steam rising from the soup that he'd bought before leaving, and he sighed with pleasure at the first sip from the lip of the bowl.

He could almost imagine a third meter showing up below his HP and MP gauges, a red line indicating body warmth. If there had been such a thing, it would be rising rapidly. Hadn't there been a few games with that mechanic over the years? A few, at least, before he was born. ALO didn't have any such thing, but he knew that prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures could still result in HP loss. He glanced up through the veil of steam and saw Lisbeth sitting cross-legged on the ground, arms hugged around herself as she shivered. Her expression as she stared at his meal was one of longing, and as soon as she noticed him noticing she turned away abruptly.

"Why didn't you wear something warmer?" Kirito asked. "You're from this area; you should know better." It wasn't as if her outfit was particularly revealing, but a coat of some sort wouldn't have hurt.

"'From'?" Lisbeth echoed with some annoyance, glancing sidewise at him. "I'm from—" She stopped, cutting herself off as if she'd been about to give him her real-world hometown. "It doesn't matter anymore. I just… I didn't expect it to be this cold. It never was back in town, or when I went out leveling."

Kirito nodded. "It's worse out here in the open, on the Wastes," he admitted. "Especially with the wind chill, when we're doing all this flying."

A few moments of silence passed; Lisbeth had turned away again. Kirito looked down at what was left of his soup, back up, and sighed. His footsteps crunched in the fresh snow as he walked over and offered the other half of his meal to Lisbeth. She looked up at him, mouth opening wordlessly as if to protest… and then seized the bowl and drank the hot broth greedily. The soup was gone in moments;
the bowl shattered into polygons.

"Better?" Kirito asked.

Lisbeth nodded. "Thank you," she said quietly. Her face held a conflicted expression, like she couldn't decide whether to be grateful for the kindness or annoyed at feeling further in debt to him.

Another nod was Kirito's only acknowledgement. Lifting his gaze, he scanned the sky and held out a hand, palm-up. "The snow's picking up. Our wings still need rest, but we'd better get moving before it gets any worse." He paused briefly, then added: "Walking will help keep you warm, too."

It had been a fine idea, but by the time their wings were fully recharged, the rising and falling intensity of the snowstorm had turned into a full-blown blizzard, stripping the heat from their avatars with every gust of frosty wind and cutting visibility to almost nothing. Within minutes, Kirito saw an icon flashing beside his HP gauge—a white snowflake on a blue background that he knew indicated hazardously low temperatures. Every few moments the green bar of his HP flashed once and ticked down just a little bit, a single hit point draining away about once per second.

"We have to find shelter!" Kirito yelled, trying to be heard above the howling wind. The two of them huddled behind the trunk of a lone tree, the narrow bulk of it providing only the most meager protection from the gale. He pulled up his map and set a marker at a point not far to the north. "There's a cave entrance here, and I know where it goes. If we're careful, we can take it the rest of the way to Nissengrof without worrying about the blizzard! Come on!"

Kirito's tone brooked no argument, and to his relief Lisbeth didn't offer any. Perhaps the sight of her HP steadily dropping in a way she was helpless to prevent had helped clarify the situation for her. She nodded once, and as they stood she reached out and took his hand tightly in hers.

"Don't let go," she pleaded as Kirito gave her a momentary look of surprise. "I don't want to get separated!"

Kirito's surprise was fleeting; he banished it with a curt nod and forced his focus back to survival. "Come on!" he shouted as they ran together towards the promised haven, racing against time and exposure. The numbers in Kirito's peripheral vision continued to decrement as the snow fell around them, each flake like a grain of sand counting down what remained of his life.

When Klein awoke, it took some time for him to shed the last vestiges of sleep and place himself. It was his fifth day of imprisonment in this world, but despite spending all of those nights either camped out in the wilderness or tucked away safely in an inn room somewhere, some part of his subconscious was clearly no closer to fully accepting the situation.

It didn't help that the previous night's accommodations were atypical even by the standards he'd endured so far. Whiteburrow was a neutral town a few kilometers on the northern side of the Puca-Cait Sith border, and it seemed to derive its name both from the modest layer of snow that blanketed the frozen ground and from the half-subterranean nature of the local architecture. Most buildings only rose half a story at most from the hills into which they were dug, a wide set of stairs leading down towards the front door of each structure. It was the first inn in which he'd actually had to go downstairs in order to get to his room.

Said room was structured much like a room in a mine shaft, with thick wooden load-bearing supports and a rough-hewn look to the walls of stone and dirt which were visible. Most of those walls were covered by furs or tapestries of one sort or another, and the warm but sparse light was cast by oil lamps and by an ancient-looking iron stove in the center of the room. From the stove a chimney pipe
rose to the ceiling, following it all the way back upstairs to the inn's common room—a design which helped to distribute heat throughout the building.

The word *cozy* came unbidden to Klein's mind as he snoozed his avatar's internal alarm for the fifth time and shut it off with a desultory jab of the finger at the mid-air prompt. He snatched his hand back under the blanket almost as soon as the operation was complete; the air in the room might be warmer than it would have been without the stove, but that didn't mean it was *warm*. In the dim light he could see Dynamn's form on the other bed just beginning to stir, and with a sigh he resigned himself to the beginning of yet another day of travel.

An hour later the four of them gathered around the hearth in the common room, each cradling a mug of hot tea and soaking up as much warmth as possible while they went over the plan. Klein had opened his map window, set it visible and resized it to show as much area as possible, using a fork to point to where they were and gesture across the fogged-out expanse of unexplored wilderness that lay before them.

"We could go around," Issin suggested, using one of his arrows as a pointer and tracing an invisible line to the west and then northwards. "West to Sondref, resupply there if necessary, then east-northeast through the open areas. We'll make better time than we would having to clear our way through the forest."

"And take twice as long anyway," Kunimittz remarked as he finished his tea and held the mug out for the NPC waitress to refill. "In a straight shot, it can't be more than five or six klicks from here to Nissengrof, assuming the map data you bought is correct."

Issin tapped the tip of the arrow at the map window, which—being programmed to stay in front of the user's chest like all other UI windows—kept trying to move every time Klein fidgeted. He grabbed his leader's shoulder and pushed down slightly to fix him in place so that he could gesture where he needed to. "Your 'straight shot' is across dense forest filled with high-level mobs. We'll be lucky to make Nissengrof by the end of the day, and we'll be fighting every step of the way."

Klein made a tee with both hands, calling a stop to the argument before Issin and Kunimittz could get their backs up—the two of them could spend hours debating the color of the ocean and only end up agreeing that it was wet, and that much would be a concession requiring GM intervention. "Okay guys, I appreciate—Issin, get that damn arrow out of my face!—I appreciate your input, but this one's decided. We're steering well clear of any faction cities we don't actually have to visit, and there's no one waiting for us in Sondref. We take the forest."

"I'm telling you, Klein, the Puca don't care who we are or what we're—"

Klein waved at the air, interrupting. "And the feeling's mutual. Come on, man, let it go. We're not going to Sondref."

Sighing, Issin gave one last annoyed flick of his tail and slid the arrow back into the quiver slung at his back. "Alright, whatever. Your call—you've gotten everyone this far."

That had the benefit of being both conciliatory and true. Satisfied, Klein tossed back the last of his own tea and pushed himself to his feet, marveling at the willpower it took to motivate him to move even a single meter away from the radiant warmth of the hearth. He was on the verge of saying something inspirational to try to pry the others loose from the heat source when he was distracted by a chime and a flashing icon in the air. A mouth that had opened in order to speak hung open as he saw the name listed beside the incoming message icon.

Klein barely heard his friends inquiring after him as he brought up the message, eyes scanning the
text and then going back over it slowly to make sure he'd read it correctly.

A pair of fingers snapped somewhere near his face, Klein absently reached up and swatted them away as he read the remainder of the message and quickly opened a window to reply.

"Yo, Leader. Love letter from Alicia?"

If Klein's expression hadn't been enough to clue in his friends that the situation was serious, the complete lack of a reaction to Issin's dig would've done it. Thereafter they gave him a few minutes of respectful silence while he exchanged private messages, all of them raising their eyes expectantly once Klein swept his menu closed with a sense of finality.

"Issin," Klein said; the named player straightened in his seat in answer. "Did you ever do any business with this Cait Sith info broker while you were there?"

Issin shook his head. "Who, the Rat? Nah. I mean, Thelvin mentioned her, and I heard the same stuff the rest of you did. But I never talked to her directly. Why?"

"I was hoping you might have an open line to her," Klein said with a grimace as he took the distraction as an excuse to sit back down and be warmer. "I met someone before I left the Salamander home city, and it sounds like he's in trouble."

"That sucks. But what does it have to do with the Rat?"

"Well, that's the thing," Klein said, scratching at the bandana that encircled his head and restrained his hair. "He asked for her."

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As she reflected on the buzz of rumors and speculation about the reasons for the sudden resignation of the Cait Sith leader, Argo had to admit that there was one serious downside to engineering a secret coup: she couldn't sell the truth of what had happened without breaking the terms of her agreement with Raikouji. He'd been intimidated enough to resign his position and lay low during the resulting special election, but if she broke her word on that he'd be free to run in a future election—and the ensuing war between the two of them would be just short of nuclear. She'd win—but it would cost her time and money she didn't want to spend just to burn someone who was already beaten.

But she couldn't just pretend ignorance or refuse to sell the information—there were far too many rumors running around the city already, and her pride and reputation wouldn't allow her to admit to not knowing something.

So Argo did what she always did when she wanted to keep a secret: she set the price for revealing it extortionately high. *Fifty thousand Yuld should do it*, she reasoned as she quickly typed out a curt answer to the latest inquiry. She'd set it at twenty thousand at first, but had been alarmed to find at least one taker at that price. What had they been doing to amass that kind of money, less than two weeks into the game? The fact itself was worth holding onto; someone would pay for it.

But it still presented her with a buyer for something she didn't actually want to sell. So she pretended to go back and forth with an imaginary source who was willing to counter-offer in order to suppress the information, and raised the price until she stopped getting responses. A few false leads planted in the city's rumor mill would help divert some more of the pressure from her, giving her time to deal with inquiries that would actually make her money.

Among other things.
"Well?" Alicia asked, her tone impatiently expectant as she swept her arms wide, fabric rippling as it spilled off her left arm.

Argo finished and sent her last message, looking up from the pillow where she sat in the room that Alicia had been renting. She evaluated her friend with a critical eye and gave a twitch of the ears. "A cape? Really?"

"Half-cape," Alicia corrected with a pout. "It's supposed to make me look regal."

"It makes you look like Supercat with blonde dreadlocks," Argo said, sighing as she received and ignored yet another incoming message notification. "Capes suck. If we ever get outta here, remind me to send you a video clip and show you why. And what's with the bell? Afraid you're gonna lose yourself?"

Alicia reached up and fingered the golf ball-sized brass bell hanging from the black collar that encircled her neck. "Oh, Thelvin thinks I need to play up the cuteness a bit."

Argo snorted. "Cute and regal?"

"Knowing the guys in this faction, he's probably right," Argo said. "But you've already got the position. Not like you need to campaign for it now. Just do a good job and you'll be fine." Her face suddenly evolved into an impish grin. "Or could there be another reason, hmm? Any word from your boyfriend?"

Alicia's face colored, her ears flattening back against her head. "He's not my boyfriend! And no, nothing since they went north." She folded her arms and turned, giving Argo a cross look out of the corner of her eye as she flicked her tail in a dismissive fillip. "He's got stuff to do, you know. And so do I. Now besides the cape and the bell, how do I look?"

Argo shrugged, uncurling from her sitting position and rising to her feet. Giving her friend a look up and down, she said, "Other than that? Nice panties."

"Argo!"

"Leotard, whatever. Look, you're asking the wrong girl for fashion advice. Don't you have a speech to make or something?"

"I still have—"

As Alicia cut off her protest mid-sentence, her eyes went to the left in a motion that Argo knew meant she'd received a new message. After a few moments of her fingers dancing in the air, Alicia's menus suddenly went visible and she beckoned towards Argo. Her curiosity immediately piqued, Argo complied, looking over her friend's shoulder.

「Hey Alicia, thanks again for helping us and stuff. Sorry I haven't PMed you, but we're doing fine and just left your territory. Um... that's not actually why I'm sending you this though. Can you maybe get ahold of Argo? There's this guy I know in the Salamanders, Eugene, and he just contacted me from exile and said that his brother Mortimer is being held in isolation by Kibaou in Gattan. He and Mort were going to challenge Kibaou when I left, and I guess that didn't go so well. Eugene said Argo would know who he was, and said to say "Lugru" like she'd know what that was. So like... yeah. Thanks again. -Klein」

Argo was a quick reader. For short messages like this, she simply memorized the contents at a glance.
and reviewed them in her head, so she only spent a moment standing over Alicia's shoulder before stepping back and frowning thoughtfully.

Mistaking her look, Alicia said, "I told you he's not my—"

"Chsst!" Argo hissed, holding up a hand as she began to pace a circuit around the room. "Gimme a sec." It was a tough nut to crack. At present her only contact in the Salamanders was Kibaou's own right-hand man, who thought that she was his source of intel on the rest of the world. He'd be no help in freeing a captive held by his boss. And there was no way that she alone could get to—

Alicia was on the verge of noting with annoyance that a "sec" had turned into close to a minute when Argo suddenly halted both her pacing and her train of thought, snapping her fingers. "Alicia, do you have any clearers you can give me for a couple days? I need someone high-level, two if you can spare them." Alicia owed her, and while Argo wouldn't have minded waiting to cash in that chit, pieces were starting to fall into place in her head and she was certain this would be worth it—assuming all went well.

Blinking at the sudden shift in mood and topic, Alicia tapped her lower lip. "Um... I can think of a few possibilities, but asking any of them to go to the Salamander home city for a rescue mission? That'd be suicide."

"Yeah, so it's a good thing that's not what I'm asking."

Alicia crossed her arms under her bust, her tone becoming all business as she regarded her friend with a hint of wariness. "Okay, what then?"

Argo smirked, pointing at her own nose. "I need an escort."

The island hovered about a kilometer east of the mountain range that ringed the center of Alfheim, looking like nothing so much as a miniature mountain itself, turned on its tip and with a forest planted atop the irregular base. At its lowest, the tip was barely fifty meters off the surface of the marsh, low enough that on foggier days the tip would be shrouded in mist and seem to be standing on the ground below. From ground level the trees at the top were barely visible, but as a person rose higher into the air it became clear that there was life atop the floating island—not just the dense clusters of twisted juniper-like trees, but movement that signaled animal or insect life.

Such islands numbered in the thousands in the skies above Alfheim, ranging in size from those barely large enough for a single person to perch atop and rest their wings all the way up to juggernauts massive enough to cause a local cataclysm if they decided to suddenly drop from the air. This one was towards the high end of the middle range, larger than most but by no means the greatest, and even in the system it had a name: players who ventured within ten meters of it would be presented with the purple text «Hammertooth Island» at the height of their peripheral vision. Text like that signaled a zone change—an obsolete term from legacy MMOs, one which in ALO referred to something that was merely useful as a navigational reference and as a trigger to change any BGM that might be present.

Hundreds of meters above sea level, two figures sat at the edge of the floating mountain, resting: a small one in purple lightweight armor trimmed with red, and a taller one clothed mostly in robes with the watery colors common to the Undines. The smaller one kicked her legs absently as they dangled over the grassy edge, and smiled up at the other as they finished the bread and fish cakes that constituted their midday meal.

"Four hundred and sixty-three," she declared with a smugly sing-song tone that might've been
annoying coming from someone any less cute.

Asuna laughed at Yuuki, plucking a handful of grass and throwing it at the younger girl; it slowed to a flutter and disintegrated into blue sparkles. "No fair," she said. "I've still got over 600 EXP to my next level. Have you been sneaking out to fight stuff while I was sleeping?"

Yuuki gave a melodic giggle and slipped off the edge—a move that made Asuna's heart leap into her chest until the Imp girl began immediately beating her wings and hovering in front of her. It was nothing short of amazing to her, how quickly Yuuki had mastered Voluntary Flight—something Asuna herself had yet to quite do. For all of the girl's initial terror and shyness, something within her seemed to have blossomed and come into its own as soon as she held a sword in her hand and saw what she could do with it. She took to the game with a natural joy at which Asuna could only shake her head and marvel.

"'Course not!" she protested. "You saw what the manual said—there's an EXP bonus for getting the last attack, and I've been lucky."

More talented than lucky, Asuna had to admit. She also had to admit that Yuuki had her there on the... what did they call it? Game mechanics. They'd been reading the manual together at night for the last few days, materializing the help files as a physical object and sitting on their bed going through it almost like a bedtime story. If the girl was getting a little ahead of her, it was only because Yuuki was being more aggressive in her attacks. This had worried Asuna at first until Yuuki pointed out that Asuna could heal her, but not vice-versa—it made sense for the younger girl to take the "forward" position in fights.

"Come on!" Yuuki said brightly, hovering closer to Asuna and tugging at the sleeve of her robes. "I bet some monsters we fought have come back by now."

"Repops," Asuna said, remembering the unfamiliar term from the previous night's study and tasting it. She resisted the pull, pushing herself back from the edge a little and standing up. "And I bet you're right."

They quickly fell back into the routine they'd established thus far. Since Asuna was still more comfortable fighting on the ground, they kept the fights there, picking a safe spot to make their stand and Yuuki flying off to "pull" a mob back there. Yuuki had discovered that her basic Blindness spell was very effective for this—it gave her a free hit or two and seemed to really enrage the mob, causing it to focus much of its aggression on the more nimble girl while Asuna struck at its flanks or healed Yuuki as necessary.

It was heading towards early afternoon when Yuuki got the notification; since they were partied Asuna saw the window appear as the girl's face lit up and she gave a delighted yell, spinning in the air. "Asuna, look look!"

"I see it, Yuuki—congratulation." She grinned as she said the word in English, echoing the ungrammatical way it was written on the screen that said Level Up and told the girl how many HP and MP she'd gained. "Do you know where you're going to put your points?"

Yuuki looked pensive as she sat down on the stump of a fallen tree and opened her menu. "I kinda wanna put 'em all in AGI... I like being fast."

"Don't neglect your STR and VIT," Asuna cautioned. "You won't be able to use better swords or do as much damage without STR, and your VIT is your life." Listen to me, she thought. I sound like my brother. A week ago that might as well have been a foreign language to me. Now... now it's becoming as familiar to me as anything I studied in school.
But Yuuki was a smart girl, and she picked up on all of this just as quickly as Asuna—if not moreso, it sometimes seemed. She nodded as her fingers moved over her menu, and when she closed it with a flicking gesture, she looked up at Asuna with an expression of adoration that melted her heart every time. "All done! So what now—"

Asuna gave Yuuki a puzzled look as she dropped off in mid-sentence, the girl's eyes shifting and then widening. "Yuuki, wha—"

Her own question was cut off by a soft weight slamming into her midriff as Yuuki kicked herself off the stump and tackled her, the sound of her wings buzzing into life and carrying the two of them clear as an arrow whistled through the space where Asuna had just been standing. Yuuki's arms were still wrapped tightly around her as they struck the ground and rolled, and as they both picked themselves up off the ground they drew their weapons and saw another Imp player hanging in the air above a few dozen meters away. He was scowling as he drew another arrow from his quiver and nocked it in the wicked-looking dark gray recurve bow he was carrying.

Asuna's heart sank as she saw a pair of players in blood-colored armor rise above the edge of the island and take position to either side of the archer. Without thinking about what she was doing, Asuna stood in between him and Yuuki.

"Now why'd you have to go and do that, girl?" the Imp asked in exasperation. "You ruined my shot."

"Asuna!" Yuuki hissed, trying to elbow past her. "He's trying to shoot you!"

"Save it, Krall," said one of the Salamanders, a youth in a mage's robes with a long orange ponytail. His nasal voice was filled with scorn. "She's obviously an exile who decided to stay here."

The other Salamander, a man who appeared to be considerably older than either, looked between the two of them with an expression that Asuna read as something akin to disbelief. He said something quietly to both, the urgency of his tones audible from where she and Yuuki stood, but not his words. The argument that ensued was not pitched for her ears, but the Imp with the bow never took his aim off of her while it went on.

"Yuuki," Asuna said without averting her gaze from their assailants, trying not to move her mouth too much as she spoke. "They're distracted and we've only got one chance at this. When I rush them, you take off and fly as fast as you can to Parasel. Don't stop until you're there, and tell Diavel what's happening. Understand?"

"No."

Asuna was so taken aback by the refusal that she almost turned to look at Yuuki in shock before catching herself. Before she could open her mouth to ask why, Yuuki made the point moot. "I'm staying with Asuna. If I run, you'll die... and then I'll be all alone... again."

Tears welled up in Asuna's eyes unbidden, despite her trying very hard not to let them out. "Yuuki..."

"We go together," Yuuki said, reaching over and setting a hand on Asuna's arm. "They're bullies. If we stand up to them, they'll back down."

Bullies, Asuna thought, her mind in turmoil. No, they're killers. And they're going to kill us...

"Asuna," Yuuki insisted, squeezing her sword arm through the robes.
They're going to kill her...

Asuna's fingers tightened around the hilt of her rapier, still held out before her as if it could block an arrow if the archer decided to let it fly.

"No, screw this," said the older Salamander loudly in disgust, scowling as he turned to leave. "I didn't sign up for this to murder kids."

"NO!" Asuna screamed as she kicked off the ground and shot towards the raiding party, light flaring along her rapier.

The archer's eyes widened, and as he let out a shout a violet light danced along his bowstring. An impact that felt like a thrown brick struck Asuna in the shoulder moments before her own attack propelled her forward and exploded against the Imp's leather breastplate, and a fireball from her left shot just above her head as the archer went tumbling out of control. Arcane symbols sprang up around the mage as he chanted a series of awkward-sounding syllables, and the symbols resolved into a glimmering orange field around him that looked like it was made of thousands of dancing sparks.

He was just starting to chant another spell when Asuna heard Yuuki's voice, and a bolt of shimmering black energy zipped past her and struck the Salamander, a status symbol appearing beside his HP gauge as the black fire smothered his eyes. Yuuki herself was right behind the spell, charging in with her sword drawn and executing a two-hit combo that cut off almost a third of the mage's HP. As she drew close to him, the sparks around him ignited and fire sheeted across her body in retaliation, burning away some of her own life.

Asuna turned her head to check for others, but the Imp was still trying to regain control of his flight and the other Salamander seemed to have abandoned his companions. Taking advantage of the breather, she held out her free hand and chanted the quick incantation for her basic heal, breathing a sigh of relief as the heal countered the ongoing damage over time from the fire shield and started to bring her back towards full.

And then she stopped and stared at herself in shock. Her free hand?

There should've been something else in it. There wasn't. She'd—

She'd flown. Without thinking about it, without overthinking it, in the heat of the moment she'd simply kicked off... and taken flight. All that time they'd spent practicing, with her trying so hard to do what seemed to come so naturally to Yuuki... and in one fleeting moment of desperation she'd just done it.

A dark bolt of energy zipping past her face and a looming shadow in her peripheral vision reminded her that this wasn't the time to get preoccupied. She got her rapier up just in time to redirect Krall's axe, turning the blow but still taking some damage from it. A series of exchanges like that left her battered, but her HP didn't seem to have dropped by the time the Imp backed off a few meters and regarded her warily.

When his eyes shot towards the battle between Yuuki and the Salamander mage, Asuna took the same opportunity and saw that the mage's HP had fallen well into the yellow zone. Reapplying the blindness debuff to him, Yuuki gave him a solid kick that sent him tumbling away and turned towards Asuna, who quickly returned her eyes to the Imp. The archer didn't seem all that happy, whether at having to shoulder his bow for a melee weapon or at the reversal in the odds.

"Get lost," Asuna snapped, leveling her rapier at him. "Before I change my mind."
Either the Imp knew good advice when he heard it, or had decided he'd had enough anyway. With a *che* sound, he scowled and flew off in the direction that the mage had fallen. At that moment, Asuna couldn't bring herself to care what happened to them once they were out of her sight. She turned just in time to catch a flying bundle of Yuuki, who smacked into her in midair and wrapped her up in a hug.

"Asuna, you were wonderful! Just wonderful! We really showed them what happens to bullies, didn't we?"

Hugging Yuuki close, Asuna closed her eyes and squeezed the tears from them as they hung there in the air high above the Undine lands. "We really did, Yuuki," she said, banishing the fear and anger she'd felt at the ambush. "We showed them who's boss."

"Hey, Asuna..." Yuuki pulled back for a moment and looked up at her. "What did that one guy mean about 'murdering kids'?"

That was the thing that had set her off, all right—the implication of the third player's words had been that no matter what he thought, the other two had every intention of player-killing her and Yuuki. What had they been doing this far north? They were on the far western edge of Undine territory, but there shouldn't have been any danger from PKers up here—that was why she'd chosen this area for the two of them to go leveling up.

"I don't think we were what they expected," Asuna said finally. "I don't think they were after us, specifically, just easy targets... and it bothered that one man that you were so young."

"So I guess not all of the Salamanders are bad..."

Asuna nodded, flying back towards the island and settling to the ground. "They're just people, Yuuki... people who've gotten caught up in something bigger than them. Some of them good, some of them bad, most of them just... complicated."

Yuuki landed delicately beside her, nodding thoughtfully. "I guess that makes sense..." She looked up at Asuna meaningfully, her expression serious. "I'm glad we didn't kill any of them though... that would've been a horrible sin. The worst."

Asuna reached over and put her arm around Yuuki's shoulder, smiling as she pulled her into a hug. "So am I, Yuuki... so am I."
Chapter 11

"While rare drops from mobs will almost always provide the most powerful gear, players should not forget that crafted equipment can be just as effective—and in many cases, far more readily available. Common materials such as iron and steel produce average-quality weapons suitable only for starting characters, but Alfheim Online contains a vast number of recipes for advanced materials which can be used to craft weapons and armor that can rival or even surpass all but the rarest mob drops—in the hands of a player smith with sufficient skill. The catch of course, is knowing the recipe—and finding the requisite components, some of which can be quite rare…"

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Player-Crafted Equipment»

12 ~ 14 November 2022
Day 7 - Evening

In most traditional RPGs there were a variety of gameplay tropes that existed for the convenience of players exploring dark areas: the so-called Hollywood Darkness being one of the most common, dictating that even deep underground in passageways that have never seen the light of day, there would still be just enough ambient light for players to make their way. Perhaps these passages would even be lit by Hollywood Torches, which hung unattended on the walls and somehow remained eternally lit even in ruins that had supposedly been abandoned for thousands of years.

Alfheim Online, in Kirito's estimation, had not been designed with the convenience of players in mind.

Once he and Lisbeth had rounded the first bend in the series of tunnels, the light level dropped significantly. Only the faintest glow backlit them as they were pursued by wind-borne gusts of snow, flakes blowing past them and disappearing as they flew into the shadows cast by the two players. In a matter of moments they had to call a stop as Lisbeth tripped over a rock and went sprawling onto a floor she couldn't even see.

"Ow!" Lisbeth cried out. Kirito knew the fall couldn't have hurt, but that didn't mean it was pleasant—or that she didn't react to the impact out of reflex as if it had hurt. She glared up at him, rubbing her knees. "You know, seems to me there's an obvious flaw in this little plan of yours…"

Kirito ignored the dig, searching his memory for a spell he hadn't had a need to cast in a while. "Matto tsutakke, trekul buren." The darkness was momentarily broken by the luminous golden symbols that whisked into existence around him with each spellword, casting a dim warm glow against Kirito's face. When the incantation was complete, the ring of light burst into particles that spread over both he and Lisbeth. At once the ambient light level in the tunnel seemed to rise to that of a partially moonlit night—perhaps not enough to read without eyestrain, but definitely enough to navigate without fear of repeating Lisbeth's fall.

As she pushed herself up to her feet and dusted herself off, Lisbeth gave him a cross look. "You couldn't have done that before?"

"You mean before when we were running through the blizzard while our HP drained away from the cold?" He shrugged as he walked past her, heading down the tunnel without looking back. "Yeah. Probably."

Lost for words, Lisbeth settled for sticking out her tongue at his back and jogged to catch up.

The illumination spell that Kirito kept active did more than keep them from stumbling over unseen
rocks—it kept them from stumbling over mobs. Without the Searching skill, they had to rely on visual identification to keep from getting ambushed by a variety of subterranean monster types—some of which blended in disturbingly well with the walls. When they reached a large room that seemed to teem with man-sized centipede-like mobs covered in carapaces almost identical in appearance to the stone of the caves themselves, Kirito insisted that they take the time to clear every single mob in the room.

"Why?" Lisbeth asked as they prepared to pull the first one, lifting her mace from her belt loop and readying it. "Can't we just clear a path through them?"

"You'll see," was Kirito's enigmatic answer, drawing another look of annoyance from the young smith. "Ready?"

"Just pull it already," Lisbeth said with growing impatience, smacking the head of her mace into her gloved palm.

But Kirito had already picked up a pebble and thrown it sharply at the nearest mob. The creature reared up like a cobra, gave a chittering hiss, and sped towards them with alarming speed. Its initial lunge caught only air as Kirito rolled to the side and came up on one knee, blue light trailing from a spinning slash that cut a red line down the centipede's side, severing a number of legs. The spinning motion continued as he pirouetted on one heel up to a standing position, his second sword skill cutting a V-shaped pattern across the creature's back that sparked and seemed to do little damage.

"You need to shatter the carapace with your mace first!" Kirito called out as he danced out of the way of another biting attack, reversing his grip on the sword and stabbing into its underbelly. A moment later there was a sound like breaking pottery as Lisbeth's mace cracked down on the mob's back, exposing pale flesh that Kirito immediately slashed with a series of quick strikes.

They made short work of it after that, and the centipedes that followed were considerably easier once they got into the necessary pattern of exposing and exploiting its weak point. Each time one was defeated, Kirito made a point of collecting the broken shards of carapace that remained on the ground after the mob disappeared in a cloud of blue polygons. Again Lisbeth questioned him on the necessity; again Kirito offered a vague reply that only managed to annoy her further.

The mob population in the caverns seemed particularly dense, and while Kirito had a fairly good idea of where he was going, the necessity of clearing as they went and bypassing more powerful mobs made their progress slow and arduous. It was especially tedious due to the lack of external references; this deep underground the passage of time seemed even more difficult to gauge than outside in the snow, and without a clock in their HUDs it would've been almost impossible to guess at the time of day.

Eventually, Kirito led her up a side passage which rose steadily uphill, gradual in most parts but occasionally requiring them to clamber up steep inclines which needed the use of both hands to pull themselves forward. A renewed chill in the air became a frigid draft that blew past their faces, and when they cleared their way to a fork in the tunnels, Kirito wet a finger and held it up before directing Lisbeth to the right-hand path. There a series of rough-hewn icy steps ascended towards a distant light, and Kirito had to quickly seize Lisbeth's arm once to keep her from slipping and taking a nasty fall back down. He could've sworn he saw her face flush in the dim light before she mumbled her thanks, but didn't press it.

When they reached the top of the stairs, the reason for the draft became obvious. The room was roughly oval in shape, thirty meters on the long end with jagged ice walls that sloped towards a hole in the ceiling. Dim light poured through this hole, light and snowfall—a mound of which collected in the center of the room in a great frozen heap.
Looking around carefully, Kirito nodded. This was the spot. "We'll make camp here for the night," he said as he opened his inventory and turned his sleeping roll into a game object; it materialized in his hands as a shimmering 3D wireframe and then turned solid.

"Here?" Lisbeth asked in dismay, staring at Kirito as if he'd lost his mind. "It was a lot warmer when we were deeper underground. It's freezing here and there's snow coming in through the ceiling." As if to punctuate her words, a thin flurry caught the draft and blew past her face.

"It's also safe here," Kirito said, looking back at her coolly. "No mobs will pop in this room, and I won't have to maintain that spell in order for us to have some light."

"And how would you know it's safe here?" she demanded. Her defiant stance, fists on her hips, lasted only until she shivered and had to wrap her arms around herself again. "You know more than you're letting on, Kirito, and it's not the first time. You've been leading us around in here like you've got a map in your head. Who are you, really?"

Kirito turned away and was silent for a few moments. He didn't really have to answer her, he knew. But he needed her help if he was going to replace his broken sword, and they'd already come this far. "I was a beta tester," he said quietly. "I've been through these tunnels before." He looked back over his shoulder at her, shaking the bedroll out and laying it flat on the ground. "Satisfied?"

Lisbeth was quiet for a few moments. Kirito couldn't begin to guess at what was going on in her head as she looked down and away. "Maybe," she said finally. "But why can't we just get out through that hole in the ceiling? It doesn't look like it's snowing that hard anymore."

As if in answer, Kirito's wings appeared on his back. He wiggled them, but they remained dark, without a hint of the iridescence that indicated they were charged and ready to take to the air; a moment later he dismissed them. "We can't fly underground. Try it if you like; I'm going to get warm."

By the time Lisbeth had opened her inventory and scrolled down to find her bedroll, Kirito had already unequipped his weapons and slid into his own, fidgeting a couple times before he seemed to get comfortable. He lay on his back with the edge of the bag drawn up to his chin, and after a few moments of indecision Lisbeth unrolled her bedding next to his, separated by almost an arm-span of the icy floor.

As she slipped into the welcoming warmth of the sleeping bag and zipped it up around her, she turned her head to look over at this customer, this beta tester, who'd accompanied her on this adventure to replace the weapon she'd broken. He'd seemed so serious before, and he had a ferocious grace when he was fighting, but with his features stilled and his eyes closed, his face was childlike, almost feminine in its softness. He couldn't be older than her, she knew; she strongly suspected that he was at least a year her junior.

But then her mind flashed back to the way he'd fought as they cleared their way through the Glitafrost Wastes and the tunnels into which they fled, and she shook off thoughts of his age. Did age really matter in here anymore?

Lisbeth shivered. Even in her sleeping bag it was still uncomfortably cold, and without really knowing where the thought came from, she found herself wishing for a moment that she'd set up her bedroll closer to his. A flush rose to her cheeks, and she shook her head hard from side to side to banish the thought. It wasn't like _that_... he was far too annoying to really like him _that_ way. It was just that she was still so cold, even just sharing a little warmth through the fabric might've helped.
She tried to gauge whether or not he'd fallen asleep, but since ALO avatars didn't need to breathe and had no autonomic respiratory animation, his chest was as still as the dead. After a few more moments of watching his face like this, she spoke softly. "Ne, Kirito…"

At first she thought that he'd already fallen asleep. But after a few beats, he let out a drowsy sound that was almost nothing more than a hum, and that might've been interrogatory.

Taking it for the latter, Lisbeth licked her dry lips and went on. "I'm still really cold." When he didn't say anything further, she mustered her courage. "Don't take this the wrong way, but… can I move a little closer?"

She wasn't sure quite how long she waited for an answer, but it had to have been measured in minutes. After a time, she realized that Kirito had probably been on the verge of sleep already, and that he'd drifted off while she was waiting. She chewed on her lower lip briefly, and then squirmed and shimmied until her bedroll was just a bit nearer to his. When this didn't present her with any relief, she kept going until she felt her elbow bump into his through the thick bedding, and quickly jerked her arm away.

It was a little better—perhaps enough. Lisbeth no longer felt like she wanted to shiver every few moments, and she rolled onto her side and pulled her legs up into a half-fetal position, eyes searching Kirito's sleeping features for signs of life or wakefulness. Without really thinking about what she was doing, her arm slowly slipped out of the bag, hand reaching tentatively towards the face of the boy beside her.

Too cold. Before her fingers could brush his cheek, she snatched her arm back into her sleeping bag and hugged it around herself, hands tucked under opposite armpits for warmth. She was asleep almost as soon as her eyes closed.

As the last of the sparkling energy disappeared from Argo's translucent yellow wings, they folded down towards the small of her back and shimmered once before disappearing. A moment later her feet touched down on the grassy plains at the edge of Cait Sith territory, and she jogged to a stop while looking back at her companions expectantly.

Thelvin was the first to land after her, only a little less gracefully but with considerably more noise as his massive armor-clad form dropped to the ground. Rather than Argo's delicate jog, he absorbed the impact of landing by sinking smoothly into a crouch with his arms out for balance, then rose to his full height. When Argo smirked, he arched his eyebrows. "Let's see you do better in plate armor, young lady."

"Did I say anything?" Argo replied impishly as the third member of their party carefully maneuvered himself to join them, breathing a sigh of relief as his feet sought solid ground.

"No, but you were thinking it really hard," Thelvin answered smugly before turning and clapping the other young man on the shoulder. "See, Sasamaru? Nothing to it. Once you form the mental connection and get the hang of it, it's like riding a bike. Just takes practice."

Sasamaru smiled, brushing a few wind-blown strands of his wavy brown hair out of his face. "Still feels kind of weird, though. Like, I can move the wings, but I can't actually feel them, so the only way I can really tell I'm doing it right is by the results." He planted the butt of his spear on the ground and leaned on it as he spoke, obviously worn out from the flight.

Thelvin didn’t miss that. "It's definitely a little more tiring at first. You'll be using the muscles on your back too much, twitching places that you don't actually need to because they're close to the nerve
pathways that you're trying to signal. You'll get it."

Argo's eyes shifted to where the clock was in her HUD, and she pursed her lips. "Come on, we can talk while we walk. We've got a fairly narrow window to work with here." She was in motion before she finished speaking, quick strides carrying her towards the treeline of the nearby forest.

"Window for what?" Sasamaru asked as he shouldered his spear and fell in with Argo and Thelvin.

"To get to the Lugru Corridor without having to explain ourselves to any Sylph patrols," Argo answered after a moment to think over whether she should charge him for the information; she decided that his knowing would probably be helpful to her. "The next one oughta be passing through the area in about 40 minutes, thereabouts. That gives us twenty minutes to fully rest our wings while we walk, and another ten minutes of flight, with about a ten-minute buffer to clear any mobs along the way. Should be just enough time to get there."

As Sasamaru's mouth hung open slightly, Thelvin covered a grin with one gauntleted hand. When the boy managed to recover his composure, he stammered for a moment. "H-how on earth do you know—"

"I'll tell you for 500 Yuld."

Sasamaru almost jerked to a stop in mid-pace, staggering briefly before jogging to catch up. He looked at Thelvin with wide eyes. "Is she serious?"

Thelvin laughed. "I don't know, ask her. She'll probably tell you whether she is or not—if you pay her 100 Yuld."

Walking between the two, Sasamaru's head swiveled from side to side as if trying to decide if he was being had. Finally, when no one said anything else, he opened his menu and tapped at it for a few seconds, materializing a small pouch in his hand and passing it to Argo. She made it disappear immediately without breaking stride.

"I know a few people in the Sylphs," Argo explained as they entered the treeline, vaulting over a moss-encrusted embankment and sliding down the other side before continuing. "Some of them highly placed. I paid them for today's patrol schedule for the northeastern section of the Ancient Forest. We'll be fine as long as we stick to our window."

The information turned out to be worth the price; the remainder of their journey passed without even catching sight of a patrol, and they ended up having just enough flight time to make it within a few minutes' walk of the entrance to Lugru Corridor. The mountains ringing the center of Alfheim rose up in their vision, visible through the gaps in the tree canopy in a way that dominated the skyline, and the only significant conflict along the way was a pitched battle against a family of carnivore-type mobs that they had the misfortune to encounter.

Before long, they pushed through a particularly thick section of underbrush and emerged in the clearing surrounding their destination. Argo saw Thelvin stiffen abruptly in front of her just as she heard a loud shout from the far end of the clearing.

"Hostiles!"

Argo caught sight of a pair of Sylphs who stood facing each other with their hands in the air as if manipulating a trade window. A third, the one who'd yelled, stood sentry atop a massive boulder easily ten meters in height, his bow already coming up as he drew an arrow from his quiver.

Thelvin shoved Argo behind him roughly as he unslung his shield from his back, swinging it
overhand and getting it in front of him just as the projectile shattered against it. He shouted as he
drew his sword with his shield held out ready to intercept any further attacks. "We're not here to
fight!"

The two who'd been trading had already drawn their own weapons and taken to the air, hovering a
few meters off the ground and looking quite ready to do battle. The sentry—a youth with long
flowing light green hair—held his fire, perhaps not wanting to waste any more arrows. He raised his
voice and called out loudly. "Then why are you here?"

Argo stepped around Thelvin, putting a hand against the flat of his blade and pushing it down.
"We're here to use the Corridor. That's all. If you're going to Lugru, we'll all get there much quicker
if we travel together."

One of the trading players settled herself to the ground and crossed half the distance separating her
from Argo's party on foot. She didn't sheathe her longsword, but it wasn't quite pointed at them
either. "Stand down, Gataki." In response, the sentry lowered his bow but didn't remove the arrow
from the string. Satisfied, the Sylph who'd approached them called out. "It's true that a party of six
will clear faster than a party of three. But you're in our territory. How do we know we can trust
you?"

"You don't," Argo replied. "But here are your choices: party with us and we all get there quickly.
Don't party with us and we waste time leapfrogging each other and watching our backs. Or fight us
now and someone dies needlessly." She paused for effect, and added: "I kinda like Option A the
best."

The third Sylph joined the apparent leader at her side, and the two traded looks. Nodding, she
sheathed her sword in a single smooth motion, a slight smile cracking her face. "I like the way you
think," she said. "I'm Chihae. The mage here is my husband Natsuo. And the excitable one up there
on the rock is our friend Gataki."

Argo introduced herself and her party by name as Thelvin sheathed his sword and returned his shield
to his back, his expression still serious. Chihae gave the three of them a slight bow. "You're Cait
Sith, aren't you? It's the first time we've seen any—I'm not sure Gataki was even sure you were
players at first."

"The cursor over our heads oughta be a dead giveaway if you focus," Argo replied. When she
focused on each of the Sylphs, she could see a diamond-shaped yellow cursor hanging just above
their heads, the color indicating a neutral race. She knew they'd see the same thing above the heads
of her own party.

"I know that, but I don't think Gataki did," Chihae gave the boy a stern look. "He does now.
Anyway, what brings three Cait Sith to the Lugru Corridor?"

Argo smiled. "It's a really great story. I'll tell you for 2000 Yuld."

Chihae's jaw dropped. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're the Rat," Natsuo said suddenly, a light of realization coming to his eyes. When his wife
looked at him oddly, he nudged her in the arm. "Remember that stuff some of the beta testers back in
Sylvain were talking about—some Cait Sith info broker who could tell you anything for a price?"

"Well isn't that something." Chihae looked at Argo as if seeing her for the first time as she reached
back and tied her dark green hair into a ponytail. "I think I'll pass on the offer. We should get going
anyway. Are we traveling together, then?"
"Unless you like the second or third options better," Argo said as she picked at her teeth with one of her claws.

What had appeared at first to be an unwelcome complication to their day turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Chihae's party was solid on DPS, but she wasn't half the tank that Thelvin was. Between his defense and her party's damage output they cleared their way safely and swiftly through the higher-level mobs in the Corridor without anyone dropping into the yellow zone. At one point midway through the journey Sasamaru even leveled up, and his elation at this simple accomplishment put a grin on everyone's faces, lifting some of the remaining tension in the mixed party.

At last they emerged from the dark and winding passageways to find themselves atop a cliff overlooking a vast underground lake, oval in shape and about a kilometer from one end to the other. In the center of the lake was a circular island a few hundred meters in diameter, a high-walled town with bright lights and visible activity built atop it. Connecting the island to the shores on opposite sides was a pair of long bridges supported by shallow arches that rose a few meters from the surface of the water.

The cavern in which all of this existed was massive—over a kilometer in diameter and rising nearly as high, the jagged rock walls and ceilings carpeted with millions of luminescent rocks and gemstones that filled the vast chamber with a cool ambient glow brighter than a moonlit night. In a world filled with stunning scenes of unspeakable beauty, Lugru was one of the sights that Argo would've recommended no one miss seeing.

She had been to Lugru during the beta, and she knew what it had to look like to those who were seeing it for the first time. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Sasamaru along with Chihae and her party standing slack-jawed at the edge of the cliff, and saw the latter's hand entwine with Natsuo's as they shared the beauty of the moment. A beta tester like Argo, Thelvin was somewhat less moved by the sight, but he smiled as he waited for the others to have their fill of it and exchanged a knowing glance with Argo.

"And I thought Sylvain was lovely," Chihae said softly. "To think something like this exists…"

"It's almost enough to forgive that man for trapping us all in here," her husband said. When she gave him a sidewise look, he hastily repeated: "Almost."

Everyone laughed, stirring themselves from the near-trance that had enveloped most of the group. "Come on," Thelvin said, taking the lead as he had for most of the trip thus far, a role into which he fell naturally as a tank. He carefully began picking his way down the narrow, twisting steps that led down the walls of the cavern towards the nearest shoreline. One by one the rest followed, Chihae taking up the rearguard position.

It took the better part of a half hour to cautiously descend even halfway down the stairs, which narrowed and widened and occasionally broke down in crumbling sections, requiring them to perform nerve-wracking hops across the gaps. Everyone was showing signs of weariness when they reached a stretch of stairs that was wide enough to stop and rest. Food and drink came out as all six players leaned against the wall, grateful for the opportunity to rest their feet.

"How much further?" Chihae asked, craning her neck to try to see around the next bend in the path.

"Not much," Argo said. "We're past the halfway point now."

Sasamaru frowned suddenly, squinting into the distance as if trying to see something tiny or far away. "What's that?"
The Sylphs looked, but didn't seem to see anything at all. Thelvin turned his eyes in the direction Sasamaru was looking, and when Argo followed suit she knew immediately what she was seeing. "Flight trail," she said, coming back to her feet.

"That doesn't make sense though," Chihae said in puzzlement as she finally caught sight of the faint violet lines in the air. "We can't fly underground."

Thelvin looked at Argo suddenly, unslinging his shield and drawing his sword. "No, we can't," he said.

Argo nodded gravely as the others armed themselves, alarmed by the actions of their companions. "But Imps can."

The day began for Asuna like most others had. The internal alarm she set each night sounded in her mind, the abrasive ringing audible only to her. As she opened her eyes to slits she reached out and touched the bell-shaped icon hanging in the air before her, silencing the alarm with a sigh. Feeling a familiar warmth, she turned her head and saw Yuuki's sleeping form snuggled up next to her with her arm thrown over Asuna's stomach, her violet hair falling over her peaceful face in a wave.

Asuna felt a rush of emotion wash over her at the sight, and a smile touched her face. Yuuki was such a sweet little girl, and the way she seemed to have attached herself to Asuna made her feel like she had a younger sister to take care of. The duality in her was uncanny at times—she could be so timid and shy, especially when dealing with strangers socially. But after that first day when Asuna had found her crying in the alley, terrified of the city around her, the girl seemed to have discovered an inner strength—or perhaps rediscovered it; Asuna suspected it had been there all along and had simply been scared away from her by her traumatic first few days in the game.

Reluctantly she reached over with her free hand and poked Yuuki in the cheek with her index finger. "Wake up, sleepy. We've got work to do."

Yuuki's eyelids fluttered once, twice, and then opened fully with a smile like the dawn. She uncurled and stretched, her slender arms quivering high above her head. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, she bounced out of bed and grabbed Asuna's arm as if she hadn't just been the one fast asleep. "Well, what're you waiting for! I wanna go to the Rainbow Valley today!"

Asuna laughed as she allowed herself to be pulled up to a sitting position. "I don't think we're quite ready to go there yet, Yuuki," she said. "Remember what Diavel told us: we should be at least level 10 first, and there's a big boss there we need to stay away from."

"But we're almost there!"

"If by 'almost' you mean halfway from level 6 to 7, sure," Asuna said with a failed attempt at a stern look as she poked Yuuki in the belly, causing the girl to double over and giggle. "Tell you what. We'll clear our way to the edge of the valley today, but as soon as we see any mobs with dark red cursors, we turn back. Deal?"

Yuuki stuck out her pinky. Laughing again, Asuna hooked hers with it and they shook. She reached up and tousled the girl's hair and began getting ready.

Leveling up had become a mini-game between them, a friendly competition. It was one that Yuuki usually won due to a fighting style that relegated her to the role of forward while Asuna healed from the back and switched in when she could, but occasionally they would draw close to even with each other. When they checked before heading out, Yuuki was somewhere around 70% of the way to her
next level, while Asuna was at the halfway point. She resolved to get in the thick of things with her friend as much as possible today and catch up a bit, at least until they started running into more dangerous mobs.

With each passing day they grew stronger. The first few levels came quickly, but the fifth and sixth had each taken at least a full day of grinding by themselves, and at the rate they were going Asuna would've been quite surprised if they reached level 7 by the end of the day's grinding. But their skills grew as well, as did their ability to use those skills to best effect, and each day they managed to make better time and clear their way deeper into more challenging territory.

To Asuna, who a few weeks prior couldn't have even imagined herself playing a game that didn't fit on her mobile phone, the transformation was still nothing short of astonishing every time she allowed herself to think about it. Every night she and Yuuki studied the game manual together, picking something new to learn about—often with a particular area of study encouraged by Diavel, who'd taken on almost a fatherly interest in checking in on Yuuki's progress when he could spare the time. And every day while they had breakfast in the inn where they stayed, they went over their maps and decided where to focus their efforts, going out and grinding EXP from morning until dinnertime.

It had begun as survival, a necessity in a world where life and death were defined by numbers in the game engine—and that term itself was one that she'd never even heard before being trapped within ALO. But at some point in the days that followed, as she and Yuuki went out together and faced a hostile world side by side, it had become something else.

It had become *fun*.

That evening, they stood on the edge of a cliff overlooking the marshlands of northwestern Undine territory, a pair of rivers running downhill out of Rainbow Valley towards them and cascading over the edge of the cliff. Mist rose from the swampy landscape far below, coating them both in a chilly patina of dampness that would've been uncomfortable if they hadn't both been overheated from fighting almost nonstop on their way there.

The raging rivers that ran through Rainbow Valley spilled over a series of steppes as they descended gradually eastward towards the cliffside at the edge of the valley, each one resulting in a series of foaming waterfalls that filled the valley with the same kind of thick mist that was currently cooling off Asuna and Yuuki. As the sun began to sink towards the horizon, the perpetual rainbows that filled the valley from the sunlight refracting through the mist grew in intensity and number, a multicolored halo surrounding the orb of the sun in a broad circle that followed them wherever they went.

They'd been silent for some time, soaking in the fine mist and letting both the scenery and the white noise of the rapids fill them with peace as they came down from the adrenaline rush of battle. Finally, Yuuki reached over and gave Asuna a playful backhanded swat in the arm. "Ninety-two," she said with a giggle. Meaning that she only needed 92 more EXP until her next level.

"Oh shut up," Asuna said without heat, grinning as she pretended to push Yuuki towards the water. "You're going to hit 7 by the time we get back, aren't you?"

Yuuki nodded happily, her violet bangs plastered wetly to her face. "Asuna… how strong do you think we are, compared to everyone else?"

Asuna looked slightly surprised at the direction of the question. "I don't know," she said honestly. "We've been working really hard. I don't think we're that far behind the clearers—they've just started going into the valley here. Does it matter?"

Yuuki looked thoughtful as she hugged her arms around herself, shivering with the beginning of a
chill. "I guess it does, kinda," she said. "I mean… we have to be strong here. Stronger than anyone. I don’t… I don’t want to see anyone else die."

Anyone else. Asuna didn't miss the implication of the word; she knew that Yuuki had come into the game with someone... and that that someone hadn't survived the Salamander assault. She'd never talked about it since, and Asuna hadn't pried. When Yuuki was ready—if she ever was—she'd bring it up herself.

"Oh, Yuuki..." Asuna reached over and put her arm around the girl's shoulders. "You're already stronger than me," she said. "And we're working hard together every day. I think one day you could be the strongest player in the game, if you kept at it."

Yuuki's smile as she looked up at Asuna was positively radiant. "You really think so?"

"I know so," Asuna said confidently.

Yuuki seemed to chew on this for a few moments as she pushed her damp hair out of her face. "Then let's become clearers. We can do it if we're together, right?"

"Clearers?" Asuna's eyes were wide as she echoed the word. Clearers were... they were the ones who took all the chances. They pushed hard into dangerous areas, mapping a trail to wherever their faction needed to go next, always on the vanguard of the Undine efforts to break through Rainbow Valley and get to Arun. They worked tirelessly every single day—

Asuna stopped there, her thoughts screeching to a halt as she looked down at the wide-eyed little girl next to her—the little sister she'd never had, a partner at whose side she'd been fighting every day since they met, fighting to become as strong as possible and get as far as possible.

Hugging Yuuki tightly against the chill that she herself was starting to feel, Asuna laughed suddenly at the irony of it all. "Yes... I think we'll do just that. We can do anything if we stick together."

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By the time Kirito and Lisbeth reached the outskirts of the tunnels beneath Nissengrof, it was nearly lunchtime on their second day of travel. The transition was not an abrupt one—gradually the mob population began to thin out, the gaps in between fights becoming longer until it seemed like nearly a half hour had passed since they'd seen the last aggro mob.

A few times they even encountered other parties in the widening tunnels, Gnomes in twos and threes with the occasional Puca or Leprechaun mixed in. The parties usually gave each other space, nodding in a neutral or friendly manner but moving on to their destination. Kirito didn't stop to ask them for directions; he knew where he was going.

The hallway finally opened up on a large subterranean chamber lit by hundreds of torches, open-sided corridors lining the walls in a spiral across a dozen levels. Rope bridges criss-crossed the open space, providing access to shops and other establishments which were either burrowed into the sides of the chamber or built in a way that stuck out into the open space.

Kirito turned to look at Lisbeth, who was wide-eyed at the spectacle. "Nissengrof," he said. "Or one
of its many parts, anyway. So who's this Gnome we're supposed to be seeing?"

"Chellok," she answered, peering out over the rope railing that lined the edge of the corridor in which they stood. "We'll find him in the Hellforge District."

That gave Kirito a direction, at least. The Hellforge District was another chamber like the one they'd first encountered, a place where most of the noxious metalworking facilities were concentrated in order to keep them from stinking up the rest of Nissengrof. Even with this precaution, getting there was almost as easy as following their noses once they entered the correct side passage. The air was filled with an acrid odor that was reminiscent of the approach to Domnann, except combined with a growing oppressive heat—and so concentrated that the very air seemed to visibly thicken, causing their eyes to swim until they became accustomed to it.

A few questions led them past the vast open pit of the Hellforge itself and into a medium-sized domed room with all the facilities necessary for advanced metalworking and smithing. A few players in the garb of apprentices worked at one station or another, supervised by a massive dark-skinned Gnome who might well have been the largest player Kirito had ever met. The man regarded the two newcomers with a critical eye at first, and after ensuring that his charges needed nothing further, he wiped sweat from his bald head and headed over to Kirito and Lisbeth.

"Can I help you?" he asked in a deep, gravelly voice.

"Perhaps," Kirito said, tilting his head up to meet the large man's gaze. "We're looking for Chellok. We have business for him."

One dark eyebrow quirked. "Business, is it? Well, you can talk to me. I'm Agil, and I'm his business partner." He wiped his hands on his apron and extended one to Kirito in an American-style greeting.

Kirito took the hand, unsurprised at the strength in it. A player's size didn't necessarily mean anything in a game where strength was determined by stats rather than muscle mass, but someone who specialized in any kind of smithing or metalworking had to be emphasizing their STR stat. "Kirito. This is Lisbeth. We understand you might be able to produce Carbon Steel here."

The other eyebrow rose to join the first. "Is that so? Well, you heard right—Chellok is the only player in Nissengrof who can make it right now. But the ingredients are hard to come by, and every bit of it is going to outfit our clearing group. I'm afraid you may have come all this way for nothing."

"Please!" Lisbeth said suddenly. "I… I owe this player a new sword, and we desperately need an ingot of Gnomish Carbon Steel to make it. Just one would do, and we're willing to pay well for it."

Looking between them, Agil shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry," he said, sounding like he meant it. "But they're not for sale at any price. We're about to challenge the boss in the Valley of Giants, and we need every single ingot we can get to maximize our chances of success."

Kirito nodded as if he hadn't expected anything else. "It sounds like your supplies are limited," he said. "Is that because of a shortage of ingredients?"

Agil answered with a nod of his own. "They're not rare so much as they are a pain in the ass to get. What we really need are—"

As Agil spoke, Kirito was already opening his menu and navigating to his inventory. Tapping a stack of items there, he chose the option to materialize them as game objects, and watched the Gnome's eyes widen as a large quantity of stone-like chunks appeared in his arms.

"—Lithopede Carapaces," Agil finished in something close to a whisper.
"I don't know what your formula and success rates are like," Kirito said as he dumped the pile of items on the ground at his feet. "But that's a stack of at least forty. You should be able to get at least a dozen ingots out of that, maybe more—assuming you have the rest of the ingredients you need."

The large black man stared at Kirito in shocked silence for some time, eyes occasionally dropping to the pile of fragments lying on the ground at their feet. He crouched to pick one up, tapping it and examining the status window that popped up when he did.

Lisbeth looked nearly as shocked as she eyed Kirito from where she stood. "You knew?"

Kirito nodded wordlessly, watching Agil and waiting patiently.

At last Agil turned away from them and disappeared into a side room, the faint sounds of conversation there drowned out by the rising and falling wall of noise from the industrial activities surrounding them. When Agil returned, he was accompanied by a short, fat Gnome with gray streaks in his brown hair. Kirito assumed that he had to be looking at Chellok.

The two Gnomes looked down at the pile of Lithopede Carapaces, the shorter man picking one up and repeating the analysis that Agil had performed. Satisfied, he slashed the air with his finger and navigated his menu; in his other hand there appeared a coal-black metal ingot that seemed to absorb the light in the room, barely a glimmer of light reflecting from its surface. He held it out towards Kirito, but raised it just out of grasp when Kirito reached for it.

"On one condition," Chellok said gruffly. "We lost a group of clearers to a fight with a named mob this morning, and the one survivor doesn't want to go back out. Join the raid and fight with us… and it's yours."

Kirito looked the older Gnome in the eyes, a smile cracking his face. He held out his hand, palm-up, and when he held the ingot in his hand he passed it immediately to Lisbeth. He looked over at her and saw her eyes watering up—whether from emotion or from the quality of the air, he couldn't say.

There was only one thing Kirito had left to ask. "I don't suppose you have an anvil she could use?"

"Holy shit, you made it!"

There were back-slapping hugs all around as Klein and his party met up with Dale and Harry One in the upper levels of Nissengrof, laughter and overlapping conversations filling the air and drawing amused stares from the local citizens. Not all of the stares were those of amusement; a few were wary or downright hostile at the sight of a Salamander and an Imp, and Issin's feline Cait Sith features were a source of open fascination for some.

However, no one accosted them or demanded to know their business; the contrast with the paranoia and suspicion in Sylvain could not have been more stark. The friendly demeanor and obvious camaraderie in Klein's group seemed enough to reassure most passers-by of their peaceful intentions, and after a while they simply became an accepted part of the city.

As they sat down in an inn for a meal and drinks, they all began swapping stories and catching up with each other. Harry One had come west with a party of Leprechauns once he learned that Dale was in Nissengrof with the other Gnomes, and the two of them had been going out with pickup groups ever since in order to level up and pass the time.

Klein related the story of his rendezvous with Kunimittz, their flight from Salamander territory and their capture in and escort from Sylph territory. When he got to the point of describing the battle in the Valley of Butterflies, Issin repeatedly butted in and made sure to gleefully provide plenty of
details about Klein's supposedly budding romance with the Cait Sith beta tester who'd brought them there—a performance which eventually ended with Klein's drink dumped over Issin's head and a near-brawl between the two of them.

"So where do we go from here?"

Dynamm's question was the question, and it brought everything to a halt. They all looked at each other for a minute; no one in Klein's group had really thought this far ahead. They were together again, every one of his friends who'd joined this game with him—all safe. It had been Klein's driving force ever since the end of Kayaba's tutorial, his primary motivation for his clockwise journey around the edge of Alfheim.

Dale was the first to speak, scratching at the skin under the knotted white band which circled his head just under the hairline of his afro. "We've been thinking about that, Harry and I. Some of the pickup groups we've gone out with have been clearers, and they've been talking about an upcoming raid—they're gonna go after the boss of the valley to the south. It'll clear the way to the capital city, and there might be some really good drops."

Harry One nodded. "Dale's right. We've got a couple of them friended, and now that you're all here… I bet if we asked, they'd be ecstatic to have another group along."

Klein leaned back in his chair with his feet up on the low table around which they all sat, fingers laced behind his head. He looked at each of his group one by one, taking stock of them; each of them in turn nodded at him. "Now that sounds like a party worth crashing. Get a message out to your clearer buddies, Dale. Let 'em know our group's in if they'll have us."

The next morning found them in a meeting with the leader of the valley raid, a stocky Gnome in full plate armor whose two-handed axe seemed almost as tall as he was. He introduced himself as Crichton and gave Klein's party a measured look that was edged with amusement. "Well don't this beat all. Y'all are like a racial sampler plate, got one of every flavor." He glanced over at Dale. "I know you and your buddy can fight. And I reckon your friends can too if they come this far. Gotta say, your timing's something else."

"Why's that?" Klein asked.

Crichton stamped the heavy butt of his axe on the stone floor; it made a hollow ringing sound that echoed in the room. "On account of we're heading out soon's everyone gathers topside. I was about to head on up there myself. You boys might as well walk with me."

The walk in question was a short one; the inn where they'd all met was only a few levels below the frozen surface, and everyone was already fairly cold long before they felt the chilly draft blowing down through the massive archway that led outside. It made Klein quite glad that they'd stopped at an item shop the previous night and picked up winter clothing; the trip from Whiteburrow to Nissengrof had been fairly uncomfortable for all of them.

The rendezvous point for the raid was an open pit several meters deep and about thirty wide, its terraced sides forming a series of natural benches. Whatever its purpose had once been, it seemed to serve quite well for its current use; dozens of players were gathered and sitting in clusters around the edges, talking and laughing and carrying on. Most of them were Gnomes, as he'd expected, but there were others as well: Leprechauns, nearly a dozen of them; a couple of Puca swaddled in mage's robes as well. He didn't see any other Cait Sith, nor any of the other southern races.

There was also a Spriggan.
Klein started in shock as he recognized the Spriggan player on the opposite side of the pit, nearly losing his footing on the terraces as he tried to find a seat. He sat down hard, his friends filing onto the seats near him, and realized that he’d been staring when the Spriggan player turned and looked across the pit, meeting his eyes with an expression that was easily as surprised as Klein’s own.

Klein didn’t have to try very hard before the name he needed came to mind. He knew the other player couldn’t hear him from this far away, but he said it anyway. "Kirito?"

At that moment Crichton flew down into the center of the pit, put a pair of fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply before raising his voice. "Alright y'all, listen up." After a moment, when not all of the conversations had ceased, he bellowed, "I said shut the hell up!"

That did the trick. Clapping his hands together with a metallic sound that rang out loudly in the sudden silence as his gauntlets met, the stocky Gnome grinned and began. "We got ourselves a boss to kill, boys, and this is how we're gonna do it…"
Chapter 12

"The effective use of magic in combat requires more than just the rote memorization of spellwords and the skill level necessary to cast a given spell. It also requires the knowledge of which spells to use, and when. It is not always desirable to use your most powerful spell; it might deplete your MP quickly or have a long cooldown timer, leaving you without it at a critical moment. But most of all, it is essential to know the resistances and weaknesses of your opponents. Imps, for example, are highly resistant to the status effects of Dark magic, and using Fire against a Salamander is an excellent way to waste your MP…"

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Resistances and Weaknesses»

12 ~ 26 November 2022
Day 7 - Evening

Argo knew that it was only the keener eyesight of the Cait Sith that allowed her and her two traveling companions to distinguish the flight trails of the incoming Imps from one another at this distance. If she could barely tell herself, it was a sure bet that the three Sylphs with whom they were traveling couldn't—and they might be having trouble even seeing the glowing violet lines that traced a curving path across the massive subterranean chamber of Lugru.

She counted silently, and then turned to the others. "Three incoming. Can't tell what their equipment is like from this distance, but if it's a balanced PK group they'll probably have a mage, a tank, and either an archer or another melee type."

"So we outnumber them?" Gataki said hopefully, sticking several arrows in the ground in front of him and nocking one.

"Yes and no," Thelvin said without taking his eyes off of the still-distant threat. "By numbers, yes, but they have us at an extreme disadvantage. We only have two sources of ranged DPS, plus whatever basic spells the rest of us can muster. They'll have at least one, more likely two…and most importantly, they can fly and we can't."

"And we're stuck on a narrow stairway that's uncomfortably high off the ground," Chihae said grimly as she checked the durability on her sword.

Thelvin nodded. "Just so. I'd say we have about a minute until they get here. Maybe less."

"Hang on," Natsuo said suddenly. "Do we really know that they're out to PK? They could be here for the same reason we are."

"Do you believe in Santa Claus too?" Argo asked cheerfully. The Sylph mage glared at her. "Well neither do I. And I don't believe in parties of Imps deep within Sylph territory who're here to visit their sick grandmothers either. So I suggest if you've got buffs, you start casting them."

"She's right, Nachin," Chihae said, putting a hand on her husband's shoulder as she used what Argo assumed had to be a pet name. "Give your haste buff to Gataki, get ready to use your wind shield if they have an archer, and pour everything else into knocking them out of the air."

"And aim low," Thelvin added. In answer to the puzzled looks from the Sylphs, he explained. "Their wings will tire faster if you force them to ascend."

"What about me?" Sasamaru asked. Argo knew he had to be young, probably around her own age—
but at that moment he looked every bit the scared kid that he was. She could sympathize—without the ability to fly, his spear wouldn't be much use in the coming fight.

"Stand over there by Natsuo and be ready to fend off hit-and-run melee strikes," she said after thinking it over for a moment. "Make sure none of them can get close to him."

"They're coming," Thelvin said urgently, his shield held at ready.

Argo saw lines of golden glyphs begin to circle around the bodies of the incoming Imps, and as she counted and interpreted the symbols that coalesced, she yelled. "Blindness! Don't let it hit you!"

"Get behind me!" shouted Natsuo. As Sasamaru and Chihae complied, he quickly chanted a series of spellwords of his own, and a gust of wind rushed past him, forming into a shimmering barrier. Streaks of violet-black energy splattered against the short-lived shield, and Argo saw another splash across Thelvin's physical shield as a flare of blue light reacted from within the enchanted item. A portion of the spell's effects seemed to soak through the defense, causing black fire to flicker briefly in Thelvin's eyes, but he gritted his teeth until his sight returned a moment later.

A streak of brilliant green energy raced away from Gataki's bow, curving in the air and seeking one of the Imps who'd attempted to evade it. Argo recognized the skill; it had probably taken close to half of his MP, but she approved of using the homing attack up-front to try to improve their odds. The bolt took the Imp in the back, exploding in an actinic flash of light and sending him tumbling out of control.

But as Argo had suspected, they weren't the only party with a mage. The Imp caster's robes fluttered vigorously in the wind as he evaded one of Gataki's arrows, and he rattled off a series of words that formed into a javelin of black energy in his right hand, which he hurled with alarming speed at Argo.

Before she could react, Thelvin was in front of her, dropping to one knee and bracing as he absorbed the projectile against his shield. The explosion that followed sent him reeling backwards into Argo, and she saw his HP go down by close to a tenth.

As she went sprawling to the ground, scrambling for purchase on the stone steps, she saw the third Imp arc towards them, skimming the surface of the wall to avoid Gataki's arrows as he readied what looked like a sword skill. Thelvin was still recovering from the explosion; a status icon beside his HP gauge showed that he was momentarily stunned.

Argo extended her steel claws to their full length and prepared to use a technique of her own to block the strike. But before the Imp could reach her, she heard Natsuo chanting again and saw the air shimmer as a gust of wind slammed into the Imp, using his own momentum to slam him against the rock wall he was skimming so closely. He bounced off the wall and struck the stairs, tumbling towards Argo's group as he tried to regain control.

Under the circumstances, Argo wasn't inclined to give him the chance. Ears flat against her head, she dashed towards the injured Imp as he came up to one knee and brought his weapon to bear on her. She recognized the opening motions of the sword skill he planned to use next, and she was already leaping above the attack as his crosscut sliced the air and sank into the rock wall to his right.

As she came down, Argo kicked off the flat of his entrapped sword blade and flipped to a landing behind the shocked Imp, sinking both claws into his back all the way to the knuckles. The player screamed in a very convincing way; even though he wouldn't feel any pain from the blow, she knew it had to be a very unpleasant sensation—and some of it had to be from the fear of impending death as well.
This wasn't the time for sympathy or mercy, though—this was life and death, and Argo chose to err on the side of living. As soon as she was released from the recovery frame of her Double Backstab technique, Argo ripped both claws up and out, and watched the Imp's HP gauge go from yellow to red. That was when Thelvin reached them and backhanded the helpless Imp with his shield, sending him spiraling off the edge of the cliff. The doomed player's screams echoed off the stone walls as he erupted into purple flames in mid-air, his Remain Light hanging there in the air like a flaming tombstone.

Sending a look of wordless thanks to Thelvin, Argo turned her attention back to the rest of the battle. The death of their comrade seemed to have visibly shaken the other Imps, who pulled up short out of melee range and looked at each other. Argo saw Gataki and Natsuo take the opportunity to uncork and drink a small blue potion each, replenishing some of their MP, while Thelvin positioned himself in front of Argo and glared over his shield. "Six to two now, gentlemen," he boomed out, projecting to make sure his voice carried. "Your move."

The Imps exchanged another glance. One of them snarled and held his hands out, beginning to chant while the other looked at him in alarm and opened his mouth. The first mage's words were interrupted by a streak of green that shot out from Gataki's bow; having replenished his MP, he'd chosen to unleash his homing attack again, for which Argo knew the long cooldown timer had to have just ended. It took the Imp squarely in the chest just below his throat, and the explosion of energy sent him tumbling out of control with his HP in the red. The other shook his head and threw one last dark look back at the victorious party before rocketing off in pursuit of his friend.

Gataki whooped loudly at the retreat and called mockingly after them. "Yeah baby! Suck on that why don't you! Assholes."

While that wouldn't have been Argo's first choice of words, it nicely summed up her feelings all the same. She glanced at her HP gauge; she hadn't been touched and there were no lingering status effects. Thelvin had taken a fair amount of damage, but that was what he was there for, and they both knew it. They shared a look; the others might not realize it, but they'd been incredibly lucky. They'd fought smart as well, she knew, and their opponents had made a few critical mistakes—but luck had been with them, and they hadn't lost anyone.

Natsuo turned out to have a little bit of water magic as well; it wasn't necessary to waste potions on healing once his MP had recovered. He and Chihae embraced when they were all done, holding each other tightly as the knowledge that they were safe sank in.

"You fought well," Thelvin said as he watched his HP climb back up to max. "As well as any veteran tester. Gataki and Natsuo especially—your bow and magic, respectively, turned the tide there."

Argo glanced out across the vast empty space above the town of Lugru, watching the flight trails of the two Imps arc slowly towards the town itself. As she did, out of the corner of her eye she caught the floating Remain Light of the defeated Imp flicker once and then extinguish.

She closed her eyes. The light wasn't all that had just been extinguished. At that very moment, she knew, in a hospital room somewhere in Japan, monitors would begin sounding a steady tone as the player's Nerve Gear destroyed their brain, their body probably briefly convulsing in one last reflex before becoming still.

Suddenly she was very, very glad that she hadn't been the one to strike the final blow. She looked over at Thelvin, whose expression was unreadable.

"Let's go," she said with sudden fierceness. "Before they decide to come back with friends."
It was sound advice, and it gave them motivation to drive themselves onward as quickly as they could, but no one else accosted them as they descended the remainder of the way to the bottom, and everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief once their feet left the stairs and touched the ground. They ran the rest of the way, ran as fast as they could across the long, wide bridge that spanned the underground lake until they reached the gates of Lugru itself.

Relief suddenly flooded Argo like a cold wave as she saw a purple message appear at the top of her vision, the words «Safe Zone: Town of Lugru» fading in and then back out a few seconds later. This was neutral territory, and no one's HP could decrease now that they were within the boundaries of the town.

They bid their farewells there to Chihae and her party, their bows considerably deeper and more respectful now that they’d fought at each other's sides. Thelvin exchanged friend requests with Chihae, a fact of which Argo took note; it gave her another possible information source within the Sylphs, and that never hurt.

As the three Sylphs headed off into the town for whatever business had brought them there, Argo recalled the agreed-upon meeting place and gestured for Thelvin and Sasamaru to come closer. "Okay, I'm gonna go meet the person I came here for. I suggest you two go hit the shops in the market while we're here; chances are you might find upgrades for your gear."

Thelvin nodded, punching Sasamaru in the arm. "You heard her. Come on, it wouldn't be a bad idea to replace that spear of yours and get our equipment repaired."

Repairing her own weapons wouldn't be the worst idea in the world, but Argo set the thought aside as she walked the streets of Lugru. She thought she caught sight of the Imps they’d fought earlier, but it was a fleeting glimpse in the crowd—and it didn't really matter; there was nothing they could do here within the Safe Zone.

Her path took her unerringly towards the town's single inn, a large two-story stone building that exuded comfort and safety from the warm glow in the windows. When she pushed her way through the double doors at the front entrance, it didn't take her long to spot her quarry—Eugene was the only Salamander in the common room, and he was… unmistakable.

He recognized Argo as well, and waved her over to an empty seat. She glanced around the room and quickly took stock of the surroundings; there were a few other players in the room—a pair of Sylphs in one of the far corners—but they were occupied with their own conversation. She slid gracefully into the chair across the table from the massive Salamander.

"Eugene. Been a while. How you holding up?"

He shrugged and gave her a rueful smile. "As well as one can in exile, with a brother held prisoner far away."

"Yeah, about that." Argo's brown eyes searched Eugene's face. It wasn't that she precisely distrusted him… but with the stakes being what they were, she had to be sure. "I need to know what happened if I'm gonna help you."

Nodding, Eugene tossed back a cup of steaming sake and steepled his fingers, elbows on the table. "I know you have people in the Salamanders. You probably know that Mort and I opposed Kibaou's power grab and that… audacious assault on the Imps." When Argo simply dipped her head once, he went on. "Kibaou didn't care for that very much. He already had the majority of the faction behind him the first night, and he invited us to some kind of summit between the leadership candidates."
At that point, Eugene scowled darkly. "It was a trap, and we were fools not to see it. He lured us into a room and barred the door, knowing that he couldn't harm us within the city or imprison us without having the leadership vote. And once that vote happened... well, he had the power to do whatever he wanted. He needed Mortimer's strategic genius, but he must've been scared of me challenging him to a duel for the leadership—he kept me imprisoned and isolated, and told Mort that if he didn't cooperate, I'd be exiled."

"Which you are anyway," Argo said. "So what happened?"

Eugene barked a laugh. "I tried to escape, of course. Almost worked, too. There are plenty of Salamanders who aren't on board with Kibaou's methods, and a particularly sympathetic player ended up assigned to guard my room one night. He and I tried to spring Mort, but..." He grimaced. "I was the only one who got away, and Kibaou designated me an exile almost immediately."

Argo grimaced as well. That was a problem. It meant that Eugene's cursor would be red to any Salamander players, calling him out as a hostile. It meant that he couldn't enter Gattan without being attacked by any NPC guards he encountered. In short, it meant that Eugene was in no position to help rescue his brother.

"What do you want from me?" she asked bluntly.

"Your help," Eugene said. "Kibaou's hold on the faction right now is tenuous. To be frank, he's a shitty leader who's in over his head. There's growing unrest both from the aggressive players who are dissatisfied with the lack of progress, and the sympathetic ones who've never supported him. He doesn't allow anyone close who might be strong enough to challenge him, and he's kept Mort isolated so that he can't stir up trouble or even level himself up to become a threat. I could challenge him, and probably beat him—but in order to do that, we have to lure him out of Gattan. And before I do, we have to rescue Mort—otherwise Kibaou will be able to use his life as leverage." Eugene's severe, craggy features looked pained. "I can't sacrifice my own brother."

"You have a plan," Argo observed.

Eugene's nod was firm and sharp. "I do. I mentioned that there's unrest in the Salamanders. We can use that. Kibaou needs to make a play soon, something that will restore his sagging popularity to stave off challenges and keep him on top when the next vote happens. I think he's going to raid the valley boss."

"Why haven't they broken through already?"

"Because Kibaou wants the better drops that come from waiting."

Suddenly it made sense to Argo. There'd been a rumor during the beta that each time a valley boss was defeated, the remaining bosses would become stronger but drop better loot. It was intended to encourage factions to rush to clear them, but a few had realized that if they positioned themselves to raid the last remaining boss, they could maximize their returns.

A plan started forming in Argo's head. At the moment, her only surviving contact within the Salamanders was Kibaou's own lieutenant, a player named Corvatz. She'd been playing him from the beginning, feeding him just enough useful information to lead him to believe that she was his source. He'd be useful, but she wouldn't be able to count on his help for rescuing Mort. She'd need someone else who could safely enter Gattan.

"Alright," she said finally. "I think I know how we can pull this off."
The Valley of Giants yawned before them, snow-covered hills rising steeply until they became mountains which reached for the sky well beyond the altitude limit of any player. The midday sky was light gray in color, overcast but mercifully free of snowfall.

Klein and his party trudged through the snow on the left flank of the raid group as their wings rested, the cold somewhat mitigated by the constant effort of both walking and clearing. Thankfully the trash mobs they encountered were no threat—those which didn't flee before the mass of players became short work. As they were part of a raid group, the EXP gain from these trash fights was minimal—but leveling up wasn't the point of this journey. A much more serious fight awaited them further within the valley.

As they started to encounter the Jotunn that gave the valley its name, Klein had occasion to wonder just how hard these fights would be if his group hadn't been in a raid with more than forty other players. The giants towered over them at nearly thrice man-height, forcing them to take to the air and fight nimbly there in order to combat them effectively.

In these fights, Klein was more grateful than ever that he'd begun to get the hang of Voluntary Flight, and although it was still awkward and tiring, it still made him far more agile than he'd been with the controller. The thought brought to mind the Spriggan who'd helped him on his first day in the game; occasionally he glanced over at the group of which Kirito was a part, but they were on opposite flanks and hadn't had the opportunity to speak.

At last they drew within sight of a massive glacier which blocked the valley ahead of them, the icy cliff rising halfway to the peaks of the mountains that formed the walls of the valley. A sharp whistle rang out and echoed as the raid leader, Crichton, called everyone to a halt.

"This is it, boys! Take a few minutes to rest, get your wings to full and recover all your HP and MP if you ain't at max. Y'all gonna need everything you got in this fight, and that's the truth of it."

Not for the first time, Klein snickered as he wondered how the women in the raid group felt about being called "boys". There weren't that many of them, but the few that were there were hard to miss. Crichton's rural accent had a certain charm to it, but it was sometimes hard to follow.

Still, the advice was good, regardless of how it was delivered. He checked his own group over, making sure everyone was in peak condition and reviewing strategy.

According to Crichton's briefing, the boss was a particularly large giant which would spawn once they got close enough to the glacier. It was slow but powerful, with a frost breath ranged attack that Klein knew would be particularly dangerous to him. It would be resistant to physical damage, which was why the raid was heavy on mages, and it would have a whopping three HP bars to knock down. There would be adds as well, each of the minions nearly a minor boss of its own.

And it was time to face it.

At Crichton's signal, the mages started casting their buffs, stacking every possible advantage on the main tank group as the vanguard advanced. When the lead tank had crossed some kind of invisible line, a deep rumbling seemed to shake the very valley itself, birds taking flight from the sparse trees while snow cascaded from the pine needles and from the walls of the glacier in a fine white cloud. Then the lower part of the glacier itself seemed to explode, chunks of ice anywhere from pebble-sized to the mass of a passenger car spraying outwards in a cone; one such chunk took an unlucky player squarely and nearly annihilated his entire HP gauge from the impact.

Behind this explosion came a roar that seemed to vibrate the air, and from the hole in the glacier emerged what Klein assumed had to be the Jotunn boss. It was truly giant, possibly as much as
twenty meters in height and almost half as broad around its barrel chest. Thick brownish-blue hair covered its body, and in its right hand it held a tree, the trunk forming the shaft of the weapon nearly a meter in diameter itself. A great shield of rock and ice the size of a backyard swimming pool guarded its left side.

It charged. For something that was supposed to be slow, Klein had time only to marvel that "slow" was a relative term—with legs that size, it was capable of covering ground with alarming speed. The left and right flanks of the raid split off while the main tank group charged in and took aggro by getting nearly in the giant's face. A blast of frost washed over the main tank's shield, and even despite the protective buffs the attack still took more than a quarter of his HP bar.

But that wasn't Klein's problem to deal with. As part of the left flank, they had a specific role to fill, one that became critical almost immediately as the Jotunn's roar echoed down the valley. A handful of smaller Jotunn came bursting out of the snow and charged towards the main force of the raid. "Smaller" being something of a relative term as well—each of these was slightly larger than the usual trash mobs, only a little less than half the size of the boss itself.

"Adds!" Klein shouted, moving his group to intercept one of the mobs before they could plow into the mage groups or distract anyone else. He parried an enraged swing from the mob's club, creating an opening into which Dale leapt with his war axe, cleaving an angry red gash across the giant's belly.

Its retaliatory swing was intercepted by Harry One's shield, the blow knocking off a chunk of his HP even through the defense and sending him careening back—but when the club rebounded back as well, Klein zoomed in and struck again with a three-hit skill. With Issin's arrows sinking into the mob whenever he had a clear shot, they made short work of the add, and it exploded into a great shower of blue particles after several minutes of intense fighting. Klein took a moment to make sure his team was in good shape; they'd fought named mobs in the field which had been easier than that battle.

And it wouldn't be the last. After at least ten minutes of watching the core of the raid batter the giant's defenses, he saw its first HP gauge finally go into the red and then shatter, leaving two to go. When it did, the giant took a deep breath and blasted a massive cone of frost in a wide arc in front of it, forcing the raid to back up and the mages to focus their efforts on restoring the main tank group's health. During this respite, it bellowed loudly again, and another round of adds burst from the snow and forced Klein's group to rush in again and protect the raid's left flank.

The next HP bar took closer to fifteen or twenty minutes to whittle down, long enough that Klein brought his group closer in so that they could add their own minimal ranged DPS to the fight. They saved their wings for when flight was absolutely necessary, as did most of the rest of the raid—only the melee DPS groups were constantly in flight, and they switched off periodically to give each other the chance to rest their wings and recover HP.

Klein took a moment to glance at the clock in his HUD in between the next round of adds while he waited for a healing potion to bring him back up. They'd been fighting for over half an hour now, and everyone was starting to show their weariness. But he could see the light at the end of the tunnel—the Jotunn's final HP gauge was in the yellow, and although its damage resistance seemed to increase each time it lost a bar of health, the coordinated work of the core groups and the exceptional crafted weapons most of them were wielding was slowly but surely whittling it down towards the red.

That was when everything went to hell.

As the Jotunn's final bar of HP turned from yellow to red, the attacks battering against it suddenly
began producing nothing but a spray of purple sparks and the occasional flashing message of «Immortal Object». Kirito couldn't read the text from where he hovered on the far right flank of the raid, but he knew that had to be the message—it was common for bosses to briefly become invulnerable while changing forms or stages. A troubled frown crossed his face; there hadn't been anything about a state change in the briefing.

During the brief lull, the raid groups did what they'd done before whenever the boss gave them a respite from its attacks: they took advantage of it and landed out of its reach, resting their flight gauges and healing each other. Kirito saw the left flank start to close back in towards the raid core, and when his own flank groups started to do the same Kirito did a flip in the air to reverse his direction and flew after them.

The boss reared back, a motion that it had done each time an HP gauge disappeared; any moment Kirito expected it to bellow again and summon another group of adds, and he wondered if everyone on the flanks ought to be closing ranks the way they were instead of waiting to intercept. Then his eyes widened as he saw the club and shield drop from the mob's hands, and as it raised its arms high it formed them into fists.

"Get back!" Kirito shouted, knowing that his voice wouldn't carry far enough—and knowing that it was too late even if it did.

With a mighty swing, the Jotunn boss brought both fists down on the ground in front of it, fountains of snow erupting from the points of impact. The ground in the valley shook; every player who had landed was either unbalanced or knocked entirely off their feet. As shockwaves rippled outward from the blow, spikes of ice burst through the snowpack in a wave that spread outwards for some distance. A number of players were impaled by the ice spikes, and a few of them who were already wounded burst into colored flame from the direct hits, without even time to scream.

Those who survived the hits were trapped in place, hanging there in the air with lances of ice pinning them straight through their bodies. As soon as it recovered from its attack, the Jotunn charged into the main force of the raid, noticeably faster now that it wasn't encumbered by its weapon and shield. Its fists flew with frightening speed, shattering players and the spikes on which they were trapped. With half of the main tank group obliterated, the surviving mages were left largely unprotected, and they scattered in every direction in order to avoid the Jotunn's haymakers.

Blasts of arcane energy lanced out from the airborne mages, and their attacks slowly picked away at the giant's remaining HP—but as Kirito raced towards the disintegrating raid, he knew that wouldn't last. There were too few of them, and nothing they did managed to interrupt the Jotunn's attacks. Over a dozen Remain Lights flickered angrily in the field, and at least half again as many players were well below half health, to the point where a single solid blow could kill. There was no cohesion anymore; Crichton had been among the casualties of the main tank group.

Kirito saw the boss begin to inhale, and knew what was coming. A trio of mages hovered just out of melee range, blasting at the mob to keep its attention while their groupmates tried desperately to heal the wounded. Kirito put on a sudden burst of speed, arms wide, and tackled two of the mages with an impact that sent them careening towards the valley wall.

An instant later, a cone of frost from the giant's breath washed across the one mage he hadn't been able to knock away, freezing him solid as his HP gauge went into the red. And that remaining life disappeared as he dropped like a rock and struck the ground below, shattering into icy fragments and leaving behind only a sickly brown Remain Light.

Kirito didn't wait for gratitude from the two he'd just saved. He took off immediately, scanning the field for any sign of the one person whose help he needed. A splash of blood-red armor showed
against the snow where the Salamander he'd recognized before was crouched beside a pair of stunned players, his groupmates trying to snap the others out of it before the giant turned its attention to them.

Landing beside him, Kirito grabbed Klein by the arm. "If you want to save them, come with me now and do exactly what I say."

The Salamander player's jaw dropped. "Kirito, what—"

"Now!" And without waiting for an answer, Kirito launched himself into the air, taking only a moment to check the durability on the new sword that Lisbeth had crafted for him—a matte black longsword named «Midnight Avenger», a meter in length with several inches of serrated edge near the double crossguard. Like the metal from which it was forged, it seemed to absorb the very light around it, with only the cutting edges shining dangerously. As expected of Gnomish Carbon Steel, it was still in excellent condition—it was a durability-type metal, and he had no fears that it would fail to get him through the battle. His own health would be gone before his sword's would be.

A familiar buzzing sound came from behind him, and Kirito looked over his shoulder to see the Salamander player catching up with him, his long curved sword at the ready. "Save that," Kirito said. "And take these." He tossed a pair of blue potions back to Klein one by one; he caught them and drank one immediately, taking the hint.

A third of the raid force was dead—more than a dozen casualties in all—and most of the rest were in complete disarray, if they hadn't already fled. As Kirito and Klein flew towards the boss and veered off in opposite directions to evade a blast of frost, Kirito yelled as loud as he could. "I need you to use your strongest fire attacks! Hit it in the face every time you have a clear shot, and don't stop hitting it until you're out of MP! Don't hold back!"

His voice obviously carried well enough; he saw Klein give him a thumbs up and sheathe his sword. Arcane symbols began circling around the Salamander player, and as the Jotunn charged towards them with fists flailing, a multi-projectile barrage of flame bolts shot out and erupted directly on target.

The howls that arose then from the frost giant were like nothing they'd heard yet. No further adds burst from the snow, and the boss clapped both hands to its face as flames licked between its fingers. Kirito was already soaring towards it at top speed, and in the opening created as the giant raised its hands to protect itself from the burning, the coal-black longsword scythed across the mob's belly with a three-hit combo that noticeably reduced the red bar in the giant's gauge.

Kirito executed a swift loop as the mob's fists pounded together where he'd just been, and as soon as the giant started to inhale for another blast of frost, a series of fiery projectiles exploded against its cheek, causing its hands to fly up protectively again as it screamed in pain. Again Kirito unloaded a sword technique against the giant's unguarded belly, and the mob's red HP gauge began to flash rapidly.

"Now, Klein!" Kirito shouted. "Give it everything!"

The blue bar beneath Klein's HP gauge began to darken as it sank towards empty, and the stream of fire bolts that shot from his hands then was unceasing, every few syllables that came from the Salamander's lips causing golden symbols to spin around him and fire to rush down his arms. A wild swing from the giant grazed Kirito as he rushed in heedlessly, the blow causing his HP to hit the yellow zone. His teeth ground together as he spun in midair and swooped below the next swing.

Just as the stream of fire ceased, the angle of Kirito's wings narrowed and he shot straight up, sword
glowing with a feral red light as he began to spin. Once, twice, three times the spiraling blow slashed across the mob's belly, and Kirito's rapid ascent narrowly took him past another clap of the Jotunn's hands as he completed the five-hit technique with a crosscut that opened its throat before arcing up and around to cleave straight down into its skull.

If the howls of pain and outrage provoked by the fire attacks had been intense, the screams from these final blows were nothing short of otherworldly. They didn't seem to erupt from the giant's mouth so much as reverberate within Kirito's skull, cracks in the ice radiating out in every direction from below the mob. Its death howl rose steadily to an almost ultrasonic pitch, finally taking on a distorted metallic sound as its body began to ripple and flicker.

As Kirito landed, his MP completely spent, the Jotunn toppled towards him and began to lose its texture. The surface of its body briefly flashed as a wireframe object, then exploded into a gale of blue polygons that flowed over Kirito like a tidal wave, hair and cloak whipping around him from the overpressure as he tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

Exhausted, Kirito sank to his knees, leaning his forehead against the pommel of his sword as it rested tip-down in the ice. A series of triumphant BGM notes played in his ear, and when he looked up he saw the English text «Congratulations!» hanging in the air in letters two meters tall. A «Result» window popped up in front of him, congratulating him for getting the Last Attack and awarding him with an EXP bonus and an item.

He struggled to focus his weary eyes on the window; as he did, the text sprang into clarity. The item was called «Coat of the Jotunn Lord», and even as tired as he was, he still felt a rush of excitement at the stats on it. As he heard the pounding of footsteps and the buzz and hum of approaching wings, he tapped the window to dismiss it and pushed himself up to his feet.

Turning, he saw the survivors of the near-wipe gathering around him, a mixture of astonishment, grief and anger on their faces. Klein's was not the least of those expressions, and as the Salamander landed in front of Kirito he seemed to be struggling to find words.

Kirito found his first. "Thanks, Klein. I couldn't have done that without your fire magic."

"You're thanking me?" Klein's expression rapidly shifted to incredulity. "You goddamn idiot, we should be thanking you!" Before Kirito realized what was happening, Klein had taken a few steps towards him and seized him in a bear hug, lifting him off the ground for a moment. "Seriously, man," he said as he set a stunned Kirito back down. "You saved the raid. You saved all of us."

"Not all," Kirito said solemnly as he watched the last of the Remain Lights on the field disappear. Without rez items or high-level healing magic this early in the game, hitting zero HP might as well be a death sentence.

One of the Puca mages that Kirito had saved with his mid-air tackle came up and set her hand on his arm. "You couldn't have helped them," she said. "Nobody could've. What you pulled off was… extraordinary. And I'm glad to be alive."

Kirito looked around at the general murmur of agreement that rippled through the survivors. He felt himself wanting to cry for some reason, and he turned away so that no one would have to see. "You'll be able to get through the valley now," he said quietly. "The hole the boss created when it spawned leads to a tunnel through the glacier. There's some tough mobs in there, but even with a half-strength raid group they won't be a threat."

"Um, exactly how do you know all that?" asked one of the Gnomes who'd survived the main tank
(group massacre.

It was a question that by this point Kirito was sick of answering or evading. Klein saved him the trouble. "This guy was a beta tester," said the Salamander. "He taught me a bunch of stuff on the first day that saved my life when everything went tits-up in Gattan."

Kirito was about to curse Klein for his big mouth when the Gnome who'd asked the question spoke. "That so?" There was a moment or two of silence, and then the tank went on. "Well, we were damned lucky to have you here. Thanks."

For once, Kirito was grateful for the freezing temperatures of the north. They turned his tears into ice crystals on his cheeks, and the wind swept them away before anyone could see.

Asuna wasn't sure why Diavel had summoned both her and Yuuki to his office. They hadn't had any further conflicts with prejudiced players in their faction, they hadn't broken any rules... as far as she knew, they hadn't done anything at all to put themselves on his radar. If anything, they'd been model citizens—she and Yuuki had fought off a Salamander/Imp raiding party, and had been devoting all their time to leveling up.

Usually when he wanted to talk to them about their studies or progress he'd simply come to the inn and sit down with them for a meal. It made her think of the last time she'd been called to his office like this—the time when she'd fought with another Undine player named Gaitner in order to defend that Spriggan boy, an encounter which had ended with her storming out of Diavel's office in anger.

If he had in mind another lecture like that for her, he was going to get a piece of her mind.

She and Yuuki touched down in the courtyard of the castle and trotted to a stop, careful not to slip on the wet flagstone. It had been pouring rain for the last few days, and while that didn't seem to be unusual weather here on the eastern coast of Alfheim, it still left all of the bare stone surfaces in the city slippery. It amused her on some level—for a race that supposedly had an innate affinity for water, she would've expected better civic design.

Maybe they just expected everyone to fly everywhere. It wasn't the worst theory. But flying in the rain could get unpleasant, and she was just as happy to get back on solid ground and get out of the inclement weather once she passed through the enormous gates and into the castle interior. She was cold and wet, but the inside of the castle was lit with countless braziers that heated the air and kept it at a comfortable temperature. As she passed by them on the way to Diavel's office, she wondered whether they ever went out. Was there an NPC whose entire raison d'etre was to make the rounds in the castle and keep them fueled? She'd never seen one if there was.

A prod in her side yanked her attention back to her surroundings. Yuuki smiled up at her. "Where were you?"

"Just thinking," Asuna answered unhelpfully, which drew another almost-ticklish prod from the girl. "Nothing important, just thinking about how strange this world is... how with some things it seems like they went above and beyond to make it so realistic, but so artificial in other ways at the same time."

Yuuki hummed thoughtfully as if she understood. Perhaps she did; she seemed to be a smart girl. "I think I get what you're saying," she said, holding out her arm. "Like my skin. It feels right when I touch stuff, and it looks like skin if you don't look too closely. But it's like there's something missing."
"Hair," Asuna said immediately. She'd noticed the same flaw in the simulation. "The little tiny hairs on everyone's arms; we don't have them there. Or anywhere else. And if you look really closely, you can tell that the texture is... wrong. Like all the little wrinkles and pores and stuff... they're there, but it's like they're *drawn* on you."

"That's it exactly," Yuuki said, favoring Asuna with another bright smile that just made her melt. "You're so smart, Asuna."

Asuna laughed. "Not *that* smart. It's just... kind of hard not to notice the little things sometimes."

They had to cut off that train of thought there, as they found themselves in front of the entrance to Diavel's office. His voice called them in as soon as they knocked, and Asuna was relieved to see that he seemed to be in a good mood—he was smiling, and he gestured them both towards a pair of plush chairs in front of his desk.

"Asuna, Yuuki," he said in greeting. "How are you holding up?"

"It's not really a question of 'holding up' anymore, Diavel," said Asuna, feeling a twinge of defensiveness rise in her again. Somehow he seemed to be really good at bringing that out in her. "We've been going out every day and... what's the word? *Grinding.* Earning lots of EXP." She lifted her chin proudly. "We're almost level 11 now."

Diavel nodded, his smile broadening a bit. "I know," he said. "I can see the levels of all my faction members in the leadership interface. That's actually why I called you here today."

A look of plain surprise took over Asuna's face. "It is?" she asked. "I... well, what do you want from us?"

Before answering, Diavel sat back in his chair, fingers laced in front of him as he regarded them both. "You might have heard the rumors by now. An alliance of Gnomes, Leprechauns and Puca—I guess they're calling themselves the Northern Crafting Combine now—broke through the boss in the Valley of Giants a week ago, albeit with heavy losses. The Cait Sith weren't far behind in clearing the Valley of Butterflies. For reasons I don't quite understand, the Salamanders haven't made a move on the Valley of Dragons yet; they're easily strong enough."

Diavel paused, and looked Asuna meaningfully in the eyes. "We're going to make our play for the Valley of Rainbows in a few days—on November 30th, to be exact. I want the two of you to be there for it."

Asuna sucked in a breath sharply, and heard Yuuki do the same beside her. This was the very last thing she'd expected to hear. "I... well... do you think we're ready for that? I mean, do you really think we're strong enough?"

Diavel almost looked amused. "You don't know, do you?" Since Asuna didn't even know what it was that she didn't know, she shook her head. "You and Yuuki are among the top twenty players in the faction, level-wise. You've been out there every single day, working harder than anyone except the clearers. And if you don't count the actual clearing groups, you're both easily in the top three. You're not only *ready* for it... we *need* you."

Asuna was too shocked to speak; she felt Yuuki's hand grab hers. When neither of them said anything, Diavel went on. "Do you *want* to be clearers?"

"Yes!" they both said at once, looking at each other.

Diavel came to his feet then and clapped his hands once. "Then it's settled. Report to Jahala first..."
thing tomorrow morning. You're going to be part of a raid... do you know what that is?"

Asuna had heard the term before. "A lot of players working together?"

"That's more or less it," Diavel said with a nod. "Think of it like a platoon of soldiers. Players divide up into groups of six, each with a group leader; they in turn are all under the command of a single raid leader. Groups have roles in the raid, and they're expected to know those roles and stick to the plan in order to keep everyone alive and ensure the raid's success."

It sounded overwhelmingly complicated. Asuna was glad that she wasn't the one in charge of planning and leading this raid; she wasn't any kind of strategist or leader. "Okay," she said. "Anything else we need to know?"

Diavel laughed. "Plenty. But don't worry, that's why I'm putting you directly under Jahala. He'll work closely with you over the next few days and make sure you know your role and what you need to do to fulfill it. We need time to assemble all of the teams anyway; we're short on clearers for this raid so we're going to be hiring some Spriggan mercenaries to fill in the gaps."

The mention of Spriggan mercenaries immediately brought to mind that one boy, Kirito. Would he be among them? She wasn't sure what she thought of that—he was a pain in the ass and a loner; she doubted he could be counted on to follow instructions. It was just as well that he'd gone north and hadn't come back.

"Asuna?"

The soft voice drew her out of her thoughts again, and Asuna felt a squeeze on her hand. She smiled and squeezed back. "It's nothing. But hey, did you hear that? This is our big chance, you and I."

Yuuki grinned at her and practically bounced in her chair. "We're gonna be clearers! We're gonna fly into the Valley of Rainbows and kick some butt! And get lots of cool stuff!"

The girl's good cheer was infectious. Diavel smiled at her and then turned to Asuna. "Very well then, that's all. Why don't the two of you take the rest of the day off and rest? You're going to be quite busy enough starting tomorrow, and you'll need every bit of your strength for the upcoming raid."

Asuna knew good advice when she heard it. She and Yuuki both came to their feet, bowed as one, and took their leave.

The two of them could hardly contain themselves on their way back to the inn. It felt like all of their hard work, all of those long, exhausting hours of grinding, had paid off. It was such a little thing, really... just a name. Clearers. It wasn't as if it gave them any gameplay advantage, or any special privileges. It wasn't even an official title of any kind. It just meant that they had a job to do, and it was really the same job that they were already doing for their daily routine. The only thing that was different was the name, and the fact that they'd be training to participate in this raid thing with a bunch of other players like them.

The prospect was exciting... and a bit scary, if she was honest with herself. As she looked down at the little girl beside her, Asuna felt a sudden pang of worry. What had she gotten Yuuki into? She was a twelve year old girl, and here Asuna was prepared to take her into a massive battle with a powerful boss where they both stood a very good chance of dying. The thought made her feel incredibly ashamed, as if she'd somehow taken advantage of the girl's enthusiasm and gotten her in over her head.

Then Yuuki caught her staring, and grinned up at her. With one blindingly swift motion she whipped
the weapon from the scabbard on her back and executed a sword skill at the open air, dealing a crushing defeat to the cobblestone pathway in front of them and causing an «Immortal Object» message to briefly flare up at the point of impact. Yuuki bounced back, flourished the sword and smoothly sheathed it again, grinning fiercely up at Asuna and bowing as if to an audience.

Asuna couldn't help but laugh as she grabbed Yuuki by the shoulders and hugged her. She was a little girl, yes. Asuna herself wasn't more than a few years older. And the thought of bringing her into the kind of danger they faced filled her with a protective urge that surprised her with its ferocity. But at some point in the past several weeks, at some point during all of their practice and studies and the daily grind of combat, this little girl had become something more than that, too.

She'd become a warrior.
Chapter 13

"While player avatars do not breathe, per se, it is still possible to die from «Drowning» status when not under the influence of a «Water Breathing» effect. Undine characters have «Water Breathing» as a passive racial ability; all other races have a «breath meter» which decreases as long as the character is underwater, and which replenishes once they surface. If the «breath meter» depletes entirely, the character will enter «Drowning» status and begin rapidly losing HP as long as they remain underwater..."

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Swimming and Drowning»

27 November ~ 1 December 2022

Day 22 - Morning

Nearly all the time that Asuna and Yuuki had spent together since being trapped in ALO had been spent solely as a pair, becoming accustomed to each other's rhythms and roles in combat to the point where it was almost second nature to them. They fought extremely well together, cohesively enough that they drew praise at first from Jahala for their skill.

But none of that had prepared them for the intensive crash course they received over the next several days in how to fight as part of a group.

Yuuki, being used to tanking most of their fights while Asuna healed her, had to learn the hard way that Jahala regarded her skill set as more suited to a role he called **DPS**—which they learned was an English gaming acronym that meant **Damage Per Second**. In other words, her role in the battle was to focus purely on dealing out damage... but to do so when and where it was needed, not to simply charge in and flail away at the mob until it died. Doing so in a group against difficult mobs was a surefire way to draw aggro in a hurry.

Asuna, on the other hand, was even more annoyed to find that Jahala considered her role to be that of a healer—which meant that she wasn't supposed to be a damage dealer at all; she was supposed to hang back behind the tanks and DPS and be ready to heal on a moment's notice. She liked fighting with her rapier, and she felt useless for half the fight simply sitting back and doing nothing.

But although weapon skills used very little MP compared to magic, they still used **some**—and any that she used up attacking was MP that she didn't have available to heal. And once they started venturing out in a full group, she quickly learned exactly why this was so important.

She and Yuuki were almost always fighting solo field mobs—opponents that were intended to be taken on by solo players who weren't part of a group. This meant that they could usually fight mobs that were a little higher level than them, but it also meant that they had never truly been challenged.

That changed once Jahala began leading them into dungeons as part of a full group of six.

When Asuna first heard the word "dungeon", the thoughts that came to mind were of dark prison cells beneath a castle, beds of straw with rats in them, and devices of torture that didn't bear description. Instead, she learned that in MMORPGs the term referred generally to any kind of self-contained area—usually indoors or underground—with monsters and scenery in a more or less consistent style. More to the point, she learned that dungeons were **hard**—they were usually intended to be tackled by a group, or in some cases by a raid composed of two or more groups.

They began with clearing some of the popular lower-level dungeons in the immediate area around Parasel, using them to work on Asuna and Yuuki's teamwork skills and get them used to their
combat roles. Once Jahala was satisfied with their progress, the next day took them into progressively harder dungeons which required Asuna to focus all of her efforts on healing, and which kept Yuuki and her aggressive fighting style on a short leash. By the end of it they were both more exhausted than they had ever been from a day out together, and they fell asleep almost immediately upon returning to their inn room and collapsing onto their bed.

But that was nothing compared to the third day when Jahala brought in a second group to go out with them. Now it wasn't just the individuals in their group who had roles—each group had their own role; the one in which she and Yuuki found themselves was what Jahala called a **DPS group**—and it turned out to be exactly what it sounded like. While the tanks in Jahala's group focused on holding the attention of a mob and "turning" it so that any of its frontal attacks wouldn't threaten the others, the DPS group stayed behind the mob and focused on doing nothing but burning it down.

Ironically, the shift in tactics meant that Asuna could actually come in and attack with Yuuki—she just had to be ready to heal on a moment's notice, and she mostly used regular attacks rather than MP-draining techniques. Some of the named mobs and mini-bosses they faced in the raid dungeon they visited required more complex approaches, dashing in and DPSing for a fixed period of time and then retreating out of range whenever the cooldown timer on a mob's AOE ability meant that it was no longer safe to be close to it.

By day's end, they both had a much greater appreciation for the complexities and subtleties of fighting as part of a raid group—and a healthy bit of apprehension for the kind of challenges that faced them when they had to fight not as one of two groups, but as one of six or more with dozens of moving parts all trying to coordinate their actions.

When the fourth day dawned, they were as ready as they were ever going to be.

The raid rendezvous wasn't until noon; the two of them had the luxury of taking their time with breakfast, and without the necessity of scouring their maps or worrying about planning. In a way, it was liberating—someone was doing all of that for them now. They'd allowed themselves to sleep in, recovering from the past days of intense training, and they were both all smiles and jokes as they finished their meal.

The only thing that remained was a trip to the market to check for any last-minute gear upgrades and to get all of their equipment repaired to full. Once done, they sent a message to Jahala to let him know they were ready, and headed out to wait just inside the outer gates of Parasel.

Diavel was there waiting for them with Jahala, hands clasped behind his back as the two conversed quietly. Asuna was surprised—certainly Diavel couldn't be planning on coming along on the raid. He'd had almost no opportunity to spend time leveling up in the past month, and it would've been foolish in the extreme for him to expose himself—and the entire faction, for that matter—to risk like that.

But as it turned out, that wasn't why he was there. When he caught sight of her and Yuuki, his smile widened and he waved them over. "I thought I'd see the two of you off," he explained. For a moment he just looked at them one by one, and then he took a deep breath and sighed before reaching out and putting one hand on each of their shoulders. "You've both come so amazingly far since I first met you. From frightened children who'd never played an MMO before, to two of the finest warriors in this faction—possibly in the game. Jahala swears that the two of you are among the quickest learners he's ever seen. I'm incredibly proud of you both. I know you'll do an incredible job out there today."

For once, Asuna couldn't find it in herself to be annoyed at the way that Diavel condescended to her without even realizing it. His praise was sincere, and she took it at face value, nodding at his words.
"Thank you, Diavel," she said at last. "We'll do our best. We'll clear the valley boss and come back with a victory for all of us."

"You do just that." As his hands dropped to his sides, he turned to Jahala. "They're all yours. It's about time you got going."

After Jahala sent them both a party invite, they turned to leave, translucent blue wings materializing on their backs and humming into life. As they rose into the air, Diavel called after them one last time. "Asuna!"

She halted her ascent, gracefully spinning in the air and looking down at her leader with a questioning expression.

"Come back victorious, both of you," Diavel called out, his face serious now. "But above all… come back."

Something passed between them then, something that Asuna couldn't quite describe. She didn't try—she had too many other things to think about. She simply nodded once, and kicked her legs in a flip as she reoriented herself in the direction of the Valley of Rainbows.

It took over an hour for them to make their way to the valley, stopping to rest their wings around twice per hour—and it would've taken far longer if so many other groups hadn't already passed through on their way there, leaving very little need to clear hostile mobs as they went. At last their flight carried them up and over the waterfalls at the edge of the valley, and with a growing sense of excited anticipation they wove their way through the mouth of the valley towards a large collection of players they could see in the distance, all of them gathered on the shores of the rivers that poured through the valley.

They weren't the last group to arrive, but as soon as they did, Jahala began breaking up some of the pre-existing groups and rearranging players. He himself was in the main tank group, although he wasn't the MT himself—as the raid leader, he needed to be close to the thick of things in order to call out instructions as needed. Yuuki and Asuna he assigned to a group he called Melee DPS B; with Asuna as the healer it brought their group to five players, the other three being a pair of Undine men with massive two-handed swords and a third with a short sword and buckler.

She was about to ask Jahala why there were only five players in their group when he introduced their sixth.

"You have got to be kidding me," Asuna said with an immediate surge of annoyance which bordered on outrage, arms folded under her bust and thunderclouds gathering on her face. The Spriggan was wearing an elaborate black trenchcoat that he hadn't had before, and the grip of the sword sticking up at an angle from his right shoulder seemed different, but his messy hair and delicate features were not likely to slip her mind anytime soon.

Kirito blinked in confusion at her reaction, looked over at Jahala, and then back at Asuna. He seemed a little uncomfortable as he rubbed at the back of his neck. "Oh, I remember you. Asuna, wasn't it?"

"As I recall," she said tartly, "the last time we met it was me saving you. Or had you forgotten?"

"That's right," Jahala said as he tried and failed to hide his amusement, taking a step back so that he wasn't between them. "I forgot you two were acquainted. Is there going to be a problem?"

"He's a jerk!" Asuna said, for lack of anything more concrete to pin on him.
"Is she actually going to heal me?" Kirito said as he gave her a slightly worried look.

"If you're lucky," Asuna shot back, her eyes flashing. She could feel Yuuki's hand on her arm, but she wasn't feeling especially charitable or inclined to back down at the moment.

Jahala gave them one more look and then shrugged. "Well, the other groups are already set. You two are going to have to work this out." His eyes flicked upwards towards where the clock in his HUD would be. "And I suggest you do it soon."

As the raid leader walked away, Asuna found herself in a staring contest with the young Spriggan boy. His expression was somewhat thoughtful as he met her eyes, as if he didn't quite understand why she was so annoyed at him and was trying to sort it out in his head. Finally she turned away, arms still folded, and eyed him sidewise. "Try not to get hurt; I don't want to have to use up all my MP on you."

Much to her irritation, Kirito simply smiled. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"I am not worried about you," Asuna said. "I'm worried about the others in the group who might need the heals more."

Kirito nodded as if what she'd said made perfect sense. "Well then." He walked away without another word, seating himself on a rock and drawing his sword, which he laid across his lap and began to examine. She noticed Yuuki staring at it covetously, and Asuna had to admit that it really was a beautiful weapon.

Once again, she caught herself thinking one of those thoughts that made her stop and almost laugh at herself, at what she'd become. But there was no dissonance in the thought now—it was amusing in an ironic sort of way, but it no longer made her feel displaced somehow, like she'd found herself living in someone else's body, someone else's life.

It had been nearly a month that they'd been trapped in this world. She counted the days; twenty-five since the launch of this death game. By this point there was simply no question in anyone's mind that they were going to be trapped in here until the conditions of the game were cleared—it was, as Kayaba had intended, their new reality.

Asuna realized, as she thought it over, that this was simply who she was, now. Not Asuna Yuuki, a middle school student who got excellent marks and never had time for video games. Not Asuna Yuuki, a frightened girl imprisoned in a dangerous world she couldn't cope with or comprehend.

Now she was simply Asuna: Undine healer, swordswoman... clearer.

And the more she thought about it, the more she thought that perhaps that was just fine with her.

The raid group lined up along the eastern edge of a broad lake halfway through the mountains, forty-two players in groups of six. The main tank group stood to one side of the river that flowed eastwards out of the lake, three groups lining the shore to either side in a crescent shape that partially encircled that end of the lake. The time had come to cast buffs and make any last-minute preparations, and Kirito spent the time sitting placidly atop a large mossy rock near his group, conserving his energy and rehashing what he knew about the boss they were about to face.

He'd already repaired all of his equipment in town, he was stocked on potions, and he even had a single precious healing crystal that had dropped from a named mob on his way back from the northern valley raid. That crystal would restore his health to full instantly; it was an extremely rare drop anywhere outside of Yggdrasil, and uncommon even there. If it came down to it, if he really
needed healing that badly… the option was there.

The thought drew his eyes to the Undine girl he'd clashed with earlier. He really wasn't sure what her problem with him was. As far as he was concerned, he'd saved her and she'd saved him—they'd each done the other a good turn, and neither owed the other anything. So why did she hate him so much?

He didn't seriously think she'd refuse to heal him. She didn't strike him as that kind of person, regardless of what she might say in the heat of anger. But whatever was putting sand in her waistband, Kirito would've greatly appreciated it if she'd sort it out and deal with it.

As if sensing either his thoughts or his gaze, Asuna turned and looked sharply up at him. Caught looking, he turned his eyes to the lake in front of him, thick fog clinging to the surface of the water and making it seem almost as if it was an ocean of clouds. He knew what was lurking beneath that water, and it was going to be a tough fight.

He hoped this raid group was up to it.

Some signal passed from the main tank group to the melee DPS groups to either side; Kirito heard the group leaders calling for everyone to form up. He slid off the edge of the rock, his wings throbbing very briefly to slow his fall as he landed in a crouch. The overlapping sounds of chanted arcane syllables resolved into light in a variety of colors cascading down across the main tank as his group buffed him, and without any further delay the tank took to the air and shot across the lake.

A cry rang out from Jahala, standing in the center of the MT group. "Incoming!" That yell was passed along the shore, spreading to either side until it reached the ranged DPS groups on the ends.

They didn't have to wait long. The lake seemed to swell, the fog spilling away from a mound of water that pushed its way up from the depths; waves more than two meters high rippled outwards from the disturbance and crashed against the shore. Then the massive bubble seemed to burst, water cascading away from a dark form that uncoiled and announced its defiance in a shriek that split the air like the roar of a jet engine.

As one the melee DPS groups rose into the air, the valley walls reverberating with the sound of dozens of wings while the gigantic water serpent «Leviathanatos» surged towards the eastern shore, chasing after the tank as the player "pulled" the boss towards the main body of the raid.

The strategy for Leviathanatos in the beta had been a relatively straightforward one: a single main tank group to hold the mob's hate, with melee DPS surrounding it on either sides and burning it as hard as they could, wherever they could reach exposed flesh.

The main complication was the array of thin suckered tentacles lining the serpent's flanks on either side at intervals of every few meters; these would seize any character who came too close to its sides, beat them against its back to stun them, then attempt to drown them. The top priority of the ranged DPS groups was to destroy these tentacles, allowing the melee DPS to close in and burn the boss down.

Projectiles—arcane and otherwise—lanced out from either shore, aimed for the base of the tentacles where they moved less and were easier to hit. Kirito grunted with approval as he saw the mages and archers open with their homing attacks; it would cost them a lot of MP, but far less than they'd likely waste by firing and missing.

Several of the tentacles on the flank facing Kirito fell into the water, trailing streamers of glowing red light from the severed ends. Immediately his group launched into action, closing the distance at top
speed and unloading weapon techniques in a flurry of multicolored light. Kirito found himself fighting side by side with the Imp girl who otherwise never seemed to leave Asuna's side—Yuuki, she'd called the girl—their longswords flashing and cleaving great red welts into the serpent's scaly hide. For all her youth, he wondered if she'd been in the beta; she moved like someone who felt perfectly at home in this world, and the speed at which she dealt out damage was easily his own equal.

Kirito kept glancing at the HP bars above the head of the boss, watching the green of the first one turn to yellow, and then finally to red. He was already zipping quickly backwards when the call to pull back rang out.

He knew what to expect, but it was still a stunning sight when Leviathanatos reacted to the loss of its first HP bar by whipping its head around in a complete circle, a blast of corrosive mist spraying out in all directions and doing serious damage to anyone who hadn't gotten far enough away. Kirito saw healing energy cascade over one of the Undine swordsmen in his own group who'd been one of the unlucky ones, and turned to see Asuna's face twisted in intense concentration as she finished the spell.

The spiraling AOE attack ended when the serpent's head sank beneath the churning water for a few moments; at that point inexperienced players might erroneously think they'd defeated it. But before long the wedge-shaped head burst forth once again, and as it reared into the air again everyone could see that the tentacles had regenerated.

This began the cycle again: ranged DPS groups, having taken the opportunity to recover their MP, erupted with a fusillade of attacks that made even quicker work of most of the dangerous appendages, and once again he and Yuuki rocketed back into melee range to continue their assault.

But this time, Kirito knew, the attack patterns would change. During the first phase, Leviathanatos had been content to focus its hate entirely on the main tank group. Now it became much more difficult to avoid pulling aggro; Kirito had to pace his attacks and avoid overdoing it. He saw the others in his group doing the same, and allowed himself a smile; they'd paid attention during the briefing.

Someone in the other melee DPS group hadn't; he went all-out in an unrelenting attack that ended with the serpent's neck twisting until it seized the player in its great jaws. Leviathanatos shook its head viciously from side to side, and only an intense blast of fire magic against the beast's throat from one of the Spriggan mercenaries got it to release its prey. Kirito shook his head as he watched the player desperately try to retreat towards a healer, his HP in the red.

Other than those minor incidents, the second phase passed as smoothly as the first; when the second HP bar reached the red, everyone retreated out of range and let the ranged DPS groups burn it down the rest of the way until the bar shattered and disappeared, leaving only one remaining. Again, Leviathanatos reacted to this outrage with an area attack, this time rising a considerable distance out of the water and using the length of its neck to extend the range of the AOE.

Unfortunately, the main tank group was within that extended range. Fortunately, the mages had been ready with buffs that shielded most of the group from the blast, and a gale-force blast of Wind magic swept past them and parted the searing fog safely to either side of the MT group. The single exception was one of those very mages, who'd been hovering just a little too far off to one side to be fully protected. Already damaged, the acidic breath scoured away the last of his HP, and with a cut-off shout of surprise he burst into blue flames.

Kirito began to grimace as he witnessed the first death of the raid, a raid with a strategy so easy to execute that there was no good reason for there to be any casualties. Then, to his surprise, one of the
two healers in the MT group peeled off and raced towards his companion's Remain Light, a lengthy and complicated series of symbols coalescing around him as he chanted a complex spell. A fine blue mist flowed out of the caster's robes and merged with the Remain Light, a translucent blue phoenix shape rising out of it and reforming into the player who'd nearly perished.

Resurrection magic. You needed Water magic at a skill level of 500 to cast even the weakest and most basic rez spell, a sacrifice that exchanged half of the caster's MP and HP in order to bring the target back with one single hit point. As Leviathanatos burst from the water once again, its tentacles regenerated, the other healer in the MT group immediately began healing both players—expending most of his MP in the process.

Kirito had no time to be astonished that someone had actually managed to grind their skill level that high in less than a month, even with the Undine racial advantage; it was enough to know that at least one person in the raid could rez. As soon as enough of the tentacles had been blasted off to give his group a hole in the defenses, Kirito raced back in with Yuuki and resumed their assault.

This time Kirito and Yuuki paced themselves by taking turns, zooming in to execute a multi-hit technique and then back out to give the other an opening, grinning at each other as they passed. It was going well enough until Yuuki seemed to get a bit carried away with trying to outdo Kirito; she blasted the mob's flank with a five-hit combo and then gave it a single spinning slash as she turned to pull back.

It was a little too much for Leviathanatos to ignore. Its head twisted around and it lunged at Yuuki, forcing her to shoot rapidly backwards in order to evade the bite. The maneuver got her out of the way... and within range of one of the intact tentacles. It lashed out with terrifying speed, wrapping around her and slamming her repeatedly against the hardened scales at the crest of its back. After the final blow, it dragged the stunned girl beneath the water and did not come up.

It took Kirito a moment to realize that the horrific scream he heard then came not from the throat of Leviathanatos, but from one of the players behind him. Asuna shot towards where Yuuki had disappeared into the water, abandoning the group entirely. Kirito tried to shout a warning, but before he could get the words out the suckered appendage lunged back out of the water and wrapped itself around Asuna's ankle, proceeding to deal with her in the same manner it had Yuuki.

As he watched the mob batter the Undine girl against its back, Kirito flew in an accelerating ballistic arc to build up altitude and speed, and then folded his wings against his back as he drove himself straight down into the water where both players had disappeared.

The water enveloped him like a cold, wet blanket, muffling the sounds of the battle above and cutting visibility. He could vaguely see a shadowed form in the shape of a player, and he swam towards them until he saw that it was Yuuki, her HP down to the red and still dropping due to Drowning status.

Wrapping an arm around her midriff, Kirito kicked as hard as he could until he broke the surface, his own breath meter nearly gone. The precious healing crystal was in his free hand before he could think about it, and as soon as he could speak again he sputtered out, "Heal!" The crystal shattered with a sound like glass, and red light flowed over Yuuki, bringing her instantly back to full.

The girl's stun seemed to be wearing off, and although she was still disoriented from the experience, she began to awkwardly tread water. "I'm going after her," Kirito said. "Get to shore!" Without waiting for an answer, he dove again just as a barrage of projectiles destroyed the tentacle that was preparing to snatch one of them.

Visibility was still minimal under the murky surface, and there was no sign of Asuna. For all he
knew, she was already dead and all he would find was her Remain Light—if that much. He knew she couldn't have drowned; Undines had no breath meters and could "breathe" underwater indefinitely. The same was not true for him, and as he searched and searched, not knowing if he was just going in circles, he watched his breath meter flash as it depleted completely. A status icon appeared by his HP gauge while his life began to tick down, and just when he saw his HP go into the yellow zone he caught sight of a faint shape in the depths.

When he breached the surface again, Asuna's stunned form was draped over his back, both of their HP gauges deep in the yellow. It was just in time to hear an unearthly shriek as someone dealt the final blow to Leviathanatos, causing it to erupt into blue polygons which rained down around them.

As Kirito swam towards the shore, he felt Asuna begin to stir from her stun status, and was uncomfortably aware of the way she was pressed against his back. After a few moments she stiffened; he saw one of her hands form into a fist.

"Please don't," Kirito said wearily. Asuna stuttered for a moment, and then her voice turned anguished as she yelled out. "Yuuki! What —"

"She's safe," Kirito said as he felt his feet touch the solid ground in the shallows. He stood as Asuna slipped off of his back and looked frantically around, spotting Yuuki sitting on the shore near them in the midst of a bunch of other recovering players. She still looked disoriented, but when she and Asuna caught sight of each other she bounded to her feet, colliding with Asuna in a fierce hug as tears streamed down their faces.

Kirito turned away awkwardly, sitting down on a nearby rock and taking off his boots one at a time to empty them of water. His coat felt like it had doubled his body weight, and if he'd known he was going to go swimming he might've considered unequipping it despite the loss of stats. He did so now, and felt enormous relief at the disappearance of the waterlogged weight from his shoulders.

When he looked up, he saw Asuna and Yuuki approaching him. For a time no one spoke, and from her conflicted expression Kirito wasn't sure if the Undine girl was going to thank him or slap him. They looked at each other wordlessly, each seemingly waiting for the other to say something.

Yuuki was the first to break the silence, looking up at the older girl. "He saved me first," she said. "I was gonna drown."

Kirito had no idea what was going through Asuna's head at that moment, or how she would react to it. Would she be angry that he'd gone after the other girl first? His uncertainty persisted until she stepped forward and shocked him by leaning over and putting her arms around him, hugging him briefly.

He was still too stunned to speak when she finally stepped back and addressed him. "Thank you," she said quietly, before taking Yuuki's hand and walking away.

"Let's go over this again," Argo said. The Salamander player sitting directly across from her groaned and palmed his face as he leaned back on the pillow where he sat. He seemed to have been expecting a chair back to stop him; he leaned too far and tipped over backwards with a distinct lack of grace. Argo rolled her eyes as he pushed himself back up to a sitting position and complained. "Seriously? Do we have to?"

"Nah," Argo said with an annoyed flick of her tail. "I'll be happy to send you off on this mission
completely half-assed, not knowing whether or not you've gotten the plan through your thick skull well enough that it stays there. So like I said, let's go over it again."

Klein gave her the kind of look that suggested he was considering getting up and stomping on her tail to see what kind of noise she'd make. Argo looked back at him evenly, unblinkingly, until he sighed. "Fine, fine," he said, waving at the air. "I'm going southeast with your people as far as the border with the Sylphs. There we're going to meet this Sylph contact of yours, who's going to escort me and Eugene through their territory without getting our asses kicked. Once we get close to the Salamander border I'm going to make a beeline for Gattan while he waits there."

"Good so far," Argo said after popping a piece of candy into her mouth. "Keep going."

"Once I'm in the city, I'm to send word to you and then lay low until Kibaou leaves the city with the raid group, then—" Klein paused, giving Argo a confused look. "I don't get it… why do you think Kibaou is even going out with the raid? He's a faction leader. It's not like he's had time to go out leveling up. He'd be an idiot to expose himself like that."

The rock candy crunched in Argo's mouth as she looked right back at Klein. "Kibaou is an idiot," she said acidly. "And he's desperate. His hold on the Salamanders is crumbling, their war's been at a stalemate for weeks, and he's gotta deliver them a huge win in the next few days before the leadership vote. More to the point, he's gotta be seen there, being a part of it." She paused, considering whether or not the next piece of information was relevant. "And he has been leveling up. He's been going out every day in secret with his most trusted flunkies."

It was a detail Argo wished she'd known weeks ago. Corvatz had let it slip in passing during a recent exchange, and if she'd known that earlier, she could've traded or sold the info to Skarrip and possibly gotten the Sylphs to take him out. It was a bit late now; Kibaou was too busy with raid preparations to be sneaking out to grind.

Klein certainly seemed to be surprised by it, but aside from a bit of open-mouthed goggling he didn't comment further. At Argo's prodding, he went on.

"Okay, anyway, once Kibaou takes off with the raid group, I send a message to Eugene, and he checks the map in his friends list to find out where they're currently keeping Mort. Are they seriously moving him every single day?"

"Yes," Argo said tersely.

"And what then? They'll have him under guard, you know. Springing him'll take a miracle. You have a plan for that?"

Argo smirked, one of her ears giving an amused twitch. "Do you know who you're talking to?"

"A catgirl with an attitude problem," Klein replied.

Argo rolled her eyes once again. "Says the hired muscle with the feather duster eyebrows." Before Klein could explode, she barreled onward. "Save it; we don't have time for this. Thelvin'll have a package for you, and he'll explain that part. The important thing is, once you've got Mort, you get the hell outta there. Don't even bother with the streets; just take off the second you're in open air and fly west as fast as you can. Soon as you're outta the city, get word to Eugene and he'll challenge Kibaou. Got it?"

"Got it," Klein said, frowning.

"Good," Argo said as she came to her feet. "Now get going. I've got business to deal with, and
you've got someone to meet at the gates."

When the Salamander had left, Argo rubbed at her temples to try to stave off the headache she felt coming on, and was not at all surprised when the trick that worked in the real world had no effect on her avatar. Over a dozen incoming messages had piled up while she was dealing with Klein, some of them quite important—and it took her a considerable amount of time to deal with them all, particularly since she started receiving replies to the first messages she sent out before she was done with the ones still in queue. It was the better part of half an hour before she had a moment's peace, and she took advantage of the lull to think over the wording of the final message she had to write.

Strictly speaking, it didn't have to be dealt with right then. She actually had no intention of sending it right away—but she wanted the draft to be saved and ready to send on a moment's notice once Klein reached Gattan. After playing out the message in her head, her lips moving silently as she carefully thought through every single word and made adjustments until it was exactly the way she wanted, she re-opened her menu and started typing.

``
It's time, Corvatz. I just got word that the Undines have successfully raided the Valley of Rainbows. Your boys are clear to hit the last valley boss.
``

She looked it over one last time; even though she could always see words in her head as if they were on paper in front of her, there was always something intangibly different about seeing them written in reality. Satisfied at last, she saved the draft and closed the window.

Now all that remained was to wait.

As soon as Klein left the apartment, a Cait Sith who'd been waiting patiently outside fell into step with him. The man was quite large—easily one of the largest Cait Sith he'd met, a man with jet black hair who stood about as tall as Eugene, but wasn't quite as massive despite the plate armor that encased his avatar.

"You got your plan all sorted out?" Thelvin asked.

Klein bristled. "Why does everyone here assume I'm stupid?"

Thelvin seemed unruffled. "I don't," he said as they turned down the main street towards the front gates. "And I owe you for saving us back then, and I appreciate you coming back with your friends to help us take down Fellrach. But considering the stakes we're dealing with now, I don't feel like leaving anything to chance." He glanced sidewise at Klein. "Fair?"

Klein nodded reluctantly. "Fair," he said. "Is it just us?"

"That's right," Thelvin replied. "The two of us alone will travel faster than we will with anyone else along. I have a group out clearing us a path between here and the Ancient Forest, so we shouldn't have to stop to fight except for maybe a few stray repops. I'll get you as far as Sylph territory, and from there we've arranged for a few of them to escort you—"

"I know," Klein said. "It still blows my mind that they're willing to do that."

Thelvin laughed sharply. "For a chance to throw a wrench in Kibaou's plans, and maybe even take him out?"

Klein had to grin at that and cede the point. "Never mind. So was it Argo who set that up, or Alicia?"
"Yes," Thelvin said, with an answering grin of his own. "Argo set up the contact, but Alicia did the diplomatic footwork. There's more than one reason she's been so busy."

"Not too busy to come and see you guys off," came a familiar voice as they prepared to take to the air. Klein turned to see their subject of conversation leaning against the wall of one of the watchtowers on either side of the city gates, a lopsided smile quirking her face. Alicia pushed herself off and strolled towards the two of them, crossing her arms before her.

"What, you thought you were getting out of here without saying goodbye?"

Klein searched his mind for something witty to say, something that might salvage the situation. He looked at Thelvin, who arched his eyebrows as if to tell Klein that he was on his own. Glancing back down at Alicia, he laughed nervously and started to stammer. "Uh, no, I just thought that since we need to get going as soon as possible, and you've been really busy—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence before Alicia reached up and grabbed him by the upper rim of his breastplate, yanking him down and crushing her lips against his. Klein made a strangled noise of surprise and opened his mouth to protest, which she took for an invitation to deepen the kiss as she reached up with her other hand and wove her fingers into his hair, pulling him closer.

Klein wasn't quite sure how long they were like that, but he was fairly certain that the snicker he distantly heard came from Thelvin. When she finally released him, it took him a moment to straighten his posture and get around to fixing his bandana. Alicia wore the smug expression of the cat who'd stolen the cream.

"You're coming back, right?" she said, wiggling her ears in a way that she had to know was devastatingly cute.

"Well, I mean, the rest of my guys are staying here, I kinda have—"

When Klein saw the look on Alicia's face, he hastily extracted his foot from his mouth and put it to good use scuffling at the ground. "I mean, among other things… absolutely, coming back here. Totally."

The smugness returned to Alicia's face and she nodded, satisfied. "You do that," she said, whistling as she walked away.

Klein blinked once, twice, his mind still spinning as he tried to figure out if that had really just happened. When he glanced over at Thelvin, the taller man was covering his mouth, laughter in his eyes.

"Shut up," Klein said as he summoned his wings and kicked off into the air.

Fortunately, the journey ahead of him turned out to be far less eventful than the walk to the city limits. The clearing groups had done their jobs well; he and Thelvin didn't have to waste time clearing any trash mobs along the way, and when Thelvin handed him off to the Sylph patrol waiting at the border, he learned from Eugene that the other half of that patrol group was blazing a similar trail for them.

Leaving Eugene alone at the edge of Salamander territory, Klein cleared his way to Gattan as quickly as he could. A few weeks ago this would've been a tedious bit of work taking half the day, but by this point he'd leveled up enough that the solo mobs along the way simply weren't any kind of challenge—some of them even refused to aggro him. It took him longer than it had taken the previous groups to move through territory that had already been cleared, but even with the need to
rest his wings it was only late afternoon when he finally reached the Salamander home city.

As he stood before the gates of Gattan for the first time in weeks, a mixture of emotions ran turbulently through his head. The last time he'd been here was not a happy memory, and he had no idea what he'd be facing once he entered the city. He knew he wasn't banished or exiled—fortunately, Kibaou had never gotten his name during their brief argument—but somewhere in the city there might be players who would recognize him, either from that first night or from his fight the day after. He needed to be particularly careful to avoid Corvatz, whom Argo had said now held a position of prominence in the Salamanders. Klein was already nervous just standing out here; he wasn't the only Salamander coming and going, and any moment he might run into the wrong player.

Steeling himself, he fired off a brief message to Argo and then headed inside and looked for a discreet place in the entry plaza to watch for the raid.

He didn't have long to wait. Fifteen, perhaps twenty minutes after his message went out, the amount of player traffic in the plaza began to increase significantly. Salamanders and Imps in twos and threes wearing gear that looked higher than average in quality started gathering near the large statue in the center of the open area, some of them beginning to sort themselves into clusters of six. There were even a few Spriggans mixed in, which made Klein think of Kirito and wonder what he was up to—Klein hadn't seen him since the Cait Sith raid on the Valley of Butterflies.

The sudden appearance of the Salamander leader made Klein suddenly very glad for the harsh shadows cast by the desert sun; they allowed him to become more or less anonymous under the awning of an NPC shop along the outer edge of the plaza. Klein opened his menu and signaled Eugene that the raid group was gathering, and as soon as he got a reply he quietly made his way down a side street, breaking into a run once he was out of sight of the raid.

On his way, he stopped at an NPC supply merchant and picked up the most expensive local sake he could find, along with a loaf of basic bread. Thus supplied, he consulted his map and the directions Eugene had given him, and made time as quickly as he could.

Kibaou's desire to keep Mortimer held in out of the way places had one advantage, from Klein's perspective—it meant that he could head to the outskirts of the city where he was less likely to run into anyone on their way to the raid group, and where he was far less likely to run into anyone important. The building he sought turned out to be a collection of storage sheds, and it didn't take him long to find the specific one he was looking for—it was the only one with a guard in front. Taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, Klein brought out the food and drink he'd bought earlier and approached the guard.

The young Salamander standing outside the door looked incredibly bored and unhappy. Klein couldn't blame him—standing here outside this door out in the direct sunlight had to be the Salamander army's shittiest duty. Kibaou would want all his best people along on the raid or out leveling up; anyone he assigned here was not likely high on the totem pole. The guard eyed him warily as he approached. "What's all this?"

Klein held up the loaf of bread and the bottle of sake. "Food and drink for you-know-who."

The guard blinked and looked surprised. "We're feeding him now?"

Wow, Kibaou's an even bigger asshole than I thought. A player's avatar didn't need to eat and couldn't starve to death, but after a while the simulated sensation of hunger got very convincing—and very unpleasant. Feigning complete ignorance, Klein shrugged as he handed over the bottle and bread. "Do I look like I care? I go where they tell me and do what I'm told."
The guard snorted and relaxed a little. "Tell me about it. Hey, wait a minute…" He looked a little more closely at the bottle, and outrage tinged his voice as he waved it in Klein's face. "The fuck is this? They're giving him Hitokiri? Do you have any idea how much this shit costs?"

As a matter of fact, Klein did—and he was glad Argo was paying for it. "How should I know? I hate drinking this crap. Give it to him or don't; I'm outta here." He turned and started walking away, forcing himself not to look back. As soon as he rounded a corner, he brought out his wings and propelled himself up to the roof of a nearby building, crawling along it until he could just peek over the edge.

*Gotcha.* He was just in time to see the guard look furtively left and right, then uncork the bottle and take a long pull from it. In a matter of moments a look of surprise crossed his face, and both bottle and bread loaf fell from his fingers as he collapsed to the ground, a yellow icon with a lightning bolt symbol flashing beside his HP gauge.

Klein wasted no time, launching himself off the roof and beating his wings just long enough to slow his descent and touch down at a run. The guard was staring up at him from the ground in sheer disbelief, which shifted rapidly to rage as it dawned on him what had happened. The parade of expletives that the guard managed to croak out weakly was music to Klein's ears as he unbarred the door and kicked it open.

Mortimer blinked as his eyes adjusted to the sudden onslaught of light; the interior of the room hadn't been lit. "Klein!" he said, grimacing as he pushed himself to his feet. "Eugene sent a message that said you might be coming. How—"

Klein didn't waste any time with banter. "Come on," he said urgently. "That paralysis poison is only going to last a couple minutes." He scooped the loaf of bread off the ground as they both rushed outside, and tossed it to Mortimer as his wings reappeared on his back. When the other Salamander didn't do the same, he looked back at him. "Come on!" he repeated. "We've gotta fly as fast as we can."

"Can't," Mortimer said over a mouthful of the bread as he tore off a bite to stave off some of the hunger pangs. "I've been inside all day; my wings aren't charged."

"Oh you have got to be—you're not kidding. Shit." He looked down at the guard, then back at Mort. "Then we run. We're not far from the western outer wall. By the time we get there, you should have at least enough flight time to carry you over it. We'll go as fast as we can and make for Sylph territory."

As they ran, Klein thought it over. Once they were outside the walls, they'd still have to travel on foot for about twenty minutes in order for Mortimer's wings to fully charge. That was more than enough time for the guard to recover and alert someone in charge about Mortimer's escape—and for a search party to fly west and catch up with the two of them, even starting from the opposite side of the city.

"Send Eugene a message now!" Klein yelled as they approached the outer wall and launched themselves into the air. "Tell him you're out and he's clear to challenge Kibaou!"

"I did that while we were running," Mortimer said, his wings buzzing into life and carrying him swiftly to Klein's side. "No answer yet."

Klein nodded, looking anxiously back at the city. He couldn't see any flight trails, but that didn't mean a search party wasn't already on its way. As soon as they had to land to rest their wings, he asked again—but there had still been no reply from Eugene. It was unusual—he'd been quick to
reply to every message thus far, and this had been the moment he was waiting for.

A thought suddenly occurred to him. "You've got him friended, right? You should be able to see his location."

They kept running as quickly as they could while Mortimer opened his menu and drilled down into it, pulling up a map. He frowned suddenly. "The plan was for him to head east at full speed to intercept Kibaou's group, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Then why is he still in Sylph territory?"

Klein staggered to a stop, nearly losing his footing in the sand from the sudden deceleration. "He's what?"

"He's on the edge of Sylph territory right now," Mortimer said with growing concern. "And he's not moving."

Klein stared at the map as Mortimer set it visible to him, uncomprehending. "I don't understand," he said. "We had a plan. And he wouldn't hang you out to dry; you're his brother. Right now he should be beelining it for the raid group in order to call out Kibaou, not sitting on his hands, unless—"

"Unless he's in trouble," Mortimer said suddenly, swearing.

Klein scanned the horizon, looking for flight trails—and still not seeing any. It was one silver lining on a plan that was rapidly going sour. There was always the possibility Eugene had been attacked by Sylphs who weren't in on the plan, of course, but that shouldn't have happened—the same group that had brought Klein through unmolested had brought Eugene as well, and Klein had left him just on the Salamander side of the border—in hiding, waiting for the signal.

It didn't make sense. But when he looked back at the map, Eugene's marker was barely moving—and it was moving in the direction of Sylvain.

"We can't do anything for him now," Mortimer said, his eyes distant and his expression thoughtful, albeit pained. "It's up to us."

Klein looked back at Mortimer in confusion which rapidly gave way to alarm. "You're not thinking what I—"

"Yes, I am," Mortimer said, cutting him off. "We don't have a choice. If Kibaou pulls off this raid successfully, there's going to be no stopping him—he'll have the entire faction behind him, including a lot of players who might've been on the fence before. It'll be a grand victory—his grand victory."

Klein scowled, not liking the sound of that at all. Mortimer was right—with that kind of success under his leadership, he'd easily prevail in the coming vote, and he wouldn't give anyone an opening to challenge him again. It was now or never. "Then no offense man, but you're kinda fucked. You're level 1. There's no way you could fight him and win."

Mortimer nodded. "No, there's not." He met Klein's gaze then, and for the first time he understood why Kibaou had felt so threatened by Mortimer, so desperate to keep him isolated from the rest of the faction. Even standing here as a level 1 character in starting gear, the man exuded charisma.

"But you can."
Author's Note 1/29/14: Incidentally, for those who care about these sorts of things, the writing binge of these last few chapters has been fueled almost entirely by a playlist of Hadouken and Crystal Method. Most of the earlier chapters were written while listening to a whole lot of Nightwish and Apocalyptica, but I found that the hard electronica worked better for all of these intense boss battles.
Chapter 14

"Although faction leaders are usually selected by popular vote once every thirty days or following the resignation of a leader, Alfheim Online provides for one other method of succession. Unlike killing the leader of a different faction, the death of a faction leader by the hands of one of their own—which in a duel or in open combat—results in the victorious player immediately replacing the former leader..."

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Assassination»

I ~ 6 December 2022
Day 31 - Afternoon

Klein knew he and Mortimer couldn't be very far behind the main Salamander raid force. They hadn't encountered a single mob in the last hour; it was as if the landscape had been scoured clean of anything that could be attacked. There had already been nearly fifty players gathered for the raid when he left the plaza earlier, and more had still been arriving—Kibaou, clearly, was taking no chances and intended to swarm the boss. He knew that there should be a variety of drakes and other reptilian flying mobs here in the Valley of Dragons, but absolutely nothing aggroed them.

With this path cleared before them, it didn't take long to catch sight of the raid. They had landed at the edge of a great canyon that split the valley, dozens upon dozens of players in red armor and robes separated into groups. Here and there a player would shift from one group to another at someone's instructions; they were still making last-minute adjustments to group makeup and roles. Klein wondered who Kibaou had doing that; he doubted the man was smart enough to make those decisions himself.

They touched down behind a massive rock formation on the western wall of the valley, a location deep in shadow from the afternoon sun. As he got a good look at what they were facing, Mortimer's face turned almost white.

"Good grief, he's a complete moron," he said, his expression aghast. When Klein glanced at his companion in confusion, Mortimer hesitated. "It's a bit hard to explain if you weren't there for the beta," he said after a moment. Klein listened while Mortimer ran down the strategy necessary for defeating the southern valley boss, his expression growing more incredulous with each new detail.

"You're shitting me," Klein said when the info dump was complete.

"I wish I was," Mortimer said with a sour look. "This fight is a difficult one when you do it by the numbers. From the looks of Kibaou's raid makeup... he's going to get them wiped. If he bothered to listen to any of the Salamander beta testers, he'd know that."

"It's almost tempting to let him," Klein said. "If it didn't mean getting more than sixty other people killed in the process..."

"You have to move now if you're going to do this," Mortimer said urgently, pointing towards the raid. "They're starting to form up."

"Wait here," Klein said. "If Kibaou sees you, he's not going to wait to hear a challenge—he's going to go ballistic, and you won't survive a single hit. Once he and I are engaged in battle, then you can move in closer."

He could see the idea frustrated Mortimer, who was already disgruntled at the necessity of someone...
else fighting his fight for him. The man nodded, and put a hand on Klein’s shoulder. "This is it," he said. "Not just this raid is at stake—thousands of lives depend on you bringing him down."

Klein nodded solemnly. "Don't worry," he said as he reactivated his wings and rose on a column of red light. "I won't fail."

The Salamander leader stood atop a large boulder, arms crossed as he looked out at his army with a smug look on his face. With others handling the actual group arrangements and the battle nearly about to get underway, Klein couldn't think of any practical reason for him to be up there—he wanted to be seen. It was the entire point of this exercise.

_Good_, Klein thought as he flew towards his target, stopping and hovering when only about ten meters of open air separated them. _I want everyone to see and hear this._ "Kibaou!" he shouted.

Kibaou's head whipped around at the sound, and his smug expression quickly turned to a scowl. "Well if it ain't the big mouth from launch day," he growled out. "I wondered where you'd gotten off to. If you're here for the raid, better go see Corvatz and hope he's got a spot for you."

"I'm not here for the raid, Kibaou," Klein yelled. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was to come next, and made sure to project his voice clearly so that it would carry to as much of the raid group as possible. "I'm here to stop you from getting everyone in it killed with this blind rush you're calling a strategy."

Kibaou laughed defiantly. "Oh no, don't tell me—let me guess, you're another one of those beta testers."

Klein should've been so lucky as to get into the beta. But Kibaou didn't know that, and Klein saw no reason to point out his error. "What's being a beta tester got to do with anything, man? You should be happy to have their help."

A sharp bark of laughter, louder than the first, was Kibaou's answer. "Save it, asshole. I've heard this crap before. If you testers wanted to help, you shouldn't have run off after the first day and left us hanging, or tried to undermine my authority." He looked around and spread his arms, obviously playing for the crowd. "Where were you when we moved on Everdark? Where were you when our offensives against the Undines and Sylphs ground to a halt? Where was your advice then—when it really mattered?"

All of this was news to Klein. But it wouldn't have surprised him at all if some of the players with beta experience had wanted nothing to do with Kibaou's warmongering, and had fled for neutral territory. Certainly Mortimer and Eugene had been a real threat to him—and for good reason. Klein hadn't run into any other friendly Salamanders in his travels, but that didn't mean they weren't out there. And from the sounds of it, Kibaou had taken that as a personal betrayal, and turned it into a prejudice against beta testers in general.

"I'm not surprised the testers abandoned you, Kibaou," Klein said clearly and forcefully. "They've got the experience to tell what a shitty leader you are."

"Oh, fuck you," Kibaou said, gesturing in the air to open his system menu. "Congratulations, pal, you just got yourself—"

"I CHALLENGE YOU TO A DUEL!"

Klein's full-throated shout echoed off the walls of the valley, momentarily stunning Kibaou into stopping what he was doing. Before the Salamander leader could recover, Klein drew his katana and...
leveled it at Kibaou, causing a stir of alarm from his guards. "You and me, Kibaou. One on one. If you're such an epic badass, it's time for you to put your goddamn money where your mouth is."

Kibaou's look of shock moved swiftly to outrage, and then slowly became a vicious grin as his wings materialized and carried him into the air. He drew a massive two-handed sword from his back and held it out in front of him at an angle, the tip pointed at Klein's chest. "So that's how you want to play it? Your funeral, pal. None of this 'first strike' crap, either—you won't be the first tester I've had to kill. Are you sure you don't want to just—"

Klein met Kibaou's eyes across the space separated by their swords and killing intent. "Shut up and bring it, you bedwetting piece of shit."

Kibaou's features twisted in rage, and he began to raise his two-handed sword high above his head in what Klein recognized as the beginning position for a sword skill. Before red light had even begun to gather along the length of the Salamander leader's sword, Klein took his left hand from the grip of his katana and rapidly rattled off a series of syllables he knew quite well by now. "Hitto zabu vethleka chazajan!"

As his sword technique began, Kibaou launched himself straight up in order to evade Klein's projectiles. But as the system assist engaged and began to carry Kibaou rapidly down towards Klein in a heavy overhand chop, the homing fire bolts which had missed low began to loop back, taking the Salamander leader in the back. The natural Salamander fire resistance meant that the damage was minimal, but the impact was enough to throw off his aim, allowing Klein to parry the blow by slanting the flat of his own weapon across his shoulder.

A spinning one-handed slash cut through the air just above Kibaou as his momentum carried him downward, flipping almost upside down and stabbing upward. The edge of the blade just barely caught Klein's leg as he evaded, and as Klein shot rapidly backwards he chanted another spell he'd learned recently, summoning a fire shield around him in a shower of incandescent sparks.

Kibaou laughed as he closed the distance. "Go ahead, waste your MP on fire spells, dumbass." A savage crosscut drew an orange arc through the space Klein had just occupied as he flew above the blow and did a flip of his own, bringing the katana down in a two-handed technique that met Kibaou's follow-up strike in a clash of steel. Klein slid the blade of his weapon down until it locked with Kibaou's at the hilt, pushing towards him until the proximity fire shield began applying a Damage-over-Time effect to his opponent. Kibaou snarled at the sudden rush of uncomfortable heat and the slight trickle of damage, and drove his knee into Klein's midsection. The blow was enough to separate them, and the three-hit combo that Kibaou unleashed against him then did noticeable damage even through his successful blocks.

Klein realized what the problem was quickly enough—it was a simple matter of weapon weight and priority. Kibaou's two-handed sword considerably outweighed Klein's katana, not only giving it higher priority in any direct clash, but making it impossible to block without some of the damage soaking through—a problem that Kibaou didn't need to worry about. Worse, Kibaou would almost certainly have a higher STR stat than him—two-handed swords were pure STR-based weapons, while curved swords and katanas required a balance of STR and AGI.

He couldn't go toe-to-toe with Kibaou—it would turn into a war of attrition that he'd lose. He was going to have to rely on evasion and wits to prevail in this battle.

Kibaou rushed at him with a roar, sword trailing behind him and building up a surge of power. Klein held his katana in a defensive position in front of him as if he was going to block... but right as Kibaou unleashed his technique, Klein completely stilled his wings and dropped like a rock. Almost immediately he brought them back into action, shooting straight up and executing a combination
attack as Kibaou's momentum carried him past.

The technique exploded against the Salamander leader's back while he was stuck in the recovery frame of his own technique, three consecutive slashes tearing great rents in his armor and leaving behind scars that glowed with an angry crimson light—as well as temporarily dispelling his wings for taking too much damage. Kibaou tumbled rapidly downwards at an angle, digging a furrow in the ground where he struck and bringing his HP gauge close to the halfway point. Klein followed him all the way down at high speed, but when he struck with a sword skill Kibaou evaded it by rolling to the side and coming up to his feet, the katana sending up a spray of dirt as it tore into the ground.

Nothing but white-hot rage filled Kibaou's eyes now, and his attacks were wild as he drove Klein back blow by blow. For all that his character had to be focused fully on STR, Kibaou's anger and desperation granted him speed, and it was all Klein could do to deflect or avoid the flurry of strikes.

Klein's own HP gauge chimed once as it hit the yellow zone, and when Kibaou swept his sword horizontally in a technique meant to bisect him at the waist, Klein's wings took him straight up and above the blow, and he flipped over his opponent's head as if trying to get behind him. Kibaou continued the momentum of his crosscut and let it spin him around, but Klein had been expecting that. Instead of landing behind Kibaou, Klein stopped himself in order to hover at around head height, and freed up his left hand while he chanted the words to the non-homing version of the spell he'd cast earlier.

Salamanders might have a natural resistance to fire, but that didn't mean they were immune—and the head was still a critical location with a damage multiplier. As Kibaou's attempted spinning slash passed below Klein, fire surged down the length of his left arm and sprang from his fingertips in a series of flaming bolts. Those projectiles struck Kibaou point-blank in the face in rapid succession, the explosions sending the Salamander leader flying backwards head-first with a yell of outrage. It wasn't enough to take him into the red zone, but from the fleeting glimpse Klein got of his HP gauge it looked to have brought him down to somewhere near a quarter of his health.

As Kibaou scrambled to get back to his feet, Klein could see something else joining the rage in the other Salamander's eyes. Now there was fear—real fear. "Corvatz!" Kibaou yelled as he lunged at Klein, more damage getting through despite Klein's attempts at blocking. "Help me deal with this fucking traitor!"

Klein snarled as he spun his katana in a series of blows that rang off of Kibaou's blade. "You cheating bastard!"

Kibaou didn't seem to care at this point as he turned his sword desperately from side to side in order to defend against Klein's sudden onslaught. While Klein was locked briefly in the recovery frame from his last technique, Kibaou planted a boot in his chest, knocking him backwards and buying some space and time. "Corvatz, goddamnit, where are you!"

As it turned out, Corvatz was having problems of his own. Klein caught a glimpse of the older Salamander as several of the other raid members tried to restrain him from rushing in. Enraged, he freed up his sword arm and slashed at one of his assailants, trying to break free. The man who'd been holding his arm cried out, and what had started as an attempt to keep him from interfering in the duel quickly turned into a fight between two different factions of Salamander players—a fight that began spreading.

The raid group was now in complete disarray, devolving into a battle for the future of the Salamander race.

A flicker of motion in his peripheral vision warned Klein that he'd been a fool to take his eyes off of
Kibaou. He got his katana up just in time to deflect the blade of the two-handed sword across his shoulder, but its new trajectory severed one of his wings, and the follow-up blow sent him sprawling to the ground while his katana went spinning out of his hands. A heavy boot descended on his chest, Kibaou's superior strength pinning him.

Kibaou grinned nastily down at Klein as he held the sword at his throat, voice rising triumphantly. "Not so tough now, are you? Fucking testers, you think you're so much better than the rest of us! You, Mort, Eugene… traitors, all of you! Well now who's laughing, asshole?" The sword point dug into his skin a little, and Klein saw his HP gauge turn a dangerous red color with a deceptively calm chiming sound.

Klein glared back up at him with something akin to pure hate. There was no point now in explaining that he wasn't a beta tester—he'd failed. He didn't know where Mortimer was now, and he supposed it didn't matter—the best he could hope for was that Mort could somehow rendezvous with Eugene and get in touch with the Sylph leadership. Maybe if Kibaou went ahead with the raid after this, they'd wipe after all. "Just get it over with, you gutless coward."

Kibaou's grin disappeared. "Fine with me." He raised the two-handed sword high above his head, flames running up and down its length as he built up for an elemental sword technique. The intent was clear—complete overkill. "Say hi to the rest of the testers in hell, asshole."

The sword descended towards Klein, and he flinched, waiting for the death blow. But the flaming blade dug deep into the ground beside his head, and a pair of small polygon bursts rained down to either side of him, accompanied by the most horrifying scream he'd ever heard from a human throat. Kibaou stared uncomprehendingly at the glowing red stumps of his forearms, emitting a wordless guttural howl that seemed to end only long enough for him to start screaming again as he sank heavily to his knees.

Behind Kibaou stood Mortimer, Klein's sword held out to one side as if he'd just come to the end of a slashing motion. His face was a mask of calm as he took two steps forward and sank his fingers into the cactus-like mass of Kibaou's hair, yanking the Salamander leader's head back and then bringing up his knee, driving the man's face into it repeatedly. Kibaou flailed helplessly as he continued to scream, trying to claw at Mortimer and free himself—but without hands with which to grasp, the difference in their STR stats meant almost nothing.

When only a red sliver remained of Kibaou's HP, Mortimer threw him face-first to the ground and put the tip of the sword to the back of his neck.

"This is for every beta tester you murdered, you son of a bitch."

When the final word fell from Mortimer's lips, he thrust the tip of the blade hard through the back of Kibaou's neck, cutting off the incoherent howling as several inches of the katana were buried in the ground beneath his opponent's throat. Kibaou's twitching body shimmered once, flames running rapidly up and down the length of it and burning away the very texture, leaving only a wireframe filled with hellfire. His 3D model collapsed into nothing, and burst into a single flaming Remain Light.

As Klein looked on in shock, a gold star appeared beside Mortimer's HP gauge.

Argo looked around the table at the seven other players present, searching their faces one by one. Representatives from almost every race in Alfheim were there—although in the case of the Spriggans, calling Kirito their "representative" was stretching matters a bit; Yoshihara hadn't responded to any of the requests to send someone to join them here in Arun.
Still, it was better having someone from that race than not.

Kirito caught Argo's gaze as she looked around the table and smiled slightly. Argo answered with a grin and wiggled her ears, then moved on. To Kirito's right sat a stunning young Leprechaun woman with long silver hair that was tied up in a high ponytail, a pair of locks hanging down across her cheeks. Yurielle inclined her head slightly as their eyes met, and turned to whisper something to the massive Gnome sitting beside her. Agil nodded once and passed whatever she'd said on to the Puca woman sitting between he and Argo, whose name she hadn't gotten yet.

"Is there something the NCC reps would like to share with the rest of the table?" The gravelly voice to Kirito's left came from Eugene, newly-minted commander of the Salamander army and designated representative from that faction.

Sakuya, sitting to Argo's right, leaned forward across the table. The effect on her considerable bosom was noticeable, and Argo would've bet any amount of Yuld that she knew exactly how it affected the men at the table. "Does it matter?" she asked coolly. "We're all entitled to our secrets. I thought we were here to discuss how to avoid the kind of open warfare and indiscriminate killings that ended so many lives in the first month of this death game."

The Undine to her right, a young man named Jahala, nodded and tried very hard not to look in the direction of Sakuya's chest. "She's right," he said. "We can't have a repeat of Kibaou's invasion, or the encouragement of PKing that followed. No matter what differences we've got, despite the fact that we're all effectively in competition to escape this world... there has to be a line."

"There will not be a repeat of the day one invasion," Eugene said firmly. "But as grateful as Mortimer and I are for the assistance of the Cait Sith and Sylphs in getting rid of that tyrant, the unavoidable fact remains that we are all still implicitly in competition."

"Yes, and I notice that we don't have a representative from the Imp faction here," Jahala said, an edge creeping into his tone. "Care to explain that?"

Eugene spread his hands. "It can't be helped. The Imps still don't have a leader—and they won't until tomorrow when this voting cycle ends. There's simply no one who can speak for them—it's still our territory at the moment, and we will represent them here."

"How convenient," Sakuya observed dryly. "Remind me again why we let you go?"

Argo stood suddenly, slapping her hands on the table. "Shut up, all of you." Taking advantage of the sudden stunned silence, she glared around the table as she spoke. "It comes down to this: we are all human. All of us. And we're all prisoners of a nut job with a god complex who—in case you've forgotten—is the person who created the artificial conditions pitting us against one another. The more people who die, the fewer who are left to clear the World Tree. And that could leave us all screwed."

"Thank you, Argo," Eugene growled. "We never would've figured that out if—"

"Are you finished being witty?" When Eugene answered only with a glare, Argo went on as if the interruption hadn't occurred. "The point is: we need rules. Like Jahala said, there's gotta be lines we don't cross. And we all gotta agree on them, sell them to our leaders, and enforce them in our factions... or else human nature is gonna rear its head again, and sooner or later people are gonna start killing each other over who gets to clear a boss or something stupid like that."

"You're talking about some kind of Geneva Convention for Alfheim," Agil said, his deep voice cutting through the tension that hung over the table.
Argo nodded. The analogy had in fact occurred to her, but it was just as well that someone else brought it up first. "That's it, more or less. So let's start having a conversation about just where those lines are."

They talked for hours, most with note-taking windows open; a few who were more comfortable with handwriting used scrolls. Argo didn't get that herself, but it did end up being handy to have paper drafts that they could pass around and share. At one point Sakuya and Eugene nearly walked out on the meeting, but after an intense series of exchanges they both sat back down and confined the degree of their disagreement to dirty looks.

They broke for lunch, giving all of the representatives time to consult with their faction leaders. When they all returned to the inn room, eight scrolls sat on the table—one in front of each chair. The representatives all unrolled them and read through the draft; Argo already had it memorized but she laid hers out on the table anyway so that nobody would doubt that she was taking it seriously.

Yurielle rose to her feet, holding the scroll out in front of her as she read. "So that we never forget that the divisions between us are arbitrarily engineered not by each other, but by the one man who trapped us all in this world;"

"Bearing in mind that no matter our outward appearance in this world, we are all still human beings;"

"With the understanding that strife will occur when human beings are presented with mutually conflicting goals;"

"With the purpose of minimizing the unnecessary loss of life in the course of these conflicts;"

"We, the nine player-races of Alfheim—"

"Eight," remarked Sakuya, unwilling to let that point go. Eugene simply rolled his eyes.

Yurielle didn't miss a beat. "—agree to observe and uphold the following principles:"

"First: that reducing a player's hit points to zero must never be the purpose of any hostile action, and must be avoided whenever possible except in the defense of one's own life or the life of another."

Nods went around the table. That was the core of the proposed treaty—the recognition that being in competition didn't mean they had to kill each other. That PKing for the sake of PKing had to end, and that if there was an opportunity to resolve a conflict without killing, that alternative was—to put it mildly—preferable.

"Second: that any player whose HP reaches the red zone must be allowed to peacefully withdraw from combat if they attempt to do so."

That went along with the first point. Argo and Kirito had argued for "yellow" instead of "red", due to the potential for powerful attacks to take more than half of a player's max HP in one hit, but there was general disagreement about how that would make it too easy for players to initiate hostilities and then escape the consequences of their actions and say "no harm, no foul" if the fight didn't go their way. There had to be a risk to combat in order to make it undesirable.

"Third: that any player who ceases hostilities and submits to their opponent must be allowed to do so without fear of further attack, so long as they do not resume participation in combat."

This point had been absolutely non-negotiable from Argo's point of view, and even Eugene didn't argue it once its purpose was clear: surrender without fear of summary execution had to always be an option, at any time. Players who had nothing left to lose by continuing to fight were capable of
desperate atrocities, and a policy of taking no prisoners could easily escalate.

"Fourth: that Damage Over Time effects must not be used against a player whose HP is in the red zone."

Although Argo had wanted to avoid getting into too many specific examples and exceptions—they made it easy to claim that anything not listed there wasn't prohibited—this was an important one. Without this provision, a player could apply a DOT to a critically injured player and claim that they didn't know it would kill them. There was really no justifiable reason to DOT someone in the red unless you were trying to do exactly that.

"And lastly: that any player attempting to revive another player's Remain Light by any means must be allowed to do so without interruption or fear of attack, even in the midst of battle."

This was the provision that had taken the longest to resolve, consuming well over an hour of argument back and forth across the table. Eugene complained that this gave the Undines an unfair advantage, given their racial affinity for healing magic, and even some of the representatives from the Northern Crafting Combine were concerned about exactly how enforceable it was, considering how difficult it could be to tell what spell another player was casting in the heat of battle.

In the end, Jahala had pointed out what in retrospect was fairly obvious: that if someone was standing in front of another player's Remain Light and trying to cast a spell or use an item, it was pretty safe to assume that they were trying to rez the fallen player. And that ultimately, if the entire point of this treaty was to avoid unnecessary deaths, then the benefit of the doubt had to be given when there was a Remain Light involved, considering the very short window of opportunity before it disappeared forever.

When Yurielle had finished reading off the scroll, she deftly rolled it back up and returned to her seat. Everyone exchanged looks, searching for signs of dissatisfaction or dispute.

There were none.

"The Northern Crafting Combine will sign the Treaty of Arun," Yurielle said simply after receiving nods from her two companions. "Anyone who breaches it will be subject to the same consequences as anyone who attacks a member of our faction: they will be blacklisted; banned from our territory, and no NCC member will do business with or otherwise provide services to them."

"So will the Cait Sith," Argo said. She hadn't even needed to consult Alicia; she'd been empowered to make that decision herself. "We'll sort out our own consequences for anyone who screws it up."

"The Sylphs agree to the terms of the treaty," Sakuya said simply.

"As do the Undines," said Jahala.

"The Salamanders will abide by these terms," Eugene said. His face then twisted in a smile. "Breaching them will be a capital crime in Gattan."

"Way to miss the point there, Eugene," Sakuya said with a sigh.

Eugene looked at her. "That was a joke."

"Not funny."

Only one person was left at the table. Argo looked directly across at Kirito, who had already taken the scroll and stored it in his inventory. He seemed distinctly uncomfortable at being put on the spot
as all eyes turned to him, and he gave a long sigh as he sat up a little straighter.

"The Spriggans—and by that I mean Yoshihara—won't agree to sign the treaty."

The sounds of outrage that erupted in the room rendered it impossible to tell what anyone was saying, and for close to a minute there was nothing but yelling back and forth, with Kirito looking very much like he'd rather be soloing a floor boss three quarters of the way up the World Tree without a healer. Finally, Argo put her fingers in her mouth and whistled so loudly that everyone clapped their hands to their ears.

She met Kirito's eyes across the table, looking for answers. She struggled silently with how to respond to that, and finally settled for simplicity. "What happened?"

Kirito closed his eyes for a few moments as he answered. "I exchanged a few messages with Yoshihara while we were on break. I tried to explain everything to her. She said that even if she was inclined to tie everyone's hands by signing any kind of treaty, it would be impossible to enforce—most Spriggans consider themselves free agents, not members of a faction." When he opened his eyes again, there was genuine regret in them as he met Argo's gaze again. "I'm sorry. It wasn't the choice that I would've made."

"Then you won't be welcome in Sylvain," Sakuya said as she stood. "You can tell her I said that—Spriggans can find work somewhere else if they won't abide by the treaty."

"I'll have to consult with Diavel," said Jahala evenly, "but I suspect he'll be of a similar mind—your faction members won't be welcome in our city or our territory."

The NCC reps looked at each other. "I don't know that we'd go quite that far," Yurielle said, "but any individuals who don't abide by the treaty will most definitely find themselves blacklisted."

Eugene shrugged. "Your faction leader's an idiot," he said. "Do what you want, but if you make trouble in Gattan you'll regret it."

Kirito nodded as each person spoke, and then returned his eyes to Argo. She almost wished that he hadn't.

She and Alicia hadn't discussed this possibility, but Argo had in fact thought about what kind of leverage might be used if any of the factions wouldn't sign on to the treaty. She'd expected the Salamanders to be the most likely ones to pull that. Perhaps she simply hadn't wanted to think about what would happen if Yoshihara ended up being as useless as she'd feared… about what that would mean for Kirito.

As Argo tried to find her words, conflicted, Kirito simply stood and looked back at her, nodding once. "I see."

"I'm sorry, Ki-bou," she said softly.

Kirito gave the very weakest of smiles and shook his head. "It's not your fault." Before anyone else could speak, he turned and left. When the door closed, it had a sound of finality.

Asuna and Yuuki walked side by side through the streets of Arun, discussing the rumors spreading through the city—that there was some sort of summit occurring that involved all of the player races, something so critical from Diavel's perspective that it had required Jahala's presence. The Undine clearing groups had been told to wait until he returned, and that when he did he would have something important to tell them.
In the meantime, she and Yuuki found themselves with a little bit of time to kill, and they had spent most of it wandering the city looking for shops that might have gear upgrades or useful supplies for them. They’d made quite a haul so far, spending close to half of their hard-earned Yuld, and Yuuki was completely over the moon about the beautiful new longsword she’d picked up—she couldn’t wait to try it out.

In fact, Yuuki had found several upgrades, not least of which was a new breastplate of a very fine, light metal with a large AGI boost and some other very impressive stats. After unequipping her old gear, she noticed that her inventory was starting to fill up, and told Asuna that she was going to go find a shop to vendor off a bunch of excess loot.

As she watched Yuuki soar off towards the upper terraces of Arun’s merchant district, Asuna sighed and trudged onward, looking for the rest of the Undine clearers. A large party of Salamanders had just headed into the World Tree, and although she didn't think Diavel wanted to send their own people in so closely behind their erstwhile—and possibly still hostile—enemies, she wanted to sync up with Jahala once he was out of his meeting and find out what the plan was. She unconsciously adjusted the set of the rapier on her hip and moved on.

As she walked through a park set on the hillside, letting her wings recharge, she was momentarily struck by a pang of recognition that she couldn’t place—a vague sense of déjà vu that tugged at something buried deep inside of her. It wasn’t until she passed through a winding path lined with flowering bushes that it hit her—she’d been here before. A month and a lifetime ago, on her first day in the game, a very different Asuna had walked this path, staring around in wonder and ignorance of what awaited her. She wondered if they’d even recognize each other, that girl and the warrior she’d become.

As she continued on, lost in her thoughts, she spotted someone that she did recognize. Kirito—she at least thought of him by name now, instead of first recalling him as "that Spriggan boy"—was lying in the grass beneath a stand of trees, fingers laced behind his head and his eyes closed. Asuna wondered for a moment if he was hurt before noticing the serene expression on his face; she realized he had to be napping.

The sight filled her with a surge of irritation that it took her a moment to place. They were all trapped in this world until the World Tree was cleared—it was their top priority; their only priority. They were all weary—hadn’t she and Yuuki been pouring everything they had into getting stronger and helping to contribute towards that goal? How could he relax like that, slacking off as if he didn’t have a care in the world?

As her shadow from the midday sun passed over him, Kirito’s eyes opened slightly—just enough to recognize her before sliding shut again.

"Don't you have anything better to be doing?" she asked with a slight edge to her voice. "There are clearing groups heading into Yggdrasil all the time. They—we—could use your help, and you’re lying here being lazy and goofing off."

It wasn't the sort of question that required an answer, but without opening his eyes again, Kirito gave one anyway. "I don't know what your problem is," he said calmly, "but you could stand to relax. This is Alfheim's nicest weather setting. It's the kind of day that was meant to be enjoyed, not wasted inside a dungeon that will still be there tomorrow. You should try it; the grass is soft."

Asuna hadn't really given the weather any thought, other than being aware that it wasn't as wet as it had been in Parasel recently. She looked around at the park, and up at the nearly cloudless sky where the sun peeked around the very edges of Yggdrasil's canopy. Rays of that sunlight filtered through the leaves of the smaller tree under which Kirito was resting, painting both of them with a patchwork
quilt of light and dark, warm and cool.

It was a nice day.

She looked back at Kirito, but without prodding him she couldn't have told whether he was aware that she was still there, or if he'd gone to sleep. A profound awareness of just how tired she really was filled her as she looked at his still form, and she sat down on the grass a respectable distance away from him and eased herself back. The grass was indeed soft, the sunlight and the cool breeze soothing, and she could feel the weariness draining slowly from her as she pillowed her head on her hands.

*Just a few minutes*, she thought. *I'll just rest here for a few minutes, let my wings finish recharging, and meet up with the others.*

It was her last thought before falling asleep.

"Don't fight it," Kirito explained.

Yuuki looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

Kirito brought *Midnight Avenger* into position for a single-strike technique; the matte black blade glowed with barely restrained electric-blue power. "It's called «system assist». It's what causes your body to move when you execute a weapon skill, carrying you through the motions. You already know how to adjust the trajectory of an attack in mid-strike; I've seen you do it. But by learning the motions yourself and moving with the system assist, you can accelerate it and increase its striking power. Struggling against it will just make you less effective."

With that, Kirito unleashed the technique he'd been holding back, one he'd performed thousands of times. This time he anticipated the movements and went with them, his sword blade moving in a blue blur that split the air and caused the grass on the hillside to sway as if from a strong wind. Yuuki's eyes widened.

"Now you try it." Kirito sheathed his weapon and sat back down beneath the tree to watch the girl practice. As Yuuki concentrated and tried to match the motions of the system assist, he heard a soft murmur from about a meter to his left, and turned his head to see Asuna's sleeping form start to stir. He had to smile as she rolled over and started to groggily come awake—she had several blades of grass stuck to her face, and she'd been drooling in her sleep. She blinked several times as she pushed herself up on her elbows, looking around as if still trying to place where she was and how she'd gotten there.

Then her eyes widened as she saw Kirito sitting nearby, and her gaze flickered towards the setting sun as it painted the sky with shades of fire. The sudden panic in her eyes seemed to subside somewhat as she spotted Yuuki practicing sword skills in the open grass, and she slowly sat herself up, looking around as if still trying to place where she was and how she'd gotten there.

Kirito smiled, reached up with one finger and made a brushing motion at his cheek. She looked at him, still confused, and then reached up and imitated the motion, wiping at her face and watching in something resembling horror as a few blades of grass went fluttering to the ground.

"How… how long was I out?"

"At least several hours," Kirito answered, looking back in the direction of where Yuuki was silhouetted against the sunset. "I didn't want to disturb you. It looked like you needed the sleep."
Out of the corner of his eye he saw Asuna's head turn to follow his gaze. She was quiet for a few moments as Yuuki executed a two-hit combo against the air once more. The Imp girl waved vigorously once she saw that Asuna was awake, and bounded over towards where the two of them sat.

"Did you see that, Asuna? It's so cool! Kirito here was showing me how to get faster and stronger by overriding the system assist!"

"Not overriding, exactly," Kirito said. "Remember, you're not fighting it. It's like swimming with the current."

"That's wonderful, Yuuki," Asuna said in gentle tones that Kirito found almost shocking. It was like seeing a completely different side of her.

Yuuki nodded, grinning happily. "I hope you had a good nap. I'm gonna go practice some more! I'll show you later!" And so saying, she sprinted back towards the open ground, giving her longsword an elaborate flourish before bringing it into position for a technique again.

"She's a good kid," Kirito said without taking his eyes off the sunset and Yuuki's enthusiastic practice strikes. "I think she'll be really strong one day."

A quiet un of assent was the only response Asuna gave, and they resumed their silence as they both watched the sun begin to set on their first month in Alfheim, the faint murmur of crowds underlying the sounds of Yuuki's training activity the only noises disturbing the peaceful stillness of the scene.

With only a sliver of the sun visible over the distant mountains, it was starting to get a little chilly. Nothing compared to the frigid temperatures of the north, and it wasn't really uncomfortable, but enough to touch him briefly as a breeze picked up and blew past his face, carrying away some of the lingering heat of the day. Kirito tilted his head back against the trunk of the tree and folded his hands in his lap, closing his eyes as a sense of serenity and contentment filled him. Other than the stress and frustration of the treaty summit, it had been a pretty good day. And this afternoon of pure relaxation had gone a long way towards banishing even that weight from his mind.

As he felt the last of the setting sun's warmth leave his body, he was aware of a presence beside him. He opened his eyes to slits just as Asuna wordlessly leaned her head against his shoulder, and then closed them again. He wasn't sure what had prompted her to do that, but it was far from unpleasant, and he was unwilling to do anything that might move or disturb her. After a while, the sounds of Yuuki's practice strikes ceased, and when he eventually opened his eyes once more he saw that the younger girl had put away her weapon and curled up beside Asuna with her head in the older girl's lap.

Kirito could not remember feeling more at peace in his life.

第1幕の終わり
END OF ACT 1

Author's Note 1/30/13: As the above implies, this is the end of the first act of Fairy Dance of Death. I hope you enjoyed it and were satisfied with the conclusion! This is most definitely not the end of the overall story, but it is a point of closure for those who want one. For everyone who's reviewed, faved or followed this story, thank you so much!

Continue to the next chapter to begin Act 2 of Fairy Dance of Death!
Chapter 15

Kibaou is dead, and with him the first month's Salamander crusade. Four months have passed since the signing of the Treaty of Arun, healing some of the wounds from that short war but allowing others to fester.

With familiarity comes comfort. For thousands of players—many of whom are in their formative teenage years, where months are lifetimes—living inside of a fantasy game and fighting for their lives has become familiar and routine. Some embrace their new lives. Others reject them. Most adapt and find ways to cope or make the best of their situation, as long-term castaways and prisoners always have.

Some few, whether they know it or not, are simply awaiting their moment. A turning point where their decisions will change Alfheim—and Alfheim will change them.

ACT 2: Turning Points

"While new spells will periodically appear in a player's spellbook as their skill level in the relevant school of magic increases, players should be aware that the arcane language used to construct these incantations can be used to create custom spells by anyone who takes the time to learn the words of power and how they combine to produce magical effects..."
—Alfheim Online Manual, «Incantations and Spellwords»

15 April 2023
Day 161

High in the sky above the surface of Alfheim, higher even than the cloud-kissed branches of the World Tree, a vortex raged.

Seemingly wide enough to swallow Yggdrasil itself, the swirling maelstrom of purple energy had churned unceasingly for nearly six months now. What was in the beginning a terrifying phenomenon that drew the eye wherever you went had become, for most, simply another reminder of their imprisonment—something to be put out of mind and never discussed. For those in the clearing groups, those who ventured daily into the dungeon within Yggdrasil's trunk and pushed ever onward, that vortex held another meaning: it would one day be their freedom.

Their's, and selected others. For the visionary madman that had trapped 20,000 players within the virtual world of Alfheim Online had left them with a very specific set of conditions for ever being able to leave the game again: pass through that vortex, and you may log out.

But with a player's maximum altitude limited by a flight meter that depleted more quickly the higher they flew, there was only one way to do this: the players of ALO must fight their way through the vast dungeon within the World Tree and reach the top. The player who landed the Last Attack on the boss waiting there would win the power of unlimited flight for themselves, their race, and two allied races of their choosing.

Unlimited flight. During the beta test, it had been a promise of joy for those who enjoyed flying and a significant tactical advantage over flight-limited characters in PvP combat. Now, under the conditions of the death game, it was a matter of nothing less than survival and liberty.
For all its prominence in the sky, the purple vortex that had appeared during Akihiko Kayaba's so-called tutorial was not visible from anywhere within Arun itself—from the vantage point of that bustling metropolis nestled in the roots of the World Tree, Yggdrasil's branches spread wide in every direction and gave rise to Arun's nickname as "The City of Eternal Shade".

As Kirito materialized on the warpgate dais in the center of the city plaza where Kayaba had first gathered everyone on the evening of that fateful launch day, he was struck with a blend of annoyance and ironic amusement at the immediate need to shade his eyes with the flat of his hand. The sun was in that brief two-hour window where it was low enough to clear the branches of Yggdrasil but still high enough in the sky to hang above the mountains on the western horizon. After a day spent clearing corridors and chambers dark enough to require his Illusion magic to see, it was nearly blinding.

His eyes adjusted soon enough, though, and within a few minutes his wings had recharged enough in the sunlight for him to take to the air—his destination wasn't far, and he had a number of errands to run.

First and foremost among those errands was to take care of his gear and keep it maintained at max durability. It was a habit long ingrained by the time the beta test had concluded, and after all these months on the front lines of Yggdrasil it had become as automatic and natural as brushing his teeth had been back in the real world. The store he sought was located on the far eastern edge of the merchant district barely twenty seconds' flight away from the entrance to Yggdrasil's dungeons; a low-level player could've almost run there in less time than they flew, but at Kirito's level he was fast enough to enjoy the convenience. He settled to the ground in front of a corner shop with a round bronze sign hanging over the entrance, and pushed the door open with a shrill tinkle of bells.

A wide array of glass display cases lined the walls and stood as islands in the middle of the shop, each of them filled with an impressive-looking assortment of weapons for virtually any preference. Kirito ran a finger down the edge of one of the cases as he walked by; the weapon within it looked as if it might almost be a match for the rare longsword he currently carried, an elegant cobalt and ebony blade called «Phantasmal Dirge». But almost was not good enough, and he rather liked his sword.

He wasn't the only player in the weapon shop. A pair of Sylphs were browsing through the katana-type weapons near the shopkeeper's front desk, and when they caught sight of him they scowled. Kirito couldn't even bring himself to sigh by this point; he was well aware of what kind of reputation the members of his race had gained ever since their then-leader, Yoshihara, had refused to sign on to the Treaty of Arun. He ignored the dirty looks and turned his attention to the shopkeeper herself.

Lisbeth looked back at him with something that might've been a hint of sympathy as he approached. Not wanting to cost the young Leprechaun smith any more business than his presence might have already, he unslung Phantasmal Dirge from his back and presented it to her wordlessly.

"Hey lady, I thought Spriggans were on the NCC blacklist. Why're you helping him?"

That snide remark came from the older of the two Sylphs, a man with long flowing light green hair that seemed to be receding from his forehead. He looked down his nose at Kirito, who did his best to blank his expression.

Lisbeth was not quite so restrained. She set the sword on the counter and marched over to the two Sylphs, fists planted on her hips in a posture that Kirito knew portended doom. The Sylph man was
tall enough to almost tower over her, but she looked straight up at him as if she intended to duel him.

"Only the ones who don’t abide by the treaty. And I can tell you that this one does. As long as they
do that, the NCC has no objection to taking a Spriggan's business. Is that a problem for you?"

The younger Sylph tried to push his way around the older one. "What do you think? Of course they
can't be trusted, lady, now—"

"Good!" Lisbeth said with exaggerated cheer as she began to push both Sylphs bodily towards the
door, almost forcefully enough to trigger the anti-harassment warning. "I'm glad we straightened that
out. Now the two of you can get the hell out of my shop while you're still breathing."

The younger Sylph didn't seem to know when to stop. "Our avatars don't breathe—"

"I'll make you breathe just so that I can deliver on that threat!" Lisbeth yelled, her face turning red.
"Get out!"

Kirito coughed lightly into his hand as the door to the shop slammed shut, drawing a glance over the
shoulder from Lisbeth. "What?" she asked, her tone defensive.

"Keep that up, and you're going to drive away so many customers that Spriggans will be your only
source of income." There was a slight smile teasing at Kirito's face, but his concern was earnest—it
seemed like every other time he came in to have his gear repaired, Liz ended up blowing her top at
some customer or another who was giving Kirito the cold shoulder.

Lisbeth folded her arms under her bust and turned to look squarely at Kirito for a few moments, then
relaxed somewhat. She dropped her gaze as he passed him, walking over to pick up his sword from
where she'd set it on the counter. "It just bothers me," she said, pausing at the doorway to the
workshop with her back turned to him. "It's not your fault the Spriggans have a crappy leader."

"The Spriggans have exactly the leader they want," Kirito said, unable to keep the scorn for his
fellow faction members out of his voice. "One who has no interest in leading."

"But that can't be all of them, right? No matter what kind of reputation the faction had on the Internet
before the game launched, there have to be players who picked their race for some reason other than
wanting to be solo, right?"

That hit a bit close to home for Kirito. He'd originally picked a Spriggan in the beta primarily for
their appearance—he mostly preferred to use his sword, so the shortcomings of Illusion magic
weren't really a concern for him, and he ended up finding creative ways to make it useful anyway.
But from what he'd seen, Spriggan players like him were in the minority—most had known exactly
what they wanted when they made their character.

"Not all of them," Kirito said finally. "But enough of the ones who vote."

Lisbeth was a skilled smith, and ALO's crafting interfaces were remarkably simplified. Kirito heard a
bit of hammering from the back room, and a few minutes later Lisbeth returned with \textit{Phantasmal
Dirge}, presenting it to him with both hands.

Kirito received it the same way, and drew the sword from its hard leather sheath. Tapping it to bring
up its status window, he confirmed that everything was as it should be, and gave Lisbeth a smile as
he sheathed it and returned it to his back, opening his trade menu and adding money to it. "Thanks
again. I appreciate it as always—a lot of NCC crafters don't even bother to check against the
blacklist; they just won't do business with Spriggans at all." Some had even gone so far as to hang
signs with "no Spriggans" or similar sentiments outside of their shops.
The look on Lisbeth's face clouded again as she accepted the payment. "They're racist idiots," she said firmly. "I know you're not like that, Kirito. You're always welcome here."


His fingers had just touched the handle of the front door when Lisbeth's voice brought him to a halt. "Kirito!"

Kirito half-turned, looking back across the shop at Lisbeth with a questioning look on his face. She seemed to be visibly struggling with something, wringing her hands on her apron as she cast her eyes down towards the floor. "Kirito, I… that is… I…"

The question on his face shifted into mild confusion. "Liz?"

Her struggle ended abruptly as she unclasped her hands and held them to her sides, donning a cheerful smile as if it was a mask. "Nothing! It's nothing, sorry… I… good luck."

Kirito blinked at her for a moment, and then tried on an awkward smile of his own, thanking her and walking out of the store.

He was never going to understand girls.

And never was that fact more apparent than when dealing with the person he saw next as the shop door shut behind him. The Undine girl's blue eyes slid to the side to regard him a little cautiously as she walked down the street, absorbed in the animated—and seemingly one-sided—conversation coming from the younger girl walking beside her.

The young Imp girl seemed to be recapping favorite moments from a recent battle the two had been in, but when she saw Kirito she cut herself off in mid-sentence and ran towards him with a happy shout, grabbing him in a hug that was startling for all its strength. It was a stark reminder that in the world of ALO, your STR stat mattered far more than the muscles on your avatar's 3D model. "Kirito!"

Arms pinned to his sides, Kirito smiled uncomfortably and tried to extract a hand so that he could dismiss the anti-harassment warning that had just popped up in his vision. "Hello Yuuki, Asuna." He saw the Undine girl give a sudden start as he spoke their names, but it was gone from her face so quickly that he couldn't be sure it wasn't just the emotion expression system being over-sensitive. He met Asuna's eyes for a moment, and saw some of the reserve thaw from her as Yuuki released him and stepped back.

"We were just on our way back to the front lines, Kirito, you should come party with us! Right, Asuna?"

Asuna opened her mouth soundlessly for a moment, and Kirito could tell from her embarrassed, cornered expression as she glanced between Yuuki and him that the sudden invitation had taken her somewhat aback.

"It's okay," Kirito said quickly, "I have to—"

"I'd really like that," Asuna said, finally managing to smile at him. Kirito couldn't remember the last time she'd done that, and it stopped him in his tracks.

He shut his mouth quickly, looking away. "That would just cause you problems," he said. "With your faction and the other clearers, I mean. Diavel doesn't want Spriggans on Undine territory at all now. You think he really wants his top clearers out partying with one?"
"You think I care what he has to say about it?" Asuna asked sharply. When Kirito returned his gaze to her, he saw an expression to match her tone—and he couldn't be sure whether she was angry with him, her leader, or both. "I can make my own decisions about who I want to party with, and what risks to take."

Kirito couldn't meet her eyes. People he knew losing business over him was bad enough. He didn't want to cause problems for Asuna and Yuuki as well; the last time they'd partied together on the front lines it had gotten Asuna into a huge shouting match with another Undine clearer that ended with both him and Kirito leaving her party.

Better that his isolation not rub off on her. He was happy enough as a solo player, but Asuna seemed to thrive on the social aspect of partying with others and the role she'd taken on as a top member of the Undine clearing groups. The prospect of her being shunned the way he was…

"Thanks for the invite, but I'm not going to the front lines today," Kirito said. "I have to go to one of the lower regions to farm mats for upgrading my sword." It wasn't even a lie—it was where he'd been intending to go.

Not a lie, no… but it was an excuse.

Yuuki seemed disappointed, and Asuna gave him a slightly hurt look. Kirito couldn't face that, and had to turn away. "I'm sorry," he said, trying to force a smile onto his face. "We'll party up another time when we're both going to the same place."

"Yeah," Asuna said, her tone doubtful. "We'll do that. Come on, Yuuki." The distinct sounds of Imp and Undine wings came to life and receded into the distance.

Kirito had to force himself to unclench his fists and stop digging the tips of his fingers into his palms after they were gone. He gave the two of them a few minutes' head start, his thoughts in turmoil. Then, without another word, he brought out his wings and headed towards the warpgate.

"I've been thinking," Argo said.

Alicia Rue flattened her ears back in mock-horror as the two of them walked through the farmer's market in Freelia. "Should I be worried? When you start thinking, it usually ends with you sending my people around the world like game pieces."

"'My people'," Argo echoed with something approaching amusement. "You're starting to sound like a larper. Do you need an intervention?"

Alicia snorted and made an indelicate gesture. Like so many neologisms in ALO, larper was derived from an English gaming term. It was an unofficial—and somewhat pejorative—word that had cropped up in recent months to refer to people who'd completely submerged themselves in their in-game racial identity. Some blurring of the line separating reality from fantasy was only to be expected after six months of living in this world 24/7, but larpers didn't blur the line so much as scuff it out and lose track of the fact that there ever was one.

"Nice," Argo said as she made an unsuccessful grab for Alicia's raised finger. "Very regal, that."

"I call the Cait Sith 'my people', Argo, because game or no game, I'm responsible for their lives. I might not take many things seriously, but that's one of them—or else I wouldn't still be here. So yeah, all kidding aside, I get to be a little worried when you start thinking up some kind of scheme that's likely to require me to ask someone to put their life on the line."
Argo's eyes flickered around the market, looking for any nearby players. Seeing none, she went on in a conversational tone. "What happens when someone clears the game?"

Alicia stopped and looked at Argo curiously. "We've talked about this. Isn't it obvious? Kayaba's terms were to reach the top of the World Tree, defeat the boss there, and get the power of Unlimited Flight so that we can fly through the vortex. Us and two allies. We know what we have to do, so why bring it up now?"

"That's not what I meant," Argo said as she paid an NPC vendor for a bag of candy. "What happens afterwards?"

Alicia was silent for a few moments. "Maybe I don't get where you're going with this after all."

"Okay, then bear with me here. Someone clears the World Tree, gets to fly through the vortex and log out, whee, happy ending. For them. What about the six races left behind?"

"They're fucked," Alicia said bluntly. "Which is why I intend for the Cait Sith to get there first. With the Sylphs as allies, provided they get around to electing a leader who isn't a damned larper. Can't you do anything about that?"

"Not really," Argo admitted. "Skarrip is a Sylph problem. I know Sakuya's been considering opposing him next cycle, but any attempt to get involved from the outside is gonna hurt her chances more than help. But getting back to the point, did I ever tell you about the conversation I had with the Puca leader in the first days of the game?"

"Sort of," Alicia said. "The stuff about second and third waves of clearing, right? I thought that was just a line you fed to Merifelle to motivate her."

Argo's teeth crunched as she chewed on the last bit of her rock candy before it dissolved. "Yes and no. None of us know for certain what's gonna happen when someone clears the game. But I know what Kayaba said, and I'm pretty sure I know how he would've phrased it differently if he'd intended to imply that Yggdrasil could only be cleared once."

Alicia sniffed at the air, nose twitching. "I detect the distinct odor of wishful thinking."

"No, really, listen to me. Have you ever read the online help in this game?"

Alicia shuddered. "Not much since the beta. I learn by doing; manuals put me to sleep."

"That explains so many things."

"Bite me, girl. Did you have a point?"

Argo nodded as they wove their way through the crowd, stopping to let an NPC-driven wagon full of lettuce pass through the narrow street. "Technical writing isn't easy, and Kayaba was excellent at it. He's got a distinctive style; you can see his touch all over the manual. And if there's one thing that stands out, it's his obsession with precision and detail. If there are two words he could've used, you can bet there's a reason why he chose one over the other."

"Point being?" Alicia prodded.

"The point is this: at every single point in the manual or the quest text where he writes about something that happens only for the first character to do it, he uses the word saisho, and usually the phrase saisho no player. He never said saisho even once in his entire tutorial speech. Not that, and not anything like it."
"That's a pretty thin branch to cling to."

"Perhaps," Argo said. "But even setting aside the choice of words, it makes sense. Say what you want about Kayaba, this game is fair. It's well-designed, well-balanced, remarkably free of bugs, and if a player dies it's usually because they made a mistake. That's a basic tenet of good game design."

"And?"

Argo went on. "And, let's say a third of the players gets to log out. What happens to the rest who are left behind? Does he send the killswitch signal to our Nerve Gears, instantly murdering more than twelve thousand people? Or does he leave us all trapped in here—and if he does, why not press the reset button and give the remaining races another go at it? Whatever he's getting out of this, he won't get it from gratuitous mass murder."

Alicia was quiet for a time as they passed through a thick knot of players of several different northern races. "What of it?" she said finally. "It doesn't change our goal. Let's say you're right, and one of the other races beats us to the top. That leaves six of us, and it almost certainly leaves us without at least one of the larger, stronger races. If we have to clear the entire World Tree again, we'll have to do it without all the casualties we'd incurred up to that point, and with three fewer races to help. And there's no guarantee there won't be a difficulty spike then, or some other new conditions."

"All true. Which is why I've been thinking. Let's say the Cait Sith clear the game first. We're probably one of the larger factions—only the Sylphs and Salamanders are bigger. But we don't have any formal allies. Who do we pick?"

"I've given that some thought," Alicia said. "Unless something changes, I think we should pick the Sylphs and the Undines."

Argo nodded as if this was no surprise at all. "Why them?"

"Well, the Sylphs because they're the closest thing we have to friends. We don't have border problems with them, our clearing groups don't conflict and even work together sometimes. And they're the second largest faction—it would save a lot of people if we can only clear the game once. As for the Undines..." Alicia shrugged as if it was a casual matter. "They're still a big faction, so lots of people to save, and their leader seems like a decent guy. They offer their healing services to anyone, and bless them for it."

"Okay," Argo said. "I see what you're thinking. Here's the problem: I think those are two of the worst possible choices you could make."

Alicia's jaw dropped. "It's not like it's set in stone, and maybe there are better... but the worst?"

"The worst," Argo agreed. "Because it completely screws everyone who's left behind." She began ticking off points on her fingers. "In one fell swoop, the remaining players have lost the beast tamers, some of the best archers, the second-largest faction with a lot of clearerers who generally play well with others, and—worst of all—access to advanced high-level rez spells only Undines can cast, along with the majority of the strong healers in the game."

Alicia said nothing, but her ears were flat and her tail lashed furiously.

"I think we need to prioritize so that we leave the remaining six races in the best possible position to quickly clear the game and free another three races. The last three are going to have the hardest time, so ideally we'd want the last ones left to be the Salamanders, Sylphs and Undines."

"Really?" Alicia said wryly. "The three races that can barely stand each other, let alone work
together. You call that being left in a good place?"

"I do," Argo said. "Because in order for it to even get to that point, we're all gonna need to set aside our differences and cooperate anyway." As Alicia started to laugh, Argo held up a hand. "I'm not saying we have to like each other. But the leaders, at least, need to look at the big picture. And if we can't reach them, we need to reach the key clearers for each faction. The person delivering the Last Attack is going to be the one who makes the decision anyway."

"You're talking about a conspiracy between the clearers," Alicia mused. "That's not going to go over well if it gets out."

"I don't care. There are a lot of lives at stake here."

"If you're right," Alicia said.

"Allie," Argo said as she turned and put both hands on her friend's shoulders. "When am I not right?"

Brow furrowed in concentration, Sachi pressed the palms of her hands together as if in supplication, and carefully read the words from the spellbook in her game menu. "Okay… zutto mezal kevuchaz shaja yasun."

It was her third attempt, and luck was with her. She'd been having trouble keeping the cadence even while stumbling over the transition between the last two words, but Sasha's explanations had been starting to sink in. As soon as the word yasun passed her lips, the golden runes swirling around her locked into place and a blue glow appeared in the palm of her right hand. She reached out and touched Sasha on the arm, blue energy flowing up and across the woman's body, and watched her smile as her eyes glanced up towards her HP gauge where she would most likely be seeing the effect notification.

Sasha gave her student a look of approval, sweeping a loose wisp of brown hair out of her freckled face. "Good, good. Now here's the twist: add the direct heal at the end of the regen."

Sachi flinched. When Sasha had started teaching her how to use magic, she'd been expecting a whole bunch of rote memorization. There was plenty of that, but learning how to improvise spells the way that Sasha did was… it was like English class, except worse.

Some of this must have shown on her face. Sasha's smile became very gentle, and she nodded her encouragement. "Chaz," she said, giving Sachi a hint.

"I know that," Sachi said proudly. And she did. The word for direct heal effects was usually omitted, since recovery-type spells assumed direct healing by default. But this was one of those situations where it was necessary to use it explicitly. She was very happy with herself for remembering.

At Sasha's prodding, Sachi cleared her throat and swept her menu closed—this spell wouldn't be in her spellbook; she was making it up as she went. "Zutto mezal—"

A portion of her MP disappeared as she stumbled to a halt in mid-incantation, startled by the door to the dining room flying open and several small children running in, yelling. She pushed herself up to her feet. "Jellica, Robert, what's going on here?"

The two children, a girl and boy of ten years respectively, both pointed at each other and loudly protested that the other had started it—whatever "it" was; they hadn't actually gotten around to
saying yet. Sachi stuck out her chin and blew a breath up at her bangs, causing them to flutter. "Do you two need to play in different rooms today?"

Sachi heard a chuckle from behind her, and turned to see Sasha covering her mouth. Sachi pouted a little at the older woman and turned back to the children, who had started bickering again. "I guess you do. Robert, go find Gilthar and give him a hand in the garden. Jellica, you stay inside."

"But it's hot inside!" Jellica protested, her blonde curls bouncing as she shook her head vigorously. "I want to go out and play!"

"Then take turns," Sachi said firmly. "But I don't want the two of you playing in the same room until you can play together nicely. Understand?"

A pair of nods, both reluctant, were the only answer. As the children went running back out the door, Sachi sighed and sat back down at one of the many tables in the dining room of the church, leaning forward until her forehead rested on it with a light bump. Since that didn't hurt, she lifted her head and repeated the bump.

"You're doing just fine," Sasha said. "Sometimes they listen to you better than they do me."

Raising her head before it could make an impression in the table, Sachi revealed a wan smile. "I'm glad you think so. Sometimes they make me want to tear my hair out."

Sasha laughed, adjusting her round thin-rimmed glasses on the bridge of her nose. "I've got more than a few bald patches myself," she said with a grin. "Now, where were we?"

Sighing, Sachi glanced up and to the left; her MP was almost completely recharged. "Verb inflection," she said with something approaching a groan.

"Yes. So let's try that again. Add a direct heal to the end of the regen effect."

Sachi chewed on her lower lip. "I think I know... vuchaze?"

The older woman shook her head. "That's the Concatenative form. Conjugate vuchaz for me."

Sachi groaned again, far more pointedly. Her teacher looked back at her unsympathetically; with a melodramatic sigh, Sachi obeyed. "Vuchaz, vuchaze, vuchazi—"

"Vuchaji," Sasha corrected.

"They sound almost the same to me... vuchaji, vuchazo, vuchajazo."

"Good. Which one is the Sequential form?"

It only took her a moment, once she realized which one she'd missed—of course it was the hard one. "Vuchaji."

Sasha gestured for Sachi to go on. Chewing on her lip some more, Sachi nodded and cleared her throat. "Zutto mezal kevuchaji chaz shaja yasun."

She knew immediately that she'd said it correctly; again the intense blue energy gathered in her hand and transferred to her "target" when she touched Sasha on the arm. She counted twelve seconds silently in her head—the expected duration of the heal-over-time effect. At the end of her count, a second flash of blue energy sheeted across Sasha as the direct heal applied itself.

Sachi squealed happily. "I did it!"
Sasha grinned at her, reaching over and ruffling Sachi's hair. The affectionate gesture made her think of her friends from school, who tended to do that to her a lot. She was the youngest of her group besides Ducker, and everyone treated her like a little sister. The thought brought a pang of nostalgia to her, which she pushed out of her head as Sasha spoke to her.

"You've been studying. You used to have a lot of trouble remembering the different inflections."

Sachi nodded, claiming a banana from the centerpiece on the table as a reward for her diligence. As she began to peel it, she said, "I try, it's just… I don't really get what the point is? The game automatically gives me new spells as my Water Magic skill goes up. What's the point of all this work just to make up your own spells?"

Sasha hesitated as she got a far-off look in her eyes that Sachi recognized as deep thought. "Well, it's like the difference between memorizing a handful of English phrases versus learning to speak English. A few rote phrases will get you through most situations as a tourist… but if you get into real trouble, or something comes up that isn't covered by what you've memorized, isn't it better to understand the language so that you can improvise?"

Sachi gave the woman a lopsided smile. "Spoken like an English teacher."

"Thank you very much." Sasha spoke those four words in English with very little accent. They both laughed. "I'm serious, though. You get out more than I do, going out with your friends to earn money for us. Some of the places you go are quite dangerous. The more capable you are at magic, the more comfortable I'll be."

"Is that why you've been spending all these months buying incantations from random people and trying to figure out how the language works? For me?"

Sasha laughed. "For you, Sachi… but also because it's something to do to fill time and keep my mind sharp. I'll never be a clearer; I have all of my kids to take care of." By which she meant the dozens of young children of various races that she'd unofficially "adopted" in order to get them off the streets. "And that includes you. But I know languages, and the language of magic in Alfheim is quite simple compared to learning English. No irregular verbs, inflexible syntax—"

Sachi waved a hand before Sasha could get wound up and drown her in unfamiliar 1000-yen words. "I know, I know. Even if the higher-level spellwords make me feel like I'm choking on cotton."

"That's the idea," Sasha said as she started to redo her braid in order to capture some of the stray locks of hair. "To the point where I'm pretty sure that was the intent. Most languages have a discrete set of phonemes associated with them. The phonemes of these spellwords seem to have been chosen based on how difficult they are for a native Japanese speaker to pronounce—with the higher magnitudes and more powerful effects being the hardest."

Sachi looked directly at Sasha as she spoke. When the older woman came to a stopping point, Sachi reached up and dribbled her finger rapidly across her own lips, making an incoherent burbling sound. The message was clear: please to be stopping the speaking of gibberish now.

Sasha snorted and made a shooing motion. "Go on, you. In fact, why don't you go out and make sure that Robert hasn't buried Jellica headfirst in the garden?"

Fortunately, no such thing had occurred. But the afternoon sun felt nice, and Sachi was content just to sit there in the garden, soaking up some peace as some of the children played in the background. She wasn't sure how much time passed, but eventually a chime and a flashing icon interrupted her daydreams.
Hey there, Little Cat. Tetsuo just let me know that he has the next two days off from his clearing group. Want to get everyone together tomorrow and hit the World Tree? -Keita

As always, the invitation from her old friend Keita filled her with a conflicting array of mixed feelings. She missed her friends—not so much as she had during the early days of the game, when no one even knew if the others were alive, but only getting to go out with them a few times a month wasn't enough.

But the worst part was that everyone had… changed.

Sasamaru least of all—he'd always been one of the quieter boys in their computer club, and if anything he seemed to be largely content with his role in one of the Cait Sith clearing groups. But it took more, now, to get him to laugh. Tetsuo even moreso—Sachi missed his boyish smile and easy humor; months spent as one of the clearers serving under General Eugene in the Salamander army had robbed him of both to a large extent. He was still Tetsuo… but something inside him seemed broken, now.

Then there was their nominal "leader", Keita. At least, he'd been their guild leader in a previous game, and before logging into ALO they'd talked about reforming the guild in this game. But he had his own responsibilities in one of the Gnome clearing groups, and with everyone being separated and having to find their own place in the world early on… the guild had simply never happened. But Keita swore that if they could find Ducker, he'd quit his clearing group so that they could rebuild The Black Cats of the Moonlit Night. And in the meantime, he tried to organize these outings together whenever they all had time at once.

Another chime sounded in Sachi's head, and she quickly accepted the second incoming message from Keita.

P.S.: I don't suppose you've heard from Ducker, have you?

That, right there, had been what Sachi had been avoiding thinking about. Nobody knew what had happened to Ducker—he'd never contacted anyone. At the time he logged in he'd been leaning towards creating an Imp, but still hadn't been certain. Tetsuo had scoured Everdark looking for him during the first month, and after all this time the likeliest possibility was that during the Salamander invasion, he'd been—

Sachi squeezed her eyes shut, tears welling up in them as she forced herself to stop so much as even thinking that. Hands trembling suddenly, she reached up and opened the reply window, a holographic keyboard appearing in front of her. Her train of thought had taken her to a dark place that no one wanted to talk about, and it was related to the other issue that gave her mixed feelings about going out with her friends.

Put simply, she was terrified of dying. It had always been there in the back of her mind, but being trapped in this death game had brought it to the forefront where it wouldn't go away.

Most of the others were clearers, and they liked to go as deep in Yggdrasil as they could. They knew she lagged far behind them in levels, despite her magic skills being high from all of her practice with Sasha. And the areas they'd been going to recently had been a concession to that, probably at least ten or twelve gates below where they usually fought.

It didn't matter. As soon as she thought about going anywhere near the front lines, her hands started shaking too much to type. It took a few minutes for the panic attack to subside, and when it did she flexed her fingers a few times and then slowly began to respond to Keita's message.
The party of six pushed one by one through the curtain separating the foyer of the inn from the common room, the sounds of conversation and the smells of NPC cooking immediately assaulting the senses. The smells weren't bad, really—now that clearing groups were progressing further into the World Tree, the components they sometimes brought back and sold translated into a gradual improvement in the quality of NPC food.

But no one held any illusions about whether or not it would be good—just acceptable and filling.

A Salamander with sword and shield was the first to enter, a tank named Allister. An unlikely collection of players followed: a pair of Gnomes, one a caster and the other in light armor; a Sylph healer whose craggy face was nearly always expressionless, and a very young Cait Sith girl with a small tame flying creature napping atop her head like a feathered hat.

Rosalia hadn't really bothered herself with the names of the others, but she knew the Cait Sith girl by reputation if nothing else: the so-called Dragon Tamer Silica, a solo player who had somehow managed to tame some sort of water drake from the Valley of Rainbows. She jumped from group to group almost as often as Rosalia did, albeit for completely different reasons. The girl's light brown hair was tied up into pigtails, just below and behind a pair of large triangular feline ears.

And she was young. Excruciatingly, annoyingly young.

From the Cait Sith girl's looks, Rosalia wouldn't have bet on Silica being much over the age of 12, perhaps 13 if she wanted to be terribly generous. Since she did not consider herself by nature to be an especially generous person, she pegged the girl at twelve and cursed whatever indulgent, irresponsible parents had let her log into this game. The girl's light brown hair was tied up into pigtails, just below and behind a pair of large triangular feline ears.

After the group settled themselves around a large round table, Rosalia put her elbow on the table and leaned her chin in the palm of her hand, trying to find something to improve her mood and failing to find it in the mug of faux ale the NPC waitress set in front of her. Her train of thought simply served to remind her of just how far she and her companions had fallen since Kibaou's defeat.

Not these companions—the very thought caused a sour look to rise to her face, as if she'd tasted something foul in her drink. These people were nothing but marks. Back in the first month of the game, she and her group had been tasked with raiding Sylph territory on a daily basis as privateers, either shaking down travelers for their goods or, when faced with stiff resistance, taking them out.

Those days had been filled with glory and official recognition for her efforts. Things could not be more different now. They weren't criminals, per se; nothing they did broke the laws of any faction, and if on occasion they skirted a little close to the letter of the Treaty of Arun… well, no one who might accuse them of it was around to do so.

But without the official backing of the Salamander leadership, they had to operate independently, and be much more careful about picking their targets. Which was how Rosalia found herself spending days at a time putting up with the inanities and noobishness of random pickup groups like this one.

A random outburst caught her attention; one of the Gnomes in the group had made an off-color joke, and Silica had clapped her hands over her ears and started saying "lalalalala" at great length. Rosalia fought down the urge to wait until the girl uncovered her ears and then go into great detail about the undocumented «Ethics Code Off» function.
So help me, if I have to listen to one more day of this brat's prattling... what the hell kind of mother lets a twelve year old girl login to a game like this?

It wasn't the first time such a thought had crossed her mind. Rosalia simply didn't comprehend women who got maternal urges—she had a few colorful names for them, the politest of which was "baby factory". She didn't feel compelled to protect Silica so much as throttle her. But she could at least grant that kids as young as Silica had no place being stuck in a virtual prison like this. And if they had the misfortune to be born to parents stupid enough to let them get trapped here, she couldn't understand why they didn't at least just stay safely in their own starting city instead of venturing out into a world meant for adults.

Frankly, Rosalia thought, I'll be doing her a favor tomorrow. Once she's done pissing herself pale, she'll probably go hole up with that woman in the church and never leave Arun again.

As far as Rosalia was concerned, that uptight schoolmarm was doing everyone a favor by keeping the kids from going out adventuring. She'd seen some brats even younger than Silica out in clearing parties, of all things!

Glancing at the time in her HUD, Rosalia pushed herself to her feet, feigning a slight bit of wooziness. "All this noise in here is making me lightheaded," she said, forcing pleasantness into her tone. "If none of you mind, I'm going to go get some air."

Allister nodded, giving her a smile. "Take your time. We're all renting individual rooms tonight, so if we're not down here when you get back, just see the innkeeper and meet us back here in the morning by nine. That is, if you still want to party with us."

Rosalia flipped her long red bangs off the right side of her face and met both of the other Salamander's eyes. She knew he wanted to sleep with her, and although she wasn't the least bit interested, his guard would be down as long as he thought otherwise. "Of course I do! But for now, if you'll excuse me..."

It was always helpful when you didn't have to lie—it kept things simpler. The noise really was giving her a headache, although Silica's high-pitched exclamations in particular were not exactly helping. The walk did her good, however, and after turning a few well-lit corners, another Salamander fell into step beside her.

"All set?" he asked.

"Almost too easy," she replied. "The biggest threat is a Sal tank named Allister. Good with his sword, and quicker than he looks. Hit him with the paralysis poison; we've only got the one."

The Salamander pikeman nodded; Rosalia knew from long experience that he was mentally taking notes. "The Gnomes aren't much to worry about. They'll fold when they see Allister drop. The Sylph mage is the healer; he needs to go down fast. Silence him if we can, otherwise we might have to kill him. He doesn't like me or Allister, and I'm pretty sure it's not my lack of charm." Meaning he had a grudge against Salamanders. Which wasn't all that uncommon.

Her companion snorted. "What about the girl?"

"Mukensha, I'm just shocked. Don't you know? That's the legendary idol Silica-chan, The Dragon Tamer." Every syllable was dripping with mockery.

"I know who she is, Rose. What are we doing about her?"

Rosalia had spent a fair amount of time thinking about the answer to precisely that question. "Kill her
pet, shake her down for whatever she's got like the others, and send her back to Arun with a
spanking. She's just a spoiled brat; there's no need for anything more drastic."

"I think you're underestimating her," Mukensha warned. "She's a fighter. What's more, she's got
enough guts to get in close and fight with a dagger. You kill that pet of hers, and she's likely to snap
and come at one of us. What then?"

Rosalia lifted one thick red eyebrow as she gave her companion a sidewise look. It was an
unpleasant thing Mukensha was talking about, and one that she'd been avoiding coming at directly.
"Then deal with the problem. What else do you want me to say?"

*Deal with the problem.* It was so much easier to say than *murder a 12 year old girl,* but meant much
the same thing. Rosalia shivered for a moment, waiting for Mukensha to argue, to assent, or to say
anything further about the task before them.

Somehow, his silence was far more damning.
Chapter 16

"The cursor is a diamond-shaped HUD indicator which appears centered above the head of an entity in the observing player's field of view, once the observer places Focus on that entity. Focusing on a cursor will cause the entity's status ribbon to appear, as well as enabling various spells and game functions which are targeted by Focus, such as duels or party invites. Critical information about an entity is also conveyed by the color of its cursor: white for NPCs, red for Hostile players and mobs, yellow for Neutral or non-aggressive, and green for Allies. Additionally, the strength of a mob relative to the observer can be inferred by whether its color is shaded darker (stronger) or lighter (weaker). The «Options» menu contains a variety of settings for customizing the HUD and cursor behavior to each player's preference..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Cursors»

16 April 2023
Day 162

Rosalia glanced at her HP gauge after the last echoes of the mob's shattering faded away. She wasn't even down by 25%, and some of that should heal normally over the next several minutes if they stayed out of combat. She supposed if she was worried about it she could use a potion, but she'd been very careful not to admit to having any, and she'd deliberately taken a hit she could've parried during the last battle in order to set up precisely this situation.

She ran her eyes across the rest of the party. In some parts of the World Tree, diffuse sunlight would filter in here and there through patches of translucent membranes in the bark. But here in the dark stretches and winding pathways of the zones just below the 16th gate, the only illumination came from the luminescent plants lining the wide path through the alien-looking forest.

They glowed in a variety of unnatural colors that somehow managed to collectively conspire towards a cool shade of white light which was bright enough to read by in parts. In any event the HUD pop-ups for her party members' HP gauges were always the same fixed brightness. And she could quite clearly tell that she was the one who'd taken the most damage in the last fight.

"Silica, dear, do you happen to have any healing crystals or potions I could have?" Rosalia put on her best smile and tried to look sweet as the young Cait Sith girl looked up at her with a mildly skeptical expression.

"Why do you need them, Rosalia? You're not hurt very much."

*Brat!* Rosalia covered a narrowly averted scowl with a cough, turning it into a chuckle. "But what if something happens in the next battle, my dear? You have your little pet to heal you."

"His name is Pina."

*Whatever.* "But the Sylph gentleman here—" She glanced at the party list in her HUD, for the first time bothering to care what the man's name was. "—Jorwyn, he'll heal you, but he seems rather reluctant to do the same for me. I can't imagine why."

"You're not a young girl who needs protecting," Jorwyn said evenly, not even turning to face her. "Your HP looks green to me. I'll heal you when you need healing."

Fighting off the urge to blow her cover there and then by spitting the obnoxious Sylph on her pike, Rosalia looked back at Silica and spread her hands. "You see, love? The boys adore you. They'd
never let anything happen to you. I'm not so lucky."

Silica looked up at Rosalia warily for a few more moments, as if trying to figure out if fun was being made at her expense. Finally she reached into one of her pouches and withdrew a slender red bottle, holding it out towards Rosalia with a cautious smile. "I suppose I won't miss one potion."

"Oh, why thank you, my dear, aren't you just the most generous thing?" Stingy brat!

"Next she'll be asking for Silica's autograph," muttered one of the Gnomes—a short, pudgy man in mage's robes with short-cropped brown hair and a bandolier of pouches worn diagonally across his chest. Glancing again at the party list below her own HP gauge, Rosalia saw that the other Gnome had taken a slight bit of damage in the fight; matching that up with the player's status ribbon helped her put a name to the mutter: Lothari. By process of elimination, that would make the skinny thief-type Gnome's name Lacey—a remarkably feminine-sounding name for such a horse-faced man; Rosalia entertained herself for a moment wondering if there was a story behind it. The two of them had been openly fawning on Silica the entire time they'd all been partyed together, and Lothari's resentment didn't surprise her a bit.

Rosalia pretended not to hear the jibe as she quaffed the healing potion, the effect status icon appearing beside her HP gauge and her HP beginning to slowly tick upwards. She already had everything she was likely to get out of Silica for now; she'd been hoping to deprive her of a healing crystal or something else more useful than a slow-acting potion, but it was better than nothing—and it was one less bit of help the girl had, if it came to a fight. She turned her most radiant smile on the pair of Gnome players, both of whom glared at her with nearly identical narrow-eyed expressions, clearly thinking themselves far more intimidating than they were. It was almost enough to make her laugh.

No one else seemed to make much of this brief byplay; Allister was already scouting ahead with Jorwyn close behind him, and Silica skipped off once she'd given Rosalia the potion, her blue-feathered pet fluttering along with her. With one last pair of dirty looks in Rosalia's direction, the two Gnomes followed right on Silica's heels.

Rosalia gave them a few moments' head start before following along, opening her menu and checking the area map. She nodded to herself in satisfaction; they were almost in position.

It was time to spring the trap.

Strictly speaking, it was impossible to send private messages to or from a player who was within the World Tree or another dungeon. The game's PM system would reject attempts in either direction with the somewhat cryptic error message «Blocked by Environment». One of her team members, however, had discovered a loophole in this, and it was one they had used more than once to excellent effect.

Drilling down into her Options menu, Rosalia looked for the «Unfindable» flag and toggled it on and off twice in sequence, then back on. Normally, this flag was used if a player didn't want people on their friends list or in their group to be able to see their location on a map. Rosalia knew that Mukensha would be watching her on his area map, and would see the green dot indicating her location flash a few times as it disappeared and reappeared, then vanished.

It was a prearranged signal, one of several. Walking slowly, Rosalia watched Lothari and Lacey disappear around a bend in the trail as it wound its way around a large boulder; when all of the group was out of sight she took a hand from her polearm and held it out palm-first as she whispered words that by now she knew as well as her own name. "Matto yojikke vayezul dweren."
As soon as the last syllable of the Illusion incantation was uttered, she watched while the surface of her 3D model rapidly went transparent, until she could only see her outstretched arm as a ghostly echo against the background of the luminescent forest. Counting on stealth rather than magic to keep herself silent, she crept around the boulder and watched.

She didn’t have to wait long. Rosalia saw a flicker of movement as a throwing dagger shot across the path and buried itself in Allister's neck. It didn’t do a terrible amount of damage, but almost immediately she saw the symbol for Paralysis status appear beside the Salamander tank’s HP gauge, and with a cry he toppled bonelessly to the ground. Jorwyn, annoyingly, did the smart thing: he let the rest of the party focus on the threat while he attempted to cure Allister's status effect.

Before he could get more than two words of the incantation out, a pair of arrows streaked out from the side of the trail opposite where the dagger had come from, one taking him in the shoulder and the other in the back. His HP gauge dropped immediately by more than half from both strikes, and he staggered from the impact, some of his MP disappearing as he fumbled the spell. A glowing violet spell effect struck him as he recovered and tried to cure Allister again, and when he opened his mouth nothing emerged but silent outrage, a different status icon appearing beside the yellow ribbon of his own HP gauge.

Into that sudden silence came Mukensha’s sharp voice from the treeline. "Give it up! Your tank is down and your healer is Silenced. Disarm and all you lose today is some money and equipment.”

All good so far. The two biggest threats were dealt with, and as she’d expected, the two Gnome players were panicking—Lacey spinning around with his short sword as if unsure from which direction to expect an attack. That idiot Lothari tried casting something, and ended up stuttering his way to failure. A volley of fireballs shot out from both sides of the treeline to encourage the remaining party members to heed the call for surrender.

Rosalia hated to admit it, but Mukensha had been right about one thing—Silica was a fighter, and her spunk was probably going to be the end of her. The girl leapt nimbly over a fireball that struck the ground where she'd been standing, landing in a roll that took her to Jorwyn's side. Rosalia's eyes narrowed as she saw what Silica drew from her pouch, and she almost broke cover to shout a warning before realizing it wouldn't come in time.

"Cure!" Silica yelled, the green crystal shattering in her free hand as the energy flowed over the Sylph mage's body. Immediately the Silence status symbol disappeared from his gauge, and without wasting a moment's breath he incanted the words to a curative spell more rapidly than Rosalia had ever heard anyone speak without mangling the pronunciation. She cursed as she saw the Paralysis status disappear from Allister; they'd only had the one paralysis poison, and if these idiots forced her to step in…

As Allister was trying to push himself back to his feet, a concentrated barrage of projectiles and elements converged on Jorwyn. The Sylph healer had time for a single ragged scream before he dissolved into green flames and left only a Remain Light. Rosalia wryly observed that it wasn't a treaty violation—he hadn't been in the red, he hadn't been trying to rez anyone, and they'd all just happened to attack at once. It was just too bad the Sylph moron hadn't surrendered when he'd been given the chance.

Such things happened in battle.

The last projectile to strike had been an AOE fireball, and both Allister and Silica went flying in opposite directions from the force of the area blast. Fingering the shaft of her pike anxiously, Rosalia took a moment to glance over to where the Gnomes were—where they had been, she corrected immediately; they were nowhere in sight, although she could still see them in her party list below her
HP gauge. She frowned. She didn't think either of them had much worth taking, but it irked her that her team had let anyone get away during all of this drama.

That left two combatants, and at this point her companions showed themselves—half a dozen Salamanders, Imps and Spriggans stepped out from the trees, blocking the path on either end. Three of them encircled Allister, who seemed determined to be a complete idiot by fighting on rather than doing the smart thing and submitting in the face of overwhelming odds. Rosalia would have to make sure that whoever killed him coughed up everyone else's share of the loot.

In the meantime, Silica was making a complete nuisance of herself by easily evading most of the attacks directed her way, as if Rosalia's people were moving in slow motion. More than one of them seemed reluctant to go all-out against a young girl, and she seemed quite willing to take advantage of their restraint.

Then, Allister screamed defiantly as Mukensha impaled him on his pike while the Salamander tank was fending off his other two opponents. The force of the blow lifted him up into the air for a moment before he exploded, cutting off his last yell and leaving the flames of his Remain Light flickering angrily in the air at chest height.

The scream caught Silica's attention, her head whipping around towards the sound. As she did, a warhammer took her in the midriff, doubling her over and sending her bouncing awkwardly across the ground to land in a heap, HP close to the yellow. The girl's pet dragon gave a warbling cry and flew to her side, casting one of its limited healing spells. Silica looked up with an expression of gratitude and opened her mouth, seemingly about to thank her pet—of all things, thanking a stupid mob for its scripted behavior, and in the middle of combat!—when the girl's eyes widened in horror. Several homing fireballs blasted the water drake from the air, causing it to explode into a shower of blue polygons and rapidly disintegrating feathers that rained down over her.

Silica had started to push herself back to her feet, but the death of her pet seemed to rob her of all her strength as she collapsed back to the ground, cradling a single feather which was all that remained of the pet. She hugged it to her chest as she rocked back and forth, her dagger lying forgotten on the ground. Tears streamed down her face as she sobbed, crying as if it had been a brother or sister instead of a worthless piece of code in the system. Rosalia would've almost felt sorry for her if it hadn't been the girl's own fault for not surrendering.

"Pina! Pina! No, no, no, Pina, why?" She seemed almost oblivious at first to the players approaching her with weapons at ready, completely absorbed in her shock and grief.

*Enough*, Rosalia thought. The pet was dead, and so were the tank and healer. The two Gnomes had run off to who-knows-where, and good riddance. She wasn't worried about being outfed by them; the two cowards would probably assume she'd run off like they did. And as she'd suspected, the erstwhile Dragon Tamer Silica didn't seem to be in any shape to put up further resistance with the loss of her pet after all. She was probably loaded with healing items and gifts from her admirers; it was time to cash in.

Rosalia was about to drop her concealment spell and take control of the situation when he showed up.

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The first bandit died almost immediately. It was a fluke, really—out of the four hits in the sword skill Kirito unleashed, two of them critted, one of them striking a vital location. The Salamander didn't even have time to scream or process the fact that he was doomed before his avatar was consumed by a pillar of flames that resolved into a flickering red Remain Light. Before the others could register
what was happening, Kirito segued into a spiraling series of cuts that ended up taking off another bandit's arm at the elbow, the other Spriggan's mace dropping to the ground as it trailed the spray of particles from his rapidly disintegrating forearm. Kirito finished with a boot to the chest that sent the shocked player staggering backwards, and stepped past a thrust from a pike to drive his sword into the next assailant's chest before bringing it around in another twirling slash diagonally across the pikeman's torso.

Kirito spun just in time to evade an incoming arrow and parry a blow from another bandit's warhammer. He used the moment's respite granted by the opening not to strike, but to utter a rapid-fire incantation that caused his own avatar to seemingly explode into a cloud of black smoke. From out of that momentary smokescreen, what appeared to be two identical Kiritos dashed forth, each of them forking in opposite directions. As his «Mirror Decoy» imitated his movements, Kirito drove back the startled warhammer-wielding player, getting inside his guard and rapidly slicing him down towards the yellow zone.

As his opponent fled, Kirito spun to see who else was left. Out of the corner of his eye, Kirito saw the two bandits with polearms finally land a blow on his decoy, which vanished in a puff of smoke similar to the one that had spawned it. Taking advantage of their confusion and disarray, he spoke the words to another spell as quickly as he could.

Immediately he was surrounded by dark flames that seemed to suck the very light from the air, and when his vision cleared his point of view was almost a meter higher than usual, the «Phantasmal Form» spell having effectively altered his avatar's 3D model so that he appeared to be a monster of a level and power equivalent to his own. From the look of the massive arms that stretched out before him, he was currently a beast of some sort—Kirito was almost level 41, and he had to assume that this creature was from a zone within Yggdrasil that they hadn't reached yet.

Kirito yelled wordlessly, hearing the guttural roar of his illusionary avatar echo off the inner walls and ceiling of the dungeon, and dashed at the two remaining Salamanders. The spell didn't make him do any more damage than he normally would with his weapon, nor did it give him any special attacks—in fact, he couldn't even cast his own spells or use sword skills while it was in effect. But it would give him a little extra height and reach, and to someone who wasn't expecting it, he knew it looked intimidating as hell. The two bandits shrieked, dropping their polearms and fleeing as if a gateway boss was on their heels.

From his Searching skill, Kirito could tell that there were at least six or seven more bandits who'd remained hidden in the artificial forest to either side. Although he couldn't see them directly, he could see their red cursors in his HUD, moving away about as quickly as a player could on foot. He whipped his head around, using the higher vantage point of his current form to ensure that there was no one else nearby, and then turned to look for the sole survivor of the ambush.

A young girl crouched on the ground beside a tiny blue feather, her tear-streaked face resolute despite her obvious fear as she held her dagger in front of her. She glared up at Kirito as if he were simply the last straw in a day gone horribly wrong, hands trembling.

Then Kirito realized why. Of course—she hadn't seen him change. He focused on the active effect icon in his HUD, moving away about as quickly as a player could on foot. He whipped his head around, using the higher vantage point of his current form to ensure that there was no one else nearby, and then turned to look for the sole survivor of the ambush.

"Sorry if I scared you," Kirito said with a little embarrassment as he walked slowly towards her, empty hands held palms-out. He glanced at her HP gauge; she wasn't even in the yellow, but she had to be rattled after that narrowly-avoided PKing. Kirito forced himself not to think about the player
he'd unintentionally cut down in his opening strike; it wasn't the first time in this death game that he'd taken the life of another player, but if he let himself start thinking about it he was going to have trouble keeping it together here—let alone sleeping later. With a visible tremor, he drove away those demons and focused on the girl he'd just rescued. "It's just an illusion. You're safe now."

She wasn't buying it—and after the experience she'd just had, Kirito wasn't sure if he could blame her. She held out the dagger with trembling hands as if it would work as a physical barrier between them. "Stay back! I won't let you get away with… with… whatever it was you came here to do!"

"I came here to farm mats," Kirito said with a lopsided smile, still holding up his hands. "I ended up rescuing someone from bandits. You're a bit late to stop me from doing either."

The girl's expression was unwavering. "How do I know you aren't one yourself? You're a Spriggan."

Kirito tried to keep the irritation from his voice as he took another step forward. "And you're a catgirl."

"I am not!" the young girl said loudly, jerking the dagger towards him as he approached. "Just because I decided to play a Cait Sith doesn't make me—"

"And just because I decided to play a Spriggan doesn't make me a bandit or a monster," Kirito said as he took one last step, hand coming to rest over hers where it held her weapon, pushing it lightly down. "Are you hurt?"

The girl's eyes swam as the dagger dropped from suddenly numb fingers, the strength draining from her face and her body as she seemed to realize her weapon was no longer needed. She slumped to the ground, picking the glowing blue feather back up and staring at it as she stammered and visibly lost her composure. "I… I… I'm not… I-I'm okay, b-but… but Pina… Pina…"

Kirito frowned for a moment, thinking that Pina must have been one of the party members who died. Then he took a good look at the feather in the Cait Sith girl's hands, something clicking in his head. "Pina was a pet?"

She nodded. "Pina was my friend," she said. The pain in the young girl's voice was heartbreaking. It reminded Kirito of the way that his little sister had grieved when the family cat died the year before; this girl seemed about the same age as Suguha, too.

Kirito gave her a compassionate smile and knelt down in front of her, bringing his eyes level with hers. "What's your name?"

"Si… Silica." She sniffled again and just stared at the feather in her hands as if it was the last thing of value she had in the world.

"Silica, I'm Kirito. Now, I don't know much about beast taming, but I've heard that sometimes, if the bond between the pet and the tamer is strong enough, it'll leave something behind when the pet dies. Is there a status window for that item?"

Silica looked confused for a moment, and then tapped the feather with one finger, so delicately that she seemed afraid of breaking it. Kirito saw a translucent window pop-up with a single line of text on it.

"«Pina's Heart»," Silica read out loud. Tears welled up in her eyes again, and she squeezed them shut as she clasped the feather to her chest.
Kirito reached out and put a hand on the girl's head, ruffling the hair between her triangular feline ears. "You know, I can't promise anything, but there might be a way you could see Pina again."

The change in Silica was dramatic and immediate. Her eyes widened, hope blossoming in them as some of the grief fled her and her ears perked up. "What? Really? Please, tell me how!"

Kirito scratched at his head as he searched his memory for the conversation he'd had once with another Cait Sith tamer. "Well, I've heard there's supposed to be a way to resurrect a tamed pet if they leave behind a token like that. But from what I understand, it requires an item that comes from some mid-level areas."

"Mid-level?" the girl echoed, her eyes going up and to the left.

Kirito interpreted the glance and hesitated, not wanting to intrude on the girl's privacy. "The floating islands around Arun. You'd want to be at least level 30-35 to safely solo all of them. But I'm sorry; I don't know any more than that."

The look of grief and despair that washed over Silica's face then tore a hole in Kirito's chest. He'd been intending to give the girl some of the spare equipment and drops in his inventory so that she'd have a chance at hunting down and tackling this quest, but she clearly wasn't experienced or high-level enough to do this by herself.

Looking back at the expression in Silica's eyes, Kirito squirmed uncomfortably for a moment before regaining his composure. "I don't know... but I know someone who might."

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Argo fought back the urge to roll her eyes as she read the message she'd just received. She would've had to explain the reaction to Alicia and Thelvin, and there was no point in interrupting their conversation for what was really just a business transaction. She gestured for them to continue as she submerged herself in thought for a minute.

"Always the hero, Ki-bou. Is that what a girl's gotta do to get your attention? Get jumped by a bunch of half-assed bandits and lose a pet?"

It wasn't as if she couldn't understand the sense of loss—she caught herself getting attached to her rats now and then. Sometimes, if she let herself, she could almost imagine the longer-lived ones having personalities. But at the end of the day, she knew they were nothing more than mobs going through their scripted routines, and that any semblance of personhood was just her imagination. And in the months since she'd been trapped in ALO, it had become necessary to remind herself more than once that her tamed pets were far more disposable than she was.

Pet revival had been nothing but a rumor in the beta—there was a popular story about some Cait Sith tamer who'd found a spell that let them resurrect their dead pet, but try as she might, Argo had never been able to track that player down and verify the story. She'd asked Skarrip once, and his response had essentially been that while he wasn't a Cait Sith expert, he did recall a coworker talking about a method involving the use of a spell on a specific rare flower found on one of the floating islands around Arun.

A typical Skarrip answer, in other words: just detailed enough to escape being worthless.

"Alicia," Argo said suddenly, interrupting the conversation her friend and leader was having with one of their lead clearers. "What do you remember about the pet-rez rumors in the beta?"

Alicia halted mid-sentence with her mouth open, jarred by the change in subject. "Uh—what does
that have to do with our plans for a mounted raid group? We lose a mount, we just replace it."

"Humor me," Argo said, tipping her chair back against the wall of Alicia's office and giving her an expectant look.

"You'd know more than I would, I'm sure," Alicia said, sighing as she traded a glance with Thelvin. "Rumor was it was some kind of spell, right? And there was a flower, too."

"Pneuma Flower," Thelvin confirmed, nodding. "That at least exists; I've seen one. But it's quite rare—supposedly it only blooms in the presence of a Cait Sith who's recently lost a pet, it doesn't last long so it's hard to sell, and even if you find one the flower itself doesn't have an action pop-up or obvious means of use—only a description."

"Which probably means it's a crafting recipe component," Argo said. Thelvin's information was consistent with her own, limited though it was. "Which is kinda interesting, considering every single version of the story says that there's a spell involved."

"Are you going somewhere with this?" Alicia asked. "We were in the middle of something, you might recall."

Argo gave Alicia a lazy wave. "Don't worry about it. I'll think it through and come up with something." She ignored the bemused looks from her companions as they resumed their planning, and frowned as she returned to the company of her own thoughts, compiling what she knew.

It didn't amount to much, and that bugged the hell out of her.

What she kept coming back to, though, was the one single fact on which all of the rumors agreed: that there was some kind of spell, presumably high-level Water or Holy Magic—or a combination of both—which made the revival possible. A spell which Argo didn't know.

That she didn't know was, in its own way, very impressive. Incantations were really nothing more than a collection of words, and Argo only had to see or hear a word once to remember it. So although she herself didn't use much magic, she knew the words to hundreds of spells and could often recognize them just by listening to the incantation or watching the glowing runes that appeared around someone during casting. And while she didn't kid herself that she knew every spell there was to know, she wasn't aware of any that required material components or which was capable of reviving a pet.

One of her ears was cocked towards Alicia and Thelvin as they spoke, and she heard the topic heading towards territory that was going to require her full attention. There simply wasn't time for her to deal with this, not for something as trivial as rezzing a pet. She opened a reply window and typed quickly.

「Ki-bou, you know pet-rez is just an unconfirmed rumor, right? I don't know why you're wasting your time on this instead of telling the girl to go tame a new one, but here goes. There's some kinda high-level spell that takes a mat called a Pneuma Flower. You can find the flower on one of the islands around Arun, but it'll only appear if your Cait Sith girl is there. The only thing that's certain is that you've got three days to find it—because that's how long it takes for a pet's Heart to become Remains.」

She hesitated, considering just hitting Send right there. That was really all the information she had, and she knew Kirito would pay her for it anyway.

And if it had been any other customer, that probably would've been that. Argo could measure her
profitability in part by how many seconds of her time it took her to handle a transaction. But
something wouldn't allow her to leave it there, and after a few moments she began to type again.

「That said, if you wanna narrow down the specific spell needed, I know of someone who might—and I emphasize might—have what you're looking for...」

"You're kidding," Thelvin said as Argo finished composing her reply and returned her attention to
the conversation at hand. "None at all?"

"None," Alicia confirmed. "Klein said he and his guild scoured the entirety of Zone 22 yesterday
after the Salamanders took down the last gateway boss. No aggro mobs. Not one. It's just a vast
cavern within Yggdrasil with a glowing lake in the middle—a bit like Lugru, except there's no town,
just a bunch of abandoned dwellings on the shores of the lake. Turns out that the gateway boss is all
the way at the top of the cavern, and to get there you have to take this insanely long path that spirals
around the edges of the cavern until it reaches the top. Takes most of a day just to march up there."

"Unless you're an Imp," Thelvin ventured.

"Yep," Alicia said, leaning back and putting her feet up on her desk. It was a pose that would've
been indecent if her outfit hadn't already left so little to the imagination. "So the Sallies sent a few
groups of Imps up to scout it out, confirmed that the boss room was there, and they already have a
raid force on the way."

"Shit," said Thelvin. "That'll be three in a row. We haven't been the ones to take down a gateway
boss since fifteen."

"Tell me something I don't know," Alicia grumbled. "That's why I want to start this program. If we'd
had flying mounts, we could've beaten the Salamanders to the top of that cavern."

"There's no guarantee there'll be another zone like that," Argo put in, speaking up finally. "Don't get
stuck trying to fight the last battle."

"I'm not. But it's not the first time there's been a spot where being able to fly within Yggdrasil
would've given us an edge. I don't think it'll be the last either, and if we tame mounts that can fight,
it's an extra point in our favor."

Since there was nothing Argo could say to refute that, she didn't try. She chewed on the idea for a
moment, then nodded. "Got a type of mount in mind?"

"Something that can fly, obviously. No shortage of those in Alfheim." Alicia grinned suddenly.
"Dragons would be awesome, if we could find some that were tamable."

"There's that one young lady with the water drake," Thelvin pointed out. "She's a casual, but she
might be able to tell us what she fed it."

"Great," Argo said. "Let me know when you find a raid group of Navi-Pixies, because they're the
only ones small enough to ride a water drake."

"It's a solid idea, though," Alicia said. "I mean, you're supposed to be able to tame any mob in the
game as long as it's not a boss or other named, right? There are dragons that are the right size for us
to ride."

"And they're all KOS," Thelvin said.

"So we find a way to de-aggro them. It has to be possible."
Thelvin turned to look at Argo, giving her a look that she had to assume was sympathy at having to put up with Alicia's eccentricities, or an appeal to talk sense into their leader. Argo didn't bite; she had plenty of her own eccentricities and a distinct lack of people in her life that put up with them. "Alicia wants dragons."

Thelvin sighed. "Dragons," he echoed.

Alicia grinned, her ears twitching in amusement. "Come on, you two. Tell me you don't want to be part of Alicia's Dragonriders."

Now Argo did roll her eyes. "Anne McCaffrey would like a word with you."

"Who?"

"Never mind. Ixnay on the Agonridersdray."

Alicia folded her arms across her chest. Since she didn't have much in the way of a chest, it was somewhat lacking in effect. "You have a better suggestion for a name?"

"Well, if we're gonna go naming your troupe of dragon-riding cats before we've actually got any dragons to ride, we could always go with something historical." Argo's expression was positively impish.

From Alicia's apprehensively flattened ears, she knew that expression far too well. It was the look Argo wore when she was about to make a joke of which she was inordinately proud, and which was likely to cause everyone else physical pain. "What?"

Argo didn't disappoint. She could hardly contain her grin as she dropped the punch line. "Ryuukihei," she said to an immediate duet of groans from her companions, compounding her sin by repeating the word in English. "Dragoons."

"That's all for today, everyone," Sasha said with finality, closing the blank book she'd purchased in which to compose her lesson plans. The room full of children reacted with the characteristic exuberance that kids have shown for the end of the school day as long as there have been schools. Most of them opened their inventory menus and deposited their classwork there, a sea of flickering 3D models disappearing throughout the room as the tables were rapidly cleared of scrolls and materials to make room for the coming meal.

"Makiko, Kai, Jellica, go help Sachi in the kitchen. Axion, Robert, it's your turn to set the tables. The rest of you have ten minutes of free time before dinner. Scoot!"

It had been hard at first to get the kids to consistently attend her lessons, but when Sachi started leveling up her Cooking skill, the two of them quickly found that food was a powerful motivator. It was impossible to starve from not eating in the game, but the simulated hunger got very uncomfortable in a hurry—so Sasha set the expectation that everyone who wanted regular meals would have to attend three hours of school a day. Anyone who didn't want to deal with schoolwork was free to use their allowance to purchase the cheap, nasty black bread from one of the NPC bakers, fare that would quiet the stomach without sating the soul.

Sasha let out a slow sigh of satisfaction as she watched the flurry of activity. When she'd gone to college to become a teacher, this certainly hadn't been what she'd had in mind. She'd originally wanted to teach English, and had even spent the last two years as a transfer student in an American university in order to polish her language skills. She'd just returned to Japan to finish up her minor in
Linguistics, and when ALO launched it had seemed a harmless diversion, a way to spend a few hours unwinding in a virtual world.

But after that traumatic first day, she'd been transported back to Sondref along with the rest of the Puca, a prisoner like everyone else. Like every other starting city, Sondref had had a handful of very young children in its population, and after the Northern Crafting Combine broke through the boss in the Valley of Giants, Sasha had relocated her wards to the neutral city of Arun and established an orphanage in one of the churches there—a place for the different factions to bring the children who were simply too young to be out adventuring, or who had nowhere else to go. Much of their first month in Arun had been spent with Sachi watching the children while Sasha ventured from capital to capital, gathering orphans and street children and bringing them safely to Arun.

Which was how she'd ended up as the caretaker of almost thirty children ranging in ages from eight to thirteen. How some of these children ended up in the game was anyone's guess—there was an unofficial taboo against discussing the outside world, but Sasha suspected more than a few of the kids had indulgent parents who hadn't paid any attention to the purchase of ALO and the Nerve Gear beyond thinking, "it's fairies; that's suitable for kids".

In her less charitable moments, she hoped those parents had spent the last six months feeling as guilty as they should.

Regardless, these children were her responsibility now. No one else was going to step up and take care of them. No one else was going to see that they at least received some kind of minimal continuing education. The faction leaders had enough on their plates just trying to defend their holdings and clear the game, and who knew how long that was going to take—they'd been quite happy to give her and the youngest noncombatants in their faction safe passage to Arun, in some cases even with an escort.

"Miss Sasha! There's people at the door!"

The child's shout from another room brought Sasha abruptly out of her thoughts, and she realized she'd been woolgathering. Shaking it off, she rose from her seat and smoothed out her long dress, answering the call of responsibility.

When she arrived in the foyer of the church, she saw two players standing just outside the entrance, backlit by the dying evening sun. The taller of the two was a teenage boy from the Spriggan faction with youthful features and unruly black hair that was in desperate need of a comb and a haircut. Sasha's practiced eye put his age at somewhere around thirteen or fourteen—she wouldn't turn away someone his age, although he'd be her oldest charge; it might be helpful to have someone older to accompany Sachi when she went out adventuring with her friends.

But after those first impressions, Sasha quickly corrected herself—this wasn't a boy looking for a place to stay. The sword on his back, the long black overcoat he wore, the way he held himself, and even the look in his eyes... this was someone who'd spent the intervening months in this game fighting every single day. Even though she knew no one could be harmed within the city, she still found herself becoming a bit wary of him, in part because of the dismal reputation of his faction.

Her attention then shifted to the child at his side, a Cait Sith girl who appeared to be a year or two younger than the boy—although the feline ears and pigtails made her true age hard to pin down. She too had gear that suggested she hadn't just been hiding out somewhere all of these months, but she looked as if she'd been crying recently, and her body language was that of someone who felt defeated. Sasha wondered what the story was there, and suspected she was about to find out.

Glancing between the two children cautiously, Sasha donned a smile. "Can I help the two of you?"
"Are you Sasha?"

The directness of the boy's question, without preamble or introduction, took her slightly aback, her smile faltering a little. If he knew her name, then he probably knew what she did here... and suddenly the scene made a little more sense. She waved off the boy who'd answered the door, sending him to join the others. "I'm Sasha, yes. Does your little sister need a place to stay?"

The squeak from the younger girl and the stammered protest from the boy told her immediately that her guess had been wrong. "No no no, she's not my... I mean, she does remind me a bit of Su—but well, no... I..."

Sasha laughed, opening the door a little wider, stepping aside. The boy's abrupt discomfort at the question was endearing, and helped soften the edges of her wariness. "Come in, you two. We're just about to start dinner. If you'd like to join us, you can explain why you're here over a hot meal."

The boy's name, she learned, was Kirito, and he'd only just met the younger girl—Silica—that very day, rescuing her from what sounded like a robbery gone wrong. The two of them gratefully scarfed down the food that was set before them, the explanation of the day's events going slowly in between bites.

"And you think I can help you?" Sasha asked when they got to the part about Silica's dead pet. "Why?"

Kirito waved his chopsticks as he chewed, trying unsuccessfully to substitute gestures for words. Sasha narrowed her eyes at his table manners, and he had the grace to look sheepish as he set down the utensils and swallowed. "I'm told that you've been buying up incantations from anyone who will offer a new one to you, and that you have an extensive library of spell effects. You might know the one we're looking for."

Sasha sighed, shaking her head. "Then I'm sorry, Kirito, but I'm afraid you may have come here for nothing. I know of no spell that can resurrect a dead pet. Certainly there's nothing like that in Water Magic, and both Sachi and I are very proficient in that element." She smiled slightly. "That would certainly be an exciting discovery, if true."

"What about Holy?" Kirito asked.

Sasha thought hard for a few moments, and then countered with another headshake of negation. "Not that I'm aware of. I don't have that skill yet, but I've recorded a lot of Holy Magic incantations and there's nothing of the sort."

Kirito set his lips in a line and glanced at Silica, who sat beside him. She looked as if she was about to start crying again. He returned his attention to his food, or what little of it remained.

"Can you tell me anything else about this spell you're looking for?" Sasha prodded. This was an unusual visit, but it would be entirely worthwhile if it led her to discovering a new spell effect that she could add to her body of work.

Kirito chewed, swallowed, and pushed his plate back. "I don't know what element it is, but all of the information I have agrees that there's a spell involved. And we think it takes at least one material component—something called a Pneuma Flower, which we need to go find."

That tickled something in Sasha's mind. She leaned forward a little, adjusting her glasses. "Well now, isn't that interesting? A material component... I wonder if it's a transmutation effect?"

Kirito raised his eyebrows. "Transmutation?"
Sasha nodded. "Transmutation. It's a Magnitude-5 Earth Magic incantation using the utility verb jevrelth and the touch manifestation min—"

"You might want to explain that in plain Japanese," Sachi said teasingly, as if she hadn't been speaking quite clearly. Looking at the blank expressions on the faces of her guests, Sasha sighed and tried again, simplifying things as if explaining them to a young student. Which, she supposed, she was.

"It's high-level Earth Magic that lets you take two material components and transmute them into a single new component. Long cooldown, moderate MP cost, and you have to figure out the recipes on your own. I've been able to purchase a few recipes from the NCC, but they're all quite ordinary—normal crafting components and such, the sort of thing that's more efficient to refine the usual way if you have the skill."

"Two material components," Kirito mused, tapping a finger on the table. "I wonder."

Sasha gave Kirito time to think through whatever idea was brewing in his head, her gaze shifting around the room to make sure that the other kids were behaving—for certain values of "behaving"; that is; she doubted the barely restrained chaos and loud banter that filled the dining hall would have met with anything short of expulsion or detention in any school in Japan.

"Kirito?" It was one of the few times Silica had spoken; she'd been fairly quiet throughout most of the meal and conversation.

"I was just thinking," he said. "Most crafting components don't have anything to indicate that that's what they are. They'll have a pop-up window with their name if you tap them, but that's all—it's up to players to figure out what, if anything, those components can be used for. Supposedly there's an effectively unlimited number of crafting recipes."

Sasha thought she saw where Kirito was going with this, but Silica obviously didn't. "And?"

"And," Kirito went on, "I'm wondering what would happen if you used Pina's Heart and the Pneuma Flower as the components for a transmutation. This is the only spell I've ever heard of that actually takes a material component. And it would explain why the rumors of pet rezzing involve both the flower and a spell."

For a minute, there was quiet at their table. And it was a relative sort of quiet—the rest of the room was very loud with the voices of children, leaving their table as a sole pocket of peace in the din.

"Are you sure about that?" Silica asked finally.

Kirito shook his head. "No. But it's all we have to go on. Isn't it worth trying, if it could mean bringing Pina back?"

The look of dawning hope on Silica's face revised Sasha's opinion of Kirito upwards by quite a bit. "You're right," the girl said. "We have to try. Can we get started now?"

"I think we'd better find an inn to rest for the night," Kirito said. "We're both pretty tired, and we'll have a hard time hunting for a flower in the dark anyway."

"You can stay here tonight, if you like," Sasha offered. "There are several spare rooms, and you're each welcome to one." Rescuer or not, there was no way she was letting the two of them share a room.

Kirito bowed slightly in his seat. "Thank you, Miss Sasha. That's very generous of you, especially
considering that we came to you for help."

Sasha quirked the corner of her mouth in a smile. "I run this place so that children trapped in this game have somewhere safe to stay. And whatever else you two are... you're still children, at least to me. So please, feel free to spend the night."

That invitation extended, she turned to Sachi. "Could I ask you to you please stay home and watch the kids tomorrow?"

Sachi looked surprised at the sudden question, and her mouth opened soundlessly a few times before she found her words. "Um, Sasha... you know I was going to go out with my friends tomorrow, right?"

"I know," Sasha said apologetically. "And I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important." Besides that, she knew very well that Sachi had been having mixed feelings about going out adventuring with her friends, most of whom were much stronger than her; she suspected the girl wouldn't be completely bent out of shape if she were kept from doing so by circumstances out of her control.

After a moment of half-hearted pouting, Sachi acquiesced, poking at what was left on her plate in silence. Sasha returned her attention to Kirito, who was watching this exchange with a curious expression.

"I'm coming with you," she said in answer to his unasked question.

Kirito's reaction was immediate and negative. "No offense, Miss Sasha, but I'm already taking along one person who's too low-level for the areas we're going. I can't be responsible for your safety."

"Nor need you be," Sasha replied firmly as she stood, and with a look that expected no argument. "I'm sure I'm not at your level, but I've been to every city in this world and I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. And when you find this flower, you'll need someone who can perform the transmutation."

"We'll bring it back to you," Kirito argued.

"That's if you find it in time. What if your time runs short? Do you know how long this flower will last after you pick it?"

Kirito's thin expression gave her all the answer she needed. Sensing victory, Sasha pushed onward. "I'm a competent mage, and a third person will help you clear any monsters more quickly and cover more ground." She held the boy's eyes, waiting until he averted them before adding the clincher. "And this is my price for helping you."

"Face it: we got owned."

The unpalatable truth hung in the air like a stink that wouldn't go away. No one seemed to want to face it, and silence reigned for close to a full minute before any of the eleven players sitting around the table in the inn room even dared to speak again.

"Be that as it may, he killed Zanzer. Are we going to let that go unanswered?"

Rosalia lifted her eyes from her cup and met Mukensha's across the table, thinking over her words before replying. She knew full well that her credibility was on the line here, and how she handled this disaster could make or break her leadership of this team. "Of course not. But vengeance doesn't
pay repair bills or bring back the dead. We have to do this—"

"He was my brother, goddamnit!" Mukensha snarled.

Rosalia planted her palms on the table as she shot to her feet. "And you'll have your revenge! But we have to do this the smart way. Think, Mukensha. Get control of your emotions for a minute and think. We were once the elite of the Salamander privateer groups, and that boy tore through us like we were nothing. Nothing! He nearly killed you while fending off two others!"

It was fascinating to watch. The mask of rage and grief stamped on every centimeter of Mukensha's features slowly ebbed as if someone was sliding a dimmer switch, his fists twitching, clenching, and unclenching on the table until he laced his fingers together, only the fire in his eyes hinting at what still lurked within. "Go on."

"We can't take him in a head-on fight," Rosalia said as she returned to her seat, hating the weakness in the statement. "We need leverage."

"He thinks he's a hero," another of her team put in. "I know his type. He's soft for people like that girl; that's why he jumped us. We can use that."

"We can also try not running from stupid Illusion tricks as if our asses were on fire," Mukensha growled as he glared at the speaker and one other—both of whom had the sense to look away, either ashamed of their cowardice or faking it well.

Rosalia let that stand, since she was largely in agreement with Mukensha, and turned to look at one of the Imps at the far end of the table. "Shadewalker, were you able to follow them after they returned to Arun?"

The named player nodded, deep violet eyes looking almost black in the lamplight. "Aye. They walked to the church, and they didn't come out. I'm certain they're staying there."

There were a number of churches of various sorts in Arun, but Rosalia had no doubt which one he meant. "Both of them? How cute. I wonder if he's dropping her off."

"I don't think so. I overhead them talking on their way there."

"And?" Rosalia prodded with mild annoyance. "Don't make me pull this out of you word by word, Shade."

The explanation that followed was easily the most interesting thing Rosalia had heard in weeks. A smile slowly stretched her full red lips as she leaned back in her chair and steepled her fingers before her. "Well now. She glanced over in Mukensha's direction; seeing him nod, she turned back to Shadewalker and made a shooshing motion. "Find a hole near the church and pull it over yourself. I want to know the moment they set out."

Once her scout was gone, Rosalia turned back to the group, panning her gaze across them before looking directly at Mukensha. "You see, dear? We play this smart, and we not only get you your revenge, but we get a payday at the end of it."

"I don't know about you," she purred, "but I do love win-win scenarios."

Author's Note:

First of all, Argo's "dragoon" joke at the end of her segment. Historically, the word "dragoon"
referred to mounted infantry or cavalry of a particular type. There's always Wikipedia if you want the
details, but long story short: while the name does derive from the same root word as "dragon", the
word "dragoon" has no relation to flying lizards with breath weapons.

The Japanese word for "dragoon", on the other hand, 竜騎兵 (ryuukihei), begins with the kanji for "dragon". The literal translation of the word would be "dragon cavalry", possibly a reference to the
archaic firearm from which the term "dragoon" is derived.

Argo is, in short, making a VERY bad joke—a play on words which I'm certain was quite
intentional on Kawahara's part when he named them "Alicia's Dragoons" in canon. I'm explaining it
here rather than in the narrative because I simply didn't see a way to go into all of that without
breaking the flow and ruining the joke—a joke the characters themselves obviously didn't need
explained to them.

Now then, on a less fun note, I wanted to address a particular kind of feedback I get now and then in
both reviews and PMs. There are a few people who don't like the multi-POV, "ensemble cast" type
of format I'm using in this fic—a format inspired in part by authors such as Harry Turtledove and
George R.R. Martin, albeit dramatically scaled down in terms of cast. There are others who don't like
that I'm spending time on "minor" characters like Klein or Sachi, or that the fic isn't all about Kirito
loving it up with Asuna or being an awesome Gary Stu.

So at the risk of losing a few readers, let me be perfectly clear: this isn't going to change. Ever. This
is the format in which I've chosen to write this fic, and this is the format in which I will continue to
write it. I'm not making this up as I go; I have the story I want to tell already outlined, chapter by
chapter and viewpoint by viewpoint. The "viewpoint" characters will shift a bit over time, as they
have in Act 2, but I've chosen the characters I have for a reason.

I welcome everyone's input, and I've tweaked things for the better here and there based on the
feedback of friends and readers, but the format of the narrative and the characters who appear in the
story are not on the table. Please respect this, and thank you again for reading!
"I have chosen to divide spell effects into four categories based on the inflection of the effect verb. «Malign» effects have an Invocative form ending in -u and inflict damage or negative status effects; they will neither affect players with a green cursor nor take effect at all in a Safe Zone. «Benign» effects end in -ul; they are defensive in nature or produce beneficial status effects and can be cast anywhere. «Restorative» effects end in -az; they heal or recover damage or ailments, respectively, and will not affect mobs or hostile players. Finally there is a broad category of what I refer to as «Utility» effects, which have an Invocative ending of -lth and either modify preceding verbs or have effects which do not clearly fall into the other categories...”

—the working notes of Sasha of Arun, «Effect Verbs»

17 April 2023

Day 163

As cities went, Arun was quite small. Roughly the size of the Japanese city of Shimotsuma, the neutral capital of Alfheim had a population of roughly 40,000—and once the valley bosses had been cleared and all of the races converged on Arun to clear Yggdrasil, that population consisted of about a three to one ratio of NPCs to players at any given time. It was the center of Alfheim, nestled at the western base of the World Tree like a piled-up scarf of terraced districts, even built into the very roots of the tree in parts.

But "small" for a city is still quite large, and as Tetsuo took flight and headed towards his rendezvous point, he could see the suburbs of the city which extended out for well over a kilometer from the spiraling core of downtown Arun, largely obscured by the surrounding forest except from a vantage point like his. From several hundred meters above the cobblestone of the city streets, patterns emerged: winding pathways and roads cutting through the forest, the warm brown of clay tiles covering the roofs of buildings, and thin trickles of chimney smoke revealing the presence of life beneath the forest canopy.

Tetsuo wasn't the only one in the air. Dozens of players could be seen at any given time, the contrails of glowing colored light tracing a path across the sky as if drawn with a slowly fading fluorescent marker beneath an unseen blacklight. Those colors ran the breadth of the rainbow; Arun was a safe zone for anyone, no matter their faction or status, and that safe zone extended out as far as the furthest branches of Yggdrasil's canopy. On the other side of the World Tree the sun was already rising above the eastern horizon, the city still glowing with the warm light of oil lamps and the cool glow of orelight in the shadow of Yggdrasil.

Leaving the crimson beam of his flight trail in his wake, Tetsuo drew within sight of his destination, an inn that was burrowed into the bark of the roots. It wasn't the first time he'd been there, not by far, and he still found it odd that the inn wasn't more popular—it easily had the best view of any establishment in Arun, situated high in the roots where they rose as sharply as the game's difficulty curve until they met the trunk of the World Tree. Lamplight shone from windows cut into the living wood, and here and there a balcony jutted out from a doorway to provide a landing pad.

Perhaps vertigo had something to do with it—a fall from this height could be lethal if a player didn't have the presence of mind to simply glide to the ground. But after six months in this game, Tetsuo felt sorry for anyone who suffered from that particular malady, as they were missing out on one of the best silver linings of being trapped in this world: the ability to fly. His translucent angular wings
bore him towards the broad semicircular balcony in front of the inn, and he dismissed them from his back moments before his feet touched the well-worn wooden surface of the platform.

He spared one last look back as his hand hesitated on the door handle. The murmur of loud conversation spiked in volume as he pushed the door open and stepped inside, and the mouth-watering smell of some kind of savory stew washed over him.

For a moment, Tetsuo thought he might've been mistaken about the date or the meeting time—when he scanned the room, his group wasn't anywhere in sight. Then movement from one of the far corners caught his eye as his old friend Keita rose from a gnarled wooden seat and waved him over. Ignoring a few dirty looks thrown his way from a pair of Sylph players at the bar, Tetsuo made his way over to join his friend and sank into the seat with a sigh.

"No one else made it?"

His old friend shook his head after finishing a sip of his drink. "Sorry, Tetsuo. I only just got the cancellation messages. Sasamaru got sent out on a mission by his faction leader and won't actually be here until later today, and Sachi's stuck at home with the kids."

Tetsuo almost laughed, but the mental image that came to him was more disturbing than funny. In lieu of laughter, he gave the other boy a bemused blank stare. "I'm going to get up now, Keita. I'm going to walk out the door. I'm going to walk back in, and when I do, we're going to redo this without the part where you make me visualize Sachi as a housewife."

"You know what I mean," Keita said with a grin, hefting his now-empty mug and feigning as if to throw it. "Sasha called in a favor or something and asked her to watch the children at the orphanage. Said something about going out on a quest with some swordsman or something."

"That's a lot of somethings," Tetsuo observed. Then, smiling: "A quest? With some swordsman?"

"Sachi didn't explain," Keita said, clearly pretending not to catch Tetsuo's insinuation. "And I didn't ask."

So Sachi was out, and Sasamaru wouldn't arrive in time to go adventuring today. That only left—

Their eyes met over the table, and neither of them needed to ask whether or not anyone had heard from Ducker. If anyone had, they'd all know by now; it wasn't the sort of thing anyone would keep under their hat. That unspoken understanding led to a silence that stretched on for what seemed like several minutes before Keita cleared his throat and tried to dispel the awkwardness with common ground.

"Grats on Gate 22, by the way. Seems like you guys are on a roll."

Tetsuo laughed, although the sound was thin and strained now. He knew his friend was trying to be gracious, but more than once these reunions had been tainted by the specter of recent conflicts between the Salamanders and one of the other clearing groups. "Yeah, thanks. This boss was nothing, really."

"Pretty straightforward battle?"

Tetsuo nodded, briefly recalling the 27-minute raid with a small smile of satisfaction. "It was almost a letdown when the boss blew up. Everyone was expecting him to shift to a new form or phase, but that was it. Between that and the lack of hostile mobs, it's almost like this zone was supposed to be a chance for us to catch our breath and take it easy."
"Well, just be careful. You know RPGs—breathers like that usually come right before a big spike in
difficulty or a major boss."

That thought hadn't occurred to Tetsuo, and he wasn't sure he wanted to thank Keita for the advice—it
made far too much sense for his peace of mind.

Keita cleared his throat, sensing Tetsuo's discomfort. "Let's change the subject."

"I've got a better idea," Tetsuo said, grinning suddenly. "Let's go harass Sachi. I miss her, and if she's
stuck at the church babysitting while Miss Sasha goes on a date, she'll probably be grateful for the
company."

Keita laughed, coming to his feet. "Now that sounds like a much better plan than sitting here by
ourselves being glum. Come on, buddy."

Tetsuo had always been a little taller than his friend in real life, but he was still surprised every time
they stood together and met eye to eye in this world—it was as if there was some kind of racial bias
in the game engine that scaled the avatars of Gnome players so that they were larger than the other
races even though everyone looked more or less the way their real bodies did.

Keita punched him in the arm lightly as they headed towards the door. "Race you."

Tetsuo snorted. "You're only suggesting that because your AGI is higher."

"Of course not," Keita said, holding the door open for his friend with exaggerated courtesy. "I'm
suggesting it because you're slow and I'll win."

"Isn't that pretty much the same thing?"

Stopping on the landing platform and looking out over the city, Keita laughed. "Nah. I'm trying to be
generous on account of our long friendship. Where we put our stats was a choice. But if I say you're
slow, it's like saying it's not really your fault. Now ready set go!"

Before Tetsuo could reply, Keita had already taken a leap off the platform, wings flaring into
existence and leaving a sparkling trail of light behind him as he accelerated straight towards the
church, the spire distantly visible halfway across the city. Tetsuo leapt after him, grinning.

In the months since joining the game, Tetsuo had found a great many things to dislike about being
part of the Salamanders. He didn't particularly like the aggressive relations with other races, for one.
That first month under Kibaou in particular had been a nightmare, but after his defeat the political
posture and aggressive nature of the Salamander faction hadn't changed all that much—just the way
they went about it. And as leader of the Salamander army, Eugene had no softness in him, no give—
you performed up to expectations or you answered for it.

But there was one thing he couldn't fault: that expectation of excellence was matched by the effort
and skill that Eugene put into training the players under his command. He treated the clearing groups
as a kind of special operations military outfit—the elite of the Salamanders. When they weren't
exploring Yggdrasil, they trained relentlessly on tactics and game mechanics, and practiced the fire
magic granted to every Salamander until they could recite the incantations under pressure without
thinking about it. Tetsuo's training regimen was the main reason that the erstwhile Black Cats met so
infrequently.
The latest focus of this training had been on advanced flight mechanics. Every clearer was expected to not only be capable of Voluntary Flight, but to master it. One of the senior clearers had crunched the numbers and come up with a chart showing the maximum acceleration and top speed attainable on a per-level basis—and then proceeded to demonstrate how that top speed could be exceeded by using gravity and advanced wing usage to the player's advantage.

Tetsuo knew that he and Keita were around the same level. Tetsuo's was 38, which according to Pyrin's chart gave him an unencumbered base speed—using the flight controller—of 37kph. His AGI gave him a modifier which pushed that to a little over 40kph; he'd done the math. Keita's was an AGI-heavy build; he wouldn't have been surprised if his friend had a top speed of at least 45kph. Both of them could push faster than that as Voluntary Flight users, and they were both weighed down a bit by armor, but in a straight line and starting at the same time, Tetsuo knew Keita would still win—and they hadn't started at the same time.

But now he was grateful for Pyrin's training over the last week. While the gravity physics of the game engine weren't quite the same as in the real world, they were close enough to estimate how fast he'd be going after falling a given distance. He couldn't reach terminal velocity in the distance between the inn and the streets below, and he didn't have any way to accurately measure his airspeed anyway, but by the time he brought out his wings and swooped into a tapering glide he knew he had to be going almost four times his top cruising speed.

He'd lose a fair amount of that speed in his glide, and eventually he'd have to actually use his wings for powered flight, but as Tetsuo glanced over his shoulder he could see that he was already well ahead of Keita—with a lead the other boy would never surmount.

As he soared through the home stretch on approach to the church, Tetsuo could see a number of children in the backyard, and a very familiar blue-clad girl with the dark blue hair of an Undine. Grinning, he beat his wings just enough to kill most of his speed, and then glided silently across the last few dozen meters, landing carefully on the wall of the yard in a crouch. Sachi's back was to him, and he held up his forefinger conspiratorially to his lips as a couple of the kids looked over her shoulder and spotted him.

"I don't care if nobody can take damage in the city," Sachi said to her captive audience, the palms of her hands planted firmly on her slender hips. "Just because Miss Sasha isn't here right now doesn't mean you get to blast each other for fun. You're not supposed to be using combat magic at all!"

"She told me I could practice," said a sullen-looking Salamander boy of about ten.

"Is that what she's going to say when she gets back and I tell her you what you did to Makiko?"

The boy turned a withering glare on a nearby Leprechaun girl.

"It hurt, Genji!" yelled the girl that Tetsuo assumed was Makiko.

"Did not!" the boy shot back. "Nobody feels pain in here!"

"It was hot!"

"You told me you wanted to see some magic!"

"I didn't say set me on fire!"

Tetsuo didn't have very much Wind magic—he trained it mainly for the buffs and debuffs. But while a person's HP couldn't decrease within a Safe Zone, and malign effects such as debuffs couldn't be applied, benign spells—buffs—were fair game. So when Sachi raised her voice and started going off
at Genji and Makiko, Tetsuo quietly uttered the words to the Muffle spell—a buff meant to make a friendly player stealthy by suppressing all sound produced by their avatar.

It had precisely the intended effect. As soon as the spell was cast, Sachi's tirade towards the two children cut off abruptly, her mouth moving but no sound coming out. Although with her back turned to him he couldn't see her expression, the reactions of the children were all he could've hoped for: utter hilarity at her expense.

Since Muffle was classed as a beneficial effect, Tetsuo knew Sachi could cancel it anytime she wanted by focusing on the icon in her HUD—if she realized what was happening and thought to do it. From the gestures she was making and her body language, Tetsuo guessed that the notion hadn't occurred to her quite yet.

The deep sound of a Gnome's wings grew in volume as Keita approached, fading away as he began to glide the rest of the way. Attention drawn by the noise, Sachi turned and looked behind her, expression clouding as she saw Tetsuo sitting on the wall and trying to silently laugh himself silly.

Sachi gestured angrily at Tetsuo as Keita landed beside him atop the wall.

"What's that?" Tetsuo said, cupping his hand to his swept-back elfin ears. "Sorry, having trouble hearing you."

Hands balled into fists, Sachi stomped one foot on the ground and said something that probably would've caused him physical pain if any sound had come out. Tetsuo tried and failed to keep a straight face as he replied.

"Well, I missed you too, girl. But missing me so much that you're speechless, that's... I mean wow."

"Come on, Tetsuo," Keita said with a nudge in his ribs. "Drop the spell or tell her how to do it herself."

Tetsuo sighed. "It's only got a few more seconds anyw—"

―ever do anything like that again I swear―" The sudden burst of noise from Sachi was like flipping on a stereo. She stopped suddenly as she realized that she could speak again, and made a prolonged growling noise that might've been intimidating if it hadn't been so cute, heat rising to her cheeks.

"Admit it," Tetsuo said with a laugh as he dropped to the ground and hugged Sachi. "You really did miss us."

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"A language," Kirito said skeptically as they touched down on the second island to continue their search. Silica immediately ran off, looking for signs of the pale violet-and-white petals nestled amongst the roots of the trees.

"You don't believe me?" Sasha said, one brown eyebrow arching.

"It's not that I don't believe you," Kirito said. As he tried to find the words he wanted to say, he scanned the area, keeping an eye on Silica. Green light flickered across his eyes briefly as he activated his Searching skill, conserving his MP by sticking to non-magical means of detection. When he saw only non-aggro animal and insect mobs nearby, he turned back to Sasha.

"You call the words of magic in this game a language. And I get that spells are incantations—a
bunch of words strung together. Say them the right way and you cast a spell if you meet the requirements. But it's not like you can use them to say something like, 'I want an apple'. All you can do is trigger spells. That's not a language, that's..." He paused as Silica ducked briefly out of sight, then went on when she reappeared on the other side of a tree. "They're system voice commands."

Sasha looked amused. As Kirito tried to decide whether or not that annoyed him, she tilted her head at him and asked, "What is language?"

Kirito glanced sideways towards her before returning his gaze to where Silica was performing her search. "Is this a pop quiz?"

"Maybe," Sasha said with a laugh. "But you're dodging the question."

"A language is..." Kirito tried to think of all the languages he knew anything about. His native Japanese, of course, and he knew a bit of English from both school and net gaming. More programming languages than he could number, although he wasn't sure those counted. "A language has syntax and vocabulary. It's a bunch of basic building blocks like that, pieces that you can arrange in any way that follows the grammatical rules of the language."

"Mmm. You're on the right track. Fundamentally, a language is a system for encoding and communicating information. A language typically has grammatical rules that give it structure, and a discrete set of phonemes that make it sound the way it does. The language of magic here is no different, it simply has a very narrow purpose: to describe the effects of a magic spell and how those effects manifest in the world."

Her long-winded explanation was briefly interrupted by Silica's shout, which drew their attention down the rough path that cut through the island foliage. She was getting a bit far away, and they walked quickly to catch up, letting their wings rest for the time being.

"You're a Spriggan," Sasha said as they walked. "So I'm sure you use some Illusion spells."

"Of course," Kirito said.

"And surely you've noticed they all have some sounds in common."

She was right, but Kirito had to stop for a moment and recite a few incantations in his head before he could be sure about the answer. "They all start with ma. Most of them with matto."

"The element of Illusion," Sasha said, sounding satisfied. "All incantations begin with the elements used in the spell. I call it the «element phrase». For anything above beginning-level spells, this is followed by the «magnitude phrase», which describes the tier of power invested in the spell. Have you noticed that as your Illusion skill increases and you gain new spells, at certain intervals of power the words seem to follow a pattern?"

"You're losing me," Kirito said, toggling Searching on again to check for danger. "And we're losing Silica again." As they wove their way through the trees, eyes on the ground to make sure the girl hadn't missed anything, he thought through his spellbook—at least, the spells that were firmly ingrained into his memory. Matto kachikke or kachi... matto tsutakke or tsuta... matto zabukke...

His lips must've been moving; Kirito caught Sasha smiling at him out of the corner of his eye. "You see?"

"I see the pattern," Kirito admitted, "but I'm not getting the meaning."

"When ma is followed by a magnitude phrase, it becomes matto. The word kachi means 'first
magnitude'. For second magnitude you would use *tsuta*, for third *zabu*, for fourth *yoji*, and so on towards the highest magnitude for which I have an example—*nyafe jezut* for eighth." Kirito was amazed at the deft way Sasha rattled off that particular tongue-twister. "The phrases that follow are what I call effect, targeting and manifestation—and this is where the grammatical rules of the language become more complex."

Unsure if he really wanted to ask the question, Kirito said, "How so?"

"Well, the «effect phrase» in particular. You can think of every magical effect in the game as a verb, describing an action to be taken. The way these effect verbs are inflected changes a number of things about their behavior and allows them to be combined in different ways. Tell me… do you have the Distress spell?"

As a matter of fact, Kirito had several different versions of it—different magnitudes, he supposed they would be called, based on the words in the spell and their increasing costs and durations. "Yes."

"And what about Silence?"

"I have that one too," Kirito said. And then, grinning: "I'm tempted to use it."

Briefly, Sasha looked as if she wished she had a ruler with which to smack Kirito's hand. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," she said while pretending nothing of the sort.

"Look, this is kind of interesting," Kirito said, not wanting to give offense, "and it's something to pass the time I suppose. But I don't understand the use for learning all of this. We already unlock all of our spells as we level up the relevant magic skill. And to be honest, I mostly use weapon skills rather than magic."

"A practical use, you mean?" Sasha said. "Well now, I don't have Illusion magic myself, but I've bought the words to a number of Illusion incantations from players who do. So I know that your basic Distress spell should be *matto tsutakke tovslagu jan*, and your Silence spell is *matto tsutakke nushlavu jan*. What's the difference between these incantations?"

That much was obvious. "The third word," Kirito said, growing a little weary of Sasha's matronly schoolteacher shtick.

"Correct. The word *tovslagu* is the effect verb for inflicting Distress status, and *nushlavu* is the verb for Silence status. The word *jan* at the end is the «unguided projectile» manifestation—when you cast these spells, you have to aim the first two fingers of your free hand at your target, right? Maybe lead them a bit if they're moving?"

Kirito nodded, still not seeing the practical use of this information when the spells already did what he needed them to do. "And?"

"Let's say you want to inflict both statuses on your target, to stop them from both casting spells and using weapon techniques. You'd have to cast both separately, right?"

"Of course. But I wouldn't. It'd take too long and my enemy wouldn't just stand still while I said both incantations. I'd pick one based on whether the opponent primarily used magic or melee, and cast it in the beginning before closing with them, or if I got a moment's opening and wasn't in striking range."

"And that is why understanding the language of magic is useful," Sasha said triumphantly. "Instead of casting two spells, you could combine both effects. And rather than relying on your aim and a bit of luck to hit them, you can turn any projectile into a homing spell with the *vethleka* targeting
method. That will increase the requirements a bit, but you might find it's worth it."

She pointed at a small, low-level creature, some kind of flying lizard with a yellow cursor above its head. "Try this: matto tsutakke tovslage nushlavu vethleka jan. Focus on the target's cursor when you say the word vethleka. Notice the vowel change at the end of tovslagu? That's the Concatenative form, which combines the effect with the one following it."

"You realize if I do that, it's going to aggro that thing," Kirito pointed out. He made no move to unsheathe his sword.

She looked closely at the flying lizard-thing—the name over the mob said «Dravian Scalefly»—and looked back at him with a sly smile. "I thought you said you were overleveled for this area."

"I am," Kirito said with his arms folded. "Which is why I'd rather not fight trash mobs that aren't worth any EXP and don't drop anything of value."

"Fine," Sasha said, planting her hands on her hips. "Cast it on me."

Kirito blinked in surprise, for a moment unsure whether or not he'd understood her correctly. "What?"

"You heard me. It's not a damaging spell, and at magnitude 2 the status effects will wear off fairly quickly. I want you to see that it does what I say it will."

"I'd have to drop you from the party to do that. I think I'll take your word for it." As Silica jogged over to them, looking downcast, Kirito turned to her. "No luck?"

"Nothing," Silica said with a heavy sigh, her mobile ears drooping. The effect, in Kirito's opinion, was cute enough that there ought to be laws regulating moe behavior from Cait Sith players. "What were you two talking about?"

"Magic," Sasha said helpfully. "Better stay close, dear. We're going to need to stick together once we get to the larger islands."

The island that they then departed was one of the nearer ones to Arun, and one of the closest to the ground—a chunk of floating rock about a hundred meters in diameter and about the same distance from the tree canopy below, thin enough that the roots of the trees on the island broke through the bottom in places. As they took to the air and broke from the treeline, Kirito could see the vast plains and steep forested hills of the region surrounding Arun, an area called Yggdrasil Basin.

Kirito had hunted these islands before, although not while looking for this particular flower. He had a fair idea of what to expect and where the aggro mobs were, and—almost as important—he knew a great deal about the altitudes and sizes of the various floating islands. He planned their route accordingly with the intent of minimizing the time wasted in flight; that it ended up being scenic as well was… inevitable, he supposed, when you were talking about massive islands in the sky.

The majority of the day passed uneventfully—and considering the circumstances, uneventful was just another flavor of failure. The most exciting moments from Kirito's perspective were the occasions when particularly dangerous aggro mobs roamed too close to where they were searching, which gave him an excuse to unwind by clearing enemies that were actually worth fighting.

It was early afternoon before they caught a break, in a place called «Cloudspire Island». As the name suggested, it was one of the highest floating islands in terms of altitude, with the roots of its lowest point almost half a kilometer above the deep valley over which it floated—very close to the highest point that a mid-level player could even reach before their flight meter was exhausted. Whereas most
of the others were squat, wedge-shaped chunks of land that looked like slabs of real estate that had ripped themselves from the ground, Cloudspire was vertically oriented, climbing a few hundred meters into the sky and with a surface area at its peak only a little over eighty meters in diameter.

Foot paths spiraled around the rocky stem of the island from bottom to top, occasionally forking into a network of dark caves in side passages set into the rock. The entire island was supposedly hollowed out by these caves; Kirito had never mapped them. Because of the height, Silica herself couldn't quite reach the top; they had to land on one of the lower outcroppings and work their way up around the foot paths.

When they arrived at the top of the island, they found it to be relatively flat except for a mound that rose to several times man-height in the center; trees were distributed sparsely and unevenly over the flat areas, which were thick with waist-height underbrush dotted with rocky clearings. Out of habit, Kirito toggled on his Searching skill and made a small noise of surprise at what he saw.

"No mobs," he said when Sasha queried him. "And by that I don't mean no aggro mobs—I mean none at all. There's nothing alive up here except us."

"That's good news, right?" Silica asked, tugging at his sleeve. "You don't have to clear anything."

"Probably," Kirito said with a nod. "All the same, let's stick together while we search."

"What's that?" Sasha said, pointing towards the large hill in the center of the island.

"I don't know," Kirito said. "It looks like a hill—"

"No, I mean that," she said, and then—seeming to catch that Kirito didn't know what she was referring to, clarified. "There's an unusual stone formation near the base of the hill."

Kirito looked more closely, and realized Sasha was right. What he'd initially dismissed as a natural formation seemed, on closer inspection, to be arranged in a way that suggested it was done by hand—which meant that it was designed that way by the person who made the game. And as they approached it, Kirito saw what looked like writing on one of the larger rocks, chiseled into an artificially flattened surface.

"It looks like English," Silica said, bending over and peering at the rock.

"It is," Sasha said with confidence. When both of the others looked at her expectantly, she sighed. "Did neither of you pay attention in school?"

Kirito's reply was defensive. "I can read it." Sasha nodded to him and smiled, gesturing clearly for him to give it a shot. He cleared his throat and began, enunciating with the exaggerated care of someone speaking a language not their own.

"Grieving brother, grieving sister, listen;" "Faithful fallen owe their lives to you now;" "Gather here and vanquish all resistance..."

He paused, frowning as he tried to puzzle out one of the words in the final verse. Sasha saved him the trouble, speaking up and finishing the poem.

"Then with Jevrelth blossom heart's renewal." She looked between Kirito and Silica excitedly. "This is it. This has to be it."

"Are you sure?" Kirito asked.
"With Jevrelth blossom heart's renewal'. Jevrelth is the spellword for the Transmutation effect. 'Blossom heart's renewal'. We're looking for a flower, right? And the other component is the pet's 'Heart'."

"Grieving sister… faithful fallen owe their lives to you now'," Kirito repeated slowly. "I think you may be right."

"What I don't understand," Sasha said as she adjusted her glasses and peered closely at the writing, "is what the penultimate verse means. 'Gather here and vanquish all resistance'…"

A chill ran through Kirito's body, followed quickly by a surge of adrenaline as the Latin letters inscribed upon the rock began to glow brightly. He pushed both Sasha and Silica away roughly. "Get back! Both of you, now!"

"Kirito, what—"

The ground began shaking, enough so that Kirito briefly had trouble keeping his footing. He continued to shoo his two companions further and further away as he backed up. The rumbling built to a deafening roar which sent birds fleeing from tree branches, and when it did a dark shape began rising out of the grassy side of the mound with a shower of dirt. It was tall but squat, twice the height of a person and roughly humanoid in form, with a body seemingly composed of shifting masses of earth churned with plant matter from the side of the hill. A steady wind whipped around it, stirring pebble-sized fragments of itself loose and occasionally casting them off.

As it gave a great bellow, a red cursor appeared above its head along with two green ribbons of HP and a name: «The Guardian of Breath».

Kirito focused closely on the Guardian as it turned to face him, analyzing it. It was lower level than him, but he'd still have to be careful—this was a named mob, a field boss, and he couldn't afford take it lightly. He leapt to the side as it raised a fist and pounded the ground where he'd been standing, somersaulting and coming up in a defensive stance.

I know this mob, he realized suddenly as he watched it tear a chunk from the ground and hurl it at him. I've fought them before. It's a golem-type, just like the ones that populate the ruins around Penwether. Those attack animations are the same basic attacks the trash mobs use—but it's a unique named version of that basic type, so the question is what special abilities it has.

That question was answered, in part at least, right after he dodged the first projectile. While it was still in the air, the Guardian tore another two chunks of rock from the ground, hurling them at him overhand one after the other. He spun and presented his sword at an angle, deflecting the first rock slightly away, and realized too late that the second one was going to hit him before he could bring his sword into position to deflect it too.

Moments before it could, however, the air in front of him shimmered and a blast of wind rushed past him, forming a brief shield in front of him against which the projectile shattered. The golem's eyes flashed, and it turned to look off to Kirito's left, where he saw Sasha's fist clench as she dismissed the spell.

"Don't cast!" he said as he charged at the golem. "I don't have aggro yet!"

The Guardian ripped another projectile from the ground and reared back to throw it at Sasha; as it did, Kirito leapt into the air, wings blazing briefly, and struck at the mob's arm with a combination attack that drew an X of glowing red damage across it. The Guardian dropped the rock, which disintegrated against the ground in a sparkle of blue polygons, and roared in outrage as its other fist
swung around and swatted Kirito from the air, sending him head over heels into the side of the hill.

He raised his gaze in time to see the massive form charging at him, head lowered, and as quickly as he could he stretched out his hand and chanted the words to his «Mirror Decoy» spell. The illusion split off from Kirito as he sprang forward and dodged to the side. It was a 50/50 chance which one the golem would attack; Kirito's luck held as it turned and chased the decoy. When it did, Kirito took advantage of the opening and struck at its exposed back with the longest sword technique he knew, a high-damage combo which ended with a pommel strike inflicting «Delay» status.

The primary downside to this technique was that the recovery time was long; nearly a second. The Delay status slowed the boss just enough so that Kirito was able to evade in time to only take a glancing blow in retaliation. He heard chanting and felt energy wash over him; he spared a glance at his HUD just long enough to notice the Regen effect that gave him a slow but steady heal. As he dodged a follow-up blow, he saw Sasha standing not far away, her hands at ready as she stayed just outside of the Guardian's reach.

With his HP back in the green and the mob's hate squarely on him, Kirito settled into a pattern that was familiar and comfortable to him: defend, evade, strike at the opening; repeat. Now that he knew to expect the double-projectile follow-up, it was easy enough to avoid, and the only other surprise came when the Guardian's first HP bar shattered. The whirlwind around the Guardian grew in intensity, buffeting Kirito with a slow DOT every time he came within melee range and repelling him with concussive force after every blow he landed. But with Sasha's healing backing him up, it only took a few more minutes to deplete the last hit points from the Guardian of Breath.

When its second HP bar disappeared, the Guardian gave one last bellow that echoed through the island, trailing off into something that sounded like an elephant giving a great sigh as it expired. Rather than exploding into blue polygons the way most mobs would upon death, it crumbled into a pile of earth and mulch, and when the last of that had settled, a green shoot surrounded by a blue glow broke through the peak of that pile.

Kirito watched and waited for the boss to shift into another phase; he'd never seen a mob fail to produce a death shatter unless the fight wasn't over yet. But as he watched, that single green stem grew rapidly until a glistening purple and white blossom spread open at its tip.

"Is that it?" Sasha asked as Kirito climbed up onto the mound of dirt and plucked the flower, tilting her head up at him.

Kirito tapped the blossom he'd just picked; a window popped up with the words «Pneuma Flower» and nothing else. "This is it," he confirmed. He looked back to where their third companion had been waiting in safety. "Silica, we found the flow—"

If his sword hadn't already been in his hand, he would've drawn it as he bit off the last of that sentence. When he looked in Silica's direction, he saw her surrounded at by a quartet of players with red cursors in a semicircle, two Salamanders with an Imp and a Spriggan. Two of them had bows drawn and aimed squarely at her; the others had their hands held out as if ready to cast.

"Yes, so you did," came a mocking female voice from behind him. "And now you can give it to us."

There were few things Argo liked better than disappearing in the middle of a large crowd and keeping her ears open—and one of her favorite things about the Cait Sith race was how useful those ears and other enhanced senses could be in her line of work. And now that it housed the majority of Alfheim's player population, Arun was one of her favorite places. Like any city, some places were
busier than others, but she had never seen a time when there was not some form of traffic passing through the park that surrounded the warpgate.

Especially now, just before noon—and without the escorts Alicia had insisted on saddling her with for the journey to Arun. At this time of day, the sun was high in the sky directly above Yggdrasil, and the entirety of Arun was in shade. The warpgate was in nearly constant operation as clearers, raids and individual parties of players returned to the city for a midday break—if they could. Almost always they were excited, but occasionally she spotted long faces or overheard enough to realize that someone must have died.

Argo sighed as she soaked up the conversations surrounding her. She knew why she kept such tight control over her secrets—information was her stock in trade. What she didn't understand was why so many other people did so. Most people's secrets were dreadfully boring. Who partied with whom, who was sleeping with whom, real-life names or occupations… all of these things were undoubtedly useful to someone, somewhere, but the vast majority of the conversations she overheard were mundane and virtually worthless, even when spoken in hushed whispers.

Sometimes, she wished that she could forget words.

Moments after a party of Undines stepped down from the dais, the warpgate flared to life once again. A flash of blue light briefly illuminated the scene before resolving into a large collection of players in green regalia, a wall of sound quickly rising as dozens of players whose conversations were interrupted by the teleportation resumed talking.

As the Sylph raid began to disperse, Argo finally caught sight of her quarry. She wasn't difficult to spot: taller than most Japanese women, improbably long hair, an oversized katana and—in Argo's opinion—an equally oversized bust that was only barely constrained by the stylized yukata and light armor the other woman wore. Not for the first time, Argo wondered if Sakuya suffered from severe back pain in real life.

When she didn't get a response to her first call, Argo picked up a pebble and chucked it at the Sylph woman, taking care not to trigger her actual «Thrown Weapon» skill. The tiny rock bounced off of her target's shoulder, and Argo made no pretense of innocence when the other woman gave her an annoyed look before detaching herself from her raid party and approaching.

"Sakuya. Fancy meeting you here. Have a seat; I'm coming to like this bench."

Sakuya snorted delicately and sat down beside Argo, swinging the sheath of her sword around to rest on the other side. "The raid went a little longer than expected. I hope I didn't keep you waiting long."

Argo shrugged, one ear canted towards her companion and the other twitching as it followed other sounds. "Nah. You know me. Just killing time."

"No doubt by eavesdropping on everyone within fifty meters."

Argo affected an unconvincingly wounded expression as she turned to look at Sakuya. "I prefer the term 'people-listening'."

Sakuya gave a wry laugh. "You'll forgive me if I can't seem to see a meaningful distinction."

Argo blew her bangs out of her face with a mildly annoyed puff. "Eavesdropping is such a loaded word. If you sit on a park bench and watch everything that's going on around you, and you happen to see interesting stuff, nobody accuses you of being a peeper. You're people-watching, and it's a hobby 'cause you think people are interesting." She touched her own nose and wiggled her ears.
"Me? I'm a people-listener. I listen to everything going on around me. Sometimes I happen to hear interesting stuff."

"And then sell that 'interesting stuff' for thousands of yuld."

"If you got any complaints about pricing, I suggest you take it up with the PR department, conveniently located at the top of the World Tree."

Sakuya shifted as if she was preparing to get up and leave. "Cute. Is that your way of saying 'fuck off'?"

"No, 'fuck off' is my way of saying 'fuck off'. What I said was my way of pointing out that 'info broker sells information for fun and profit' is not exactly the seven o'clock news."

Sakuya sighed. "You know I love these little chats, Argo, but I'm sure you had a business reason for wanting to meet with me, and I'm very hungry. That makes me a little bitchy, so perhaps you'd like to get to the point soon."

Argo paused for a moment as she reviewed the approach she wanted to take. Her eyes flitted from subject to subject as she took stock of who was near enough to hear. "Walk with me."

It took a minute for them to get to a part of the arboretum near the warpgate that was open enough to see who was nearby but secluded enough for a semblance of privacy. As they walked, Argo reached up and tried to pluck a leaf from a tree, failed, and then hopped to get enough height to do so without using her wings. The leaf disintegrated into blue polygons after a few moments in her hand; it wasn't a harvestable item.

"You're in charge of the Sylph clearers," she said finally, rubbing her fingers together as if to brush off any lingering particle effect. "How much does Skarrip trust your counsel?"

Sakuya's expression was one of mild surprise at the question. "More than he does most Sylphs, not as much as he should. Sigurd's the one he listens to the most. Why?"

Argo filed that second bit of information away for future reference. "Has he ever given you any priorities for what 'allied' races to choose if you guys get the last attack? I know you don't have any formal allies at the moment."

That expression of surprise shifted quickly to one of suspicion, which was broken shortly thereafter by a slight smile towards the much shorter girl. "Perhaps I'm still ignorant of the way you do business, Argo, but that does seem like the sort of thing you should be paying me for. Assuming I ought to even tell you in the first place."

Argo grinned widely, fangs peeking out. She stopped beneath a tree to get out of the indirect sunlight and leaned back against the bark, crossing her arms. "Now you're getting the hang of this. Took you long enough. Fair's fair, then—you tell me what those priorities are, and I'll tell you why I'm asking."

Sakura frowned. "That's what you call a trade?"

"Reasons are information. And once you hear mine, you'll understand why this is so important—for all of us."

Turning away, Sakuya took a few slow steps off the marked path, her sandals sinking into the grass and her hands clasped behind her back. Argo couldn't see her face, but she could imagine what was going through the Sylph woman's mind right about then—the weighing of risks and benefits, taking into account Argo's own reputation and the business they'd done in the past. The moment when
Sakuya looked back over her shoulder at Argo was almost predictable.

"I don't have any clear orders yet about who to choose. Skarrip feels that it's a bit early to be making a decision that won't need to be made for some time yet. With that said… it shouldn't surprise you that the Cait Sith are on the short-list. You're the closest thing we have to allies right now."

"No surprise, no," Argo admitted. "And I'm pretty sure Mortimer's not getting any birthday wishes from you."

"You know his birthday?"

Argo grinned. "Do you really wanna pay for that information?"

Sakuya paused, as if actually considering it. "No. At any rate, this much you could've guessed. Our relations with the Undines are friendly enough, and of course everyone does business with the NCC."

"So basically, to sum up: you're friends with us and the Undines, which everyone knows; you do business with the Gnomes, Lepus and Puca, like everyone else; and the chances of the Salamanders or Imps getting picked by you are predictably equivalent to the chances of Skarrip getting a girlfriend."

Sakuya looked away at the last bit, but Argo could've sworn she heard the other woman choke off a snicker. "That sounds about right. So?"

"So," Argo said, "tell me something I don't know."

"What do you want me to say?" Sakuya's long green hair followed her in a delayed ripple as she spun and looked at Argo, radiating annoyance. "There is no policy. If you're trying to get a read on whether or not the Cait Sith are still our friends, then you can tell Alicia she has nothing to worry about—especially if I put my name in for the next election. Or, perhaps, she could try asking me herself. Or better yet, asking Skarrip, who's actually in a position to give her a real answer right now."

"This isn't for Alicia," Argo said, nonplussed by the other's irritation. Getting someone annoyed could sometimes bear fruit as they let slip things they might not otherwise, but there was a line and she was treading close to it. It was time to lay everything out and hope that she hadn't misjudged Sakuya. "And it isn't for Skarrip either. He's a larper—he's gotten far too comfortable in this world, and at this point I doubt he gives an inventory full of legendary shits whether or not he ever gets out—or better alone if anyone else who isn't a Sylph does. You do."

Sakuya was silent for some time. It was difficult to read her expression; Argo reflected that she might make a dangerous opponent if they ever met over a card table. "I do. And?"

Bait taken; time to yank the line and set the hook. "And I have a proposition for you," Argo said. "But it starts with another question: what do you think happens to everyone left behind when the game gets cleared and three races go through the vortex?"

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Three, four … Sasha's count of their assailants ended there. She knew there were more, because the voice had come from behind her, but she couldn't see them without turning around. And considering how bad the odds were just from the players she could see, she wasn't sure it mattered how many more there were. Being outnumbered two to one wasn't a whole lot better than being outnumbered three to one.
Kirito's free hand balled into a fist. "Cowards. You sure need a lot of people to rob a girl, a schoolteacher and a solo player."

"You caused us plenty of trouble yesterday," growled a male voice filled with hate. "But you don't have the element of surprise now."

"Drop the sword, Spriggan boy," came the female voice behind her again. "As you can see, we have archers and mages targeting your dear Silica. Disarm yourself and let us take the flower, and you can all fly away from this when we're done."

"Spells take time to cast," Kirito called out, anger clouding his face briefly before he calmed himself. "And the flower won't be of any use to you. It doesn't do anything except—"

"Resurrect a dead pet, yes, thank you, we know. And there are Cait Sith who will pay quite a lot of money for one. As to your first point..." She laughed; it was a sound that had very little to do with humor. "Try anything, and you'll find out whether or not you're faster than an arrow. Now be a good boy and disarm yourself."

Sasha suspected the other woman was right about their ability to kill Silica before he could get to her—and no matter what he said, Kirito had to realize that as well. At least thirty meters separated the two of them from the Cait Sith girl, and while it might take a few seconds for their mages to cast, the arrows alone could be fatal—to say nothing of what would happen if they all cast AOE spells that even hit near her.

"Just give them the flower, Kirito," she urged. "It's not worth Silica's life."

"It's not just her life, though," Kirito said. "It's Pina's. We might not find another flower before it's too late."

Sasha couldn't believe what she was hearing. Was this boy really implying that the girl's pet, which was nothing but a bunch of data on a server somewhere, was as valuable as a person?

"They don't need me to disarm, either," Kirito went on. "Just sheathing my sword would be enough. They want me completely defenseless for some reason. Why?"

"Kirito," Sasha hissed angrily, "they are going to kill her. Do you not get that?"

"I get it just fine," Kirito replied, his voice pitched only for her ears. "I also get that the moment they take my sword, they can do whatever they want anyway. They're threatening to kill someone outright—doing so would be a treaty violation. Do you really think someone willing to do that has any incentive to let any witnesses walk away from this?"

Sasha shivered involuntarily. He had a point, and she didn't like the implications one bit.

"Enough talking," the woman snapped. "I'm going to give you five sec—"

"Wait!" Sasha said suddenly. "Please, listen to me. The flower's no good without the spell!"

A few moments of silence passed before the bandit woman spoke again. "Explain, and explain quickly."

Sasha took a deep breath, glancing in Silica's direction. The girl was plainly confused and perhaps even a little terrified, but she was keeping it together well, and had frozen in place to avoid giving any of their enemies a reason to attack. "The flower does nothing on its own. You have to transmute it using the pet's Heart item as the other component, holding both of them in your hands."
Another pause. "And I suppose the reason you're along on this little field trip is because you know how to do this."

Sasha attempted to put confidence into her voice, to quell the fear that threatened to creep in. "That's correct. It's a high-level Earth magic effect. If you want to be able to sell the flower, you'll need to know the incantation."

"Sasha," Kirito said softly, "what do you think you're doing?"

"Keeping us alive," she said without looking at him. She half-turned, keeping Silica within her field of view, and looked at the woman who'd been speaking, a Salamander with the race's typical red hair hanging over one side of her face. She was hovering in mid-air a short distance away with her polearm at ready, out of melee range but near enough to close that distance if she had to.

"Rosalia," said a severe-looking pikeman hovering not far from the person he spoke to. "You have a little Earth magic. Do you have any idea what the hell she's talking about?"

"Never heard of it," Rosalia said, looking bored.

"And what's your Earth magic skill again?" Sasha asked sharply, looking at Rosalia in a direct challenge.

Rosalia glared back. "None of your business."

Emboldened and caught up in the moment, Sasha held the other woman's gaze. For better or for worse, she was committed. "Transmutation is a high-level spell with a complex incantation. Unless you're a Gnome, you need a minimum Earth skill of 590 to even see it in your spellbook. Mine's quite a bit higher than that. I doubt yours is."

The expression on Rosalia's face said she'd hit the mark. "Fine," the woman snapped. "Tell me the words to the spell so we can get this over with."

"You understand that I can't speak the words without the magic system trying to cast the spell?"

"Now ask me if I care. If you're not holding the ingredients it shouldn't have any effect, and you losing some MP is just fine with me." Rosalia's eyes narrowed suddenly. "And don't try anything funny. I know what Earth magic sounds like, especially the attack spells. Cast the wrong spell and the ex-Dragon Tamer Silica-chan will be the next name crossed out in the Hall of Memories."

"Sasha…" Kirito looked as if he felt betrayed as he said this. She didn't dare risk trying to reassure or persuade him otherwise. She glanced once again towards Silica, measuring distances by eye and swallowing nervously.

The archers are hovering about three meters off the ground, something like ten or so meters away from her... mages a little further back... call it four, two and five for the dimensions...

"Out with it already," Rosalia said, leveling her pike in Sasha's direction in an implied threat. "Or I start counting."

"All right," Sasha protested, holding up a hand. "All right. Listen carefully, please. The words you want are... dotto mezal kepemalthe lezhayo chotsu vachome ralth shippura tepnaga dweren."

As she spoke the final word of the incantation, her eyes shifted towards a point on the ground near Silica, and she saw a reticule flicker in her HUD at the point of Focus. As the final set of shimmering golden runes locked into place around Sasha, a wall of elemental earth rose sharply out of the ground
in a ring around Silica. The archers loosed their attacks the moment the earth wall began emerging, but the wall was an «Immortal Object» and the glowing projectiles shattered against it in quick succession.

He couldn't have known what to expect from her casting, but Kirito wasted no time the moment it was clear that Silica was being protected. He launched himself into the air and closed the distance between himself and Rosalia with frightening speed, the Pneuma Flower held in one hand and his sword in the other. The sword became a colored blur as he launched a series of multi-hit techniques against the bandit woman, driving her back before the pikeman who'd spoken earlier lunged in and bought her a moment's respite.

Then Sasha had no more time to pay attention to Kirito; from behind her she heard the beginning of a Fire magic attack spell, and she leapt to the side just as dirt and grass erupted in a burst of fire from the ground where she'd stood. Sprawling on the ground, she managed to quickly rattle off the words to a Water magic shielding spell that absorbed a follow-up attack, then took to the air and flew towards the ring of earth where Silica was now protected—but also trapped.

Bolts of magic energy sizzled through the air past her as she desperately tried to evade them, and she almost went careening off in the wrong direction as a staccato burst of Earth magic projectiles tracked across her leg and spun her around. Sasha landed awkwardly inside the protective ring wall just beside Silica, her leg numb. As several homing projectiles followed her over the wall, she threw her hands up and rapidly spoke a series of spellwords, forming a whirlwind dome of green energy above them that would steadily drain her MP—but which would last as long as she had MP to maintain it.

"Sasha, what's going on out there?"

"I don't know," she replied to Silica, watching a surge of her MP disappear as a fireball dissipated against her shield. "But whatever's happening, I'd bet that boy can handle it."

Three of the bandits were floating in the air directly over the two of them, and although Sasha couldn't hear what they were saying over the din, she could take a good guess as all three of them stopped attacking: they were going to wait for her MP to run out or for her to drop the shield, then attack. She grimaced.

"Silica," Sasha said urgently as she watched her MP dip below half. "Do you have any magic, and if so at what skill level?"

"A little Water magic for heals and defense," the girl said, sounding as frightened as she ought to as she looked up at what awaited them. "It's… a bit over 240, I think."

"Perfect," Sasha said, leaning close to Silica so the girl could hear her clearly despite the churning wind shield above them. "All I need you to do is throw up a defensive shield just like mine. I'll drop my shield, and then right before I finish casting my next spell, I'm going to look straight at you. When I do that, I want you to drop your shield. You'll only need to hold it for a few seconds. Can you do that?"

"I…" Silica looked up, nervously eyeing the three enemies above the shield. They all had red cursors, which in this case indicated that they were part of a group that was hostile to her. All three of them looked ready to act on a moment's notice: an Imp had his hands raised in preparation to cast, a Spriggan had an arrow nocked on his bow, and the Salamander of the group was grinning down at them as he playfully tossed his short sword from one hand to the other.

"You can do it," Sasha said reassuringly, putting her free hand on the girl's shoulder. "But I need you
Silica looked at her and nodded, visibly getting a grip on herself.

"Cast," Sasha said.

Silica did, and Sasha waited, listening to the incantation. When she heard the word for the Defensive Shield effect pass the girl's lips, she clenched her fist to dismiss the wind shield, which dispersed immediately and left a roaring silence in her ears from the sudden absence of the rushing air. She heard the Imp start to cast as the maelstrom of wind was replaced by one of water, the element surging out of the walls and imposing a barrier against which his debuff spell dissipated harmlessly.

*Can't do Distress without combining this with Fire, she thought. And that'll double the MP cost... but Silence will only deal with the casters, and I need to stop the physical attacks... and Distress will only suppress weapon techniques anyway, not regular attacks...*

Sasha spared a moment to glance at her party HUD. Whatever Kirito was doing was draining his MP quickly, but he was alive—and Silica's MP wouldn't let her keep this shield up much longer. She needed to decide now, and the thoughts raced through her mind as she made absolutely certain of what she wanted to do—she would only get one shot at this.

*Okay... zure, then Sequential-form navogjiki for Paralysis, then nushlave, end with plorjabu... need tepnaga for the AOE... and better make it magnitude 5 for the increased AOE radius.*

Silica's MP dropped below 25%. Sasha looked up, eyeballing the distance one last time, and then began to cast. When she began uttering the AOE spellword, she whipped her head around and looked directly at Silica, who clenched her own fist.

A fraction of a second passed between the moment that Silica's water shield evaporated and the moment that Sasha uttered the word *min*, completing her own incantation. As a glowing arrow struck the ground beside her, spraying her with stinging dirt and pebbles, she slammed the palm of her hand into the earth and threw her arms around Silica.

A whirlwind erupted from the ground in a tight circle around her and Silica, their huddled forms a calm at the center of the storm. In the span of a heartbeat, that storm exploded in a torrential rush of elemental energy that surged up through the cylindrical channel inside the stone ring and washed across their assailants hovering above, blasting them all away in different directions. Three different status effects appeared beside the HP bars of the bandits in the split-second before all of them went tumbling out of sight.

As the wall of earth ran its duration and crumbled into dust around them, Sasha hugged Silica close to her. Using the last of her MP, she cast one final, powerful spell which surrounded both her and Silica with energy. As the energy coalesced on them, it seemed to eat away at their avatars, the textures of their skin and clothes evaporating into nothingness.

And then they were gone—leaving only a swirling cloud of dust, and a raging battle for survival between Kirito and the remaining bandits.
Chapter 18

"The Flight Meter is a measure of a player's stored wing energy, which is consumed by powered flight and replenished by exposing the wings to sunlight or moonlight. All players regardless of level or stats have enough wing energy for approximately ten minutes of level flight; time spent ascending consumes energy significantly faster, while a powered descent consumes far less. Gliding does not require any energy at all, and a player can safely glide to the ground even when their wings are completely depleted. With all Flight Meters being equal, the distance a player can cover and the altitude they can achieve is determined by their maximum speed—which is affected by their level, Agility stat, racial traits and specific buffs."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Flight Meters»

17 April 2023
Day 163

The explosion split the air like a thunderclap, a sharp sound that seemed to almost tangibly divide the world into before and after. Kirito couldn't help but be drawn to the noise by reflex, whirling around just in time to see a turbulent bubble of green energy blossom from the mouth of the elemental earth wall that hid Sasha and Silica from view. The three enemies who'd surrounded them were thrown limply in several directions by the force of the blast, and Kirito thought he caught a glimpse of status effects on their HP bars before they disappeared—two of them tumbling into the underbrush while a third went sailing over the nearest edge of the island itself.

And then, as the wall of earth began to crumble into a churning cloud of dust, Kirito had no more time for distraction. He was beset by three attackers at once, and this time they had a good idea of his capabilities—they'd positioned themselves so that Kirito couldn't easily close to melee range with one of them without exposing his back to the others. The sound of a fast incantation from behind him gave him just enough warning to defend himself, spinning and presenting the flat of his sword to absorb the fire bolt as it homed in on him. He still took a portion of the damage, but nowhere near as much as if he hadn't tried to block.

The others hadn't been idle, however—Mukensha and Rosalia both charged him when he turned to face the mage, and only by stilling his wings and dropping like a heavy stone did Kirito manage to evade their pincer attack. The two pikes clashed with a metallic clamor as they converged on where Kirito had just been, and he took the moment to rattle off the words to his Mirror Decoy spell now that the cooldown was over. The mage was the biggest threat, and Kirito needed the other two off his back while he dealt with him.

But as Kirito launched himself towards the mage, the illusionary mirror image of him splitting off in the opposite direction, he heard Rosalia shout behind him. "Use your Focus! The decoy doesn't have a cursor!"

Kirito cursed silently. It figured that someone in this group would know how to tell an illusionary decoy from the real thing—the game's Focus system would only pop a cursor and HP bar for a real player. A mob wouldn't know or care about this; they would choose a target at random unless they had some kind of enhanced senses. Players weren't necessarily that stupid, which was one of the things that made Illusion Magic of limited use in PvP combat.

In the heat of battle that subtle visual difference could be easy to miss, but now that Rosalia had called it out he wouldn't be able to rely on that trick; there was no point in wasting any more MP on trying. He jinked left and right to evade the projectiles that the Salamander mage blasted at him as he
closed, and before the mage could finish a third incantation Kirito tore into his opponent with a flurry of strikes that covered the Salamander's unarmored body with angry crimson lines, tearing great rents in his robes. An echoing scream of terror transitioned into the sound of the man's avatar combusting into red flames, and Kirito burst through those flames at high speed as he fled the other two Salamanders and looked for Sasha and Silica, eyes straining to pierce the dust cloud that was still dispersing.

They were nowhere to be seen. Panic gripped Kirito briefly before he took the risk of looking up at his HUD for a moment, and saw that both of them were alive and their HP green. Whatever Sasha had done had depleted nearly all of her MP, but based on the fact that none of Rosalia's party had tried to use them as hostages again, he had to assume for the moment that they were safe.

He couldn't necessarily say the same for himself. The sound of Salamander wings behind him brought Kirito's attention back to his surviving enemies, and with his sword held out and ready he turned to face Mukensha and Rosalia. The two began to separate as they approached, forcing him to back up and keep his head moving to keep track of both of them.

"Still two to one, boy," Mukensha said smugly as he drifted slowly clockwise around Kirito.

"Outnumbering me didn't help you much yesterday," Kirito retorted as his eyes flicked back and forth, watching for the motions that would signal the opening of a weapon technique from either of them. "And you don't have the element of surprise now."

"Neither do you, my dear," said Rosalia with a crooked smile of anticipation on her blood-red lips. "And everyone here is wise to your little Illusion magic stunts."

"Then it comes down to two things," Kirito said flatly, as if citing from a manual. "Player skill, and our stats and equipment. You already know I'm better than you. If you feel like betting your lives that you're higher level than me and have better equipment, make your move. Otherwise, you'd better find somewhere else to be." His eyes narrowed dangerously as he locked gazes with Rosalia. "Fast."

"Oooh," Rosalia said, tone dripping with mockery. "I don't know about you, Mukensha, but I just got a chill. Now be a good boy—you have something I want."

In answer, Kirito stowed the Pneuma Flower in his inventory and let himself drift slowly backwards, shifting the majority of his attention to Mukensha. Rosalia might be the leader of this group and she talked a good game, but he wasn't buying her insouciance—he could see uncertainty in her eyes, fear of whether or not they really could take him.

On the other hand, he could feel the killing intent radiating from her companion. She wanted the item and the payoff at the end of this—Mukensha wanted him dead. Any remaining doubt Kirito had of this was dispelled when their eyes met.

"Enough banter," Mukensha said, leveling his pike. "You and I have a score to settle, Spriggan."

Kirito didn't get a chance to ask what kind of grudge Mukensha had against him. Before his adversary finished speaking, his stance shifted slightly and his pike began to glow with orange light.

It was just enough warning to get his sword up. The impaling attack shot Mukensha forward in a flash of light, similar to the basic dashing attacks in so many sword styles. Kirito slanted his sword and let the polearm deflect off of it at an angle, taking a small amount of blocking damage from the technique. His counter was met and rebounded by the shaft of the pike as his opponent reversed it, and he carried the motion into the opening for a 360-degree spiral attack that drove back both Mukensha and Rosalia, the latter of whom had just tried to take advantage of his preoccupation with
That technique had a lot of reach and very little recovery time, which gave Kirito an opportunity he didn't often have in the midst of battle: after both opponents flitted backwards to evade the spinning attack, Kirito lashed out with his free hand and chanted a short incantation. As Rosalia charged in to try to run him through again, she ran right into the spell effect; the black energy washed over her and he saw the icon for Distress status appear beside her HP gauge.

That wouldn't stop her from attacking, but it would keep her from using weapon techniques—which were the biggest threat in this battle. Without the system assist, Rosalia didn't seem to be that effective at melee combat, and without the added speed and damage from her weapon techniques, he wasn't too worried about damage soaking through his blocking.

With Rosalia effectively disabled and easily fended off, he was free to return most of his attention to Mukensha. They clashed repeatedly, colored sparks like a fireworks display spraying away from where their weapons techniques met and countered each other, a deadly dance that resulted in Mukensha's HP being slowly eroded away. The Salamander was lower-level and was outclassed in equipment if not in skill; he had to know that he had no chance of winning this war of attrition. His only chance against Kirito was to hope for him to make a mistake.

As luck would have it, Kirito did.

It was a simple error borne from Kirito's own confidence in his skills, but it was enough to turn the tide of battle. Most players had an area in the upper right of their peripheral vision where they could see icons for which techniques or spell effects were on cooldown. Kirito had turned off that UI option and most other elements of his HUD because he found them distracting and was good at keeping track of that information. Usually.

After parrying several blows from Kirito's «Triangle» technique, Mukensha responded with the same impaling attack he'd used at the onset of battle. Kirito tried to use the most appropriate counter but misjudged the end of its cooldown timer by barely a second, which left him briefly exposed in the opening motion of that attack, expecting it to be ready. He had only a moment to realize his mistake before the head of the pike plunged into him just below the light chestplate he wore, driving him back and pinning him against a tree.

The look on Mukensha's face was pure ecstasy. Fighting off an overwhelming wave of nausea from the numb, painless sensation where the head of the pike was still embedded in his gut, he tried to swing his sword at Mukensha, but the Salamander shifted his grip lower on the shaft and the respective lengths of their weapons made it impossible to connect.

"Don't bother, Spriggan. You're mine now."

Rosalia made a clucking sound with her tongue as she joined her group member's side. "Tsk, now now, Mukensha, you don't get him until we have what we came for."

"Speak for yourself, Rose. I came to kill the player who killed my brother."

Suddenly Mukensha's grudge made all the sense in the world to Kirito, and his hopes sank. If the man's gripe with him was this personal, there was going to be no reasoning with him, no buying him off. Kirito wondered exactly who it had been, and realized after a moment's thought that there was only one possibility.

"Yes, you know what I'm talking about, don't you, boy? I can see it in your eyes." Mukensha twisted the pike; Kirito began to realize that there was an entire world of unpleasant sensations that fell short
of what the simulation categorized as "pain" that should be suppressed. His eyes went up to his HP gauge; he could see it ticking slowly downwards, with a more rapid drop every time Mukensha gave the weapon a twist.

"Ken," Rosalia said sharply, "you're going to kill him before we get—"

"Back off, Rose." Mukensha met Kirito's eyes as his gaze came back down from his HUD. "You know exactly who I'm talking about. You cut him down in the blink of an eye when you ambushed our party. His name was Zanzer, Spriggan. And he was my brother. Not that that means anything to you."

"It was an accident," Kirito managed to grate out, free hand closing on the shaft of the pike in a fist as he tried to use his leverage against the tree to pull it out. "A couple of lucky crits. I was trying... to disable him."

"Lucky?" Mukensha snarled. His bark of humorless laughter was punctuated by another twist. "Not so lucky for him. And not so lucky for you now, either." Hate flared up again behind his eyes as he leaned forward and gave the weapon another vicious twist, spreading his wings to put more strength behind his movements. "Now, Spriggan... die."

"Damnit, Ken—!" For all of her loud protests, Rosalia made no move to interfere. Kirito wondered if perhaps she was afraid of being next if she thwarted Mukensha's craving for vengeance. He looked up at his HUD again, and saw that while his own HP was yellow and dropping fast, Sasha's and Silica's gauges were still full, and their MP was recovering slowly. Wherever they were, whatever they'd done, they were safe. He hoped they were well on their way back to Arun.

With that knowledge, Kirito reflected that this might be the best outcome. Regardless of the circumstances, the fact was that he'd killed this man's brother. He had every right to want and seek revenge for that. They'd fought, and the outcome had been fair. If Mukensha killed him here and now, that would put the matter to rest. Sasha and Silica didn't have the Pneuma Flower and wouldn't try to get another on their own, and with Mukensha's need for vengeance settled, Rosalia's group would have no need to go after either of them again. Silica would mourn the loss of her pet, but they'd be safe.

As the chime warning him that his HP had reached the red zone sounded in his ear, Kirito closed his eyes. He couldn't free himself, and he could see the end approaching. Silently, he apologized to his mother and sister for the pain his death would cause them. He thought of the friends he'd made here in the game—people who would probably mourn his passing, if they ever found out about it. Klein, Lisbeth, Yuuki... and Asuna. Most of all, Asuna. Things had occasionally been tense with her ever since the failure of the Spriggans to sign the Treaty of Arun, but he was surprised at the depth of regret that filled him when he thought about the Undine girl.

A warm sensation and sounds of alarm from Rosalia and Mukensha yanked him back to the here and now, and as his eyes flew open, he looked up at his HUD and realized that his HP was yellow and starting to quickly climb back towards green. Following the gazes of the two Salamanders, he saw Sasha standing some distance away, hands held out and blue energy surging around her. Silica was standing behind her and slightly to one side, dagger out and expression defiant.

"Rosalia!" Mukensha snapped as he torqued the pike roughly in one direction and then the other, trying to overcome the rate at which Sasha was healing him. "Deal with them!"

She gaped at him. "Since when do I take orders from you?"

It was then that Kirito realized what he had to do. While Mukensha and Rosalia argued heatedly, he
seized the shaft of the pike again as far down as he could with his free hand, and pulled. Close to
20% of his HP disappeared in a moment as the head of the pike punched through his back with a
tearing sound and a spray of glowing red damage particles, and he gritted his teeth and pulled himself
closer still.

Rosalia began to shout a warning at Mukensha, but it was too late. Kirito raised his sword, and
swung it down with every ounce of strength he had. The blow severed the Salamander pikeman's left
arm at the shoulder, along with his two left wings. As Mukensha howled in sudden shock and
outrage, his arm and wings disintegrating into a burst of blue polygons, Kirito swung both feet up
and kicked out. His opponent went sprawling backwards from the blow, giving Kirito the critical
moments he needed to free himself from the weapon that had impaled him.

As he began to slip off the butt end of the pike with an involuntary wince, Kirito caught a glimpse of
Rosalia rushing at him, her weapon trailing a half-moon of crimson tracers in the wake of the
 technique she was executing. Before the blow could land, from his right there came a brief surge of
hurricane-force wind laced with brilliant green energy, which blindsided Rosalia as she stepped
in front of a freight train and slammed her bodily into the tree against which Kirito had so recently
been pinned. Her weapon went flying out of her hand and she crumpled to the ground, momentarily
stunned. Kirito risked just enough of a glance to see Sasha lower her hands and nod at him.

A cold rage washed over Kirito as he realized how close his life had come to being ended—and how
his own guilt over the life he'd taken had allowed him to accept that end. He stalked purposefully
through the tall grass towards where Mukensha had fallen on his side, and saw the man aim his
remaining arm at Kirito and begin to incant a spell. An almost desultory slash of his sword deprived
the Salamander of the hand he needed in order to cast, and Kirito gave him a fierce kick in the
midriff that rolled him over onto his back.

"Don't," Kirito said as Mukensha tried to use the stump of his arm to push himself up, leveling his
sword. The tip of the blade pricked the Salamander's throat meaningfully.

Very little that Kirito recognized as human remained behind Mukensha's eyes as he glared. "Don't
what? Give you a reason to kill me?"

"The thought had occurred to me," Kirito bit out.

An awful smile twisted his face, an expression which had nothing at all to do with mirth. "You
mistake me for someone who cares to live. I failed. Just get on with it and let me go join my brother."

"Your brother was an accident," Kirito said. "I wasn't trying to kill him. I was just—"

"Spare me your self-serving excuses, Spriggan," Mukensha spat. "I saw your face when you did it. It
didn't even faze you. You just stepped right through his Remain Light and moved on to the next
target. And you didn't bother seeing if anyone was trying to rez him, either."

Another rush of anger and outrage flooded through Kirito. "Oh please. Silica told me what your
group did before I got there. You killed two people just because they were in the way, and you were
trying to rob the survivors. And you've got the nerve to try to guilt me for taking one of you down,
and imply that I violated the Treaty? You took your chances when you decided to mug Silica's party
—and so did your brother. I'm sorry about what happened to him, but—"

"No you're not," Mukensha said with unparalleled viciousness. It was as if he'd gathered up all the
contempt that existed in the world and invested it into every hate-filled word. "You didn't even break
stride when you killed him. Just like you didn't react when you killed Kin'oh earlier. Those weren't
your first kills, were they?"
Kirito’s expression was as cold as the chill that ran through him. He didn’t reply; he didn’t have to. The answer was plain on his face.

Mukensha tried to sit up again, and spat on Kirito’s blade. "You think you're such a big damn hero, showing up in the nick of time to save the girl. You think saving her or stopping hunters like us can wash all the blood off your hands." A derisive snort. "But you're just as much of a killer as I am, so don't fucking patronize me with your hollow sympathy. At least I'm honest about what I do to survive in here. You can't decide whether to be proud of your skill or ashamed of it."

"Shut up." Kirito’s fist tightened on the grip of his sword. The knife that Mukensha twisted inside him with every word hurt far more than the pike that had impaled him earlier. Mukensha must have seen the barbs sink home; that horrible smile returned to his features.

"Then shut me up, Spriggan," he seethed through clenched teeth. "Kill. It's what you're good at. It's all your kind is good for."

The urge to do exactly that was overwhelming. Mukensha was right: Zanzer and the Salamander he called Kin’oh hadn’t been his first. As both a solo player and a Spriggan, he had a perpetual target on his back, and more than once he’d had to demonstrate his willingness and ability to make a PK group pay a higher price than they were willing to pay in order to take him down. He tried to tell himself that he didn’t regret those kills—that they were necessary, that they were a last resort when he was left with no choice. Kill or be killed: the ultimate argument of necessity.

But here he was faced with someone who had very little reluctance to kill—someone who would almost certainly do so again if he went free. Moreover, Mukensha wanted to die. Whatever else he was, he was a grieving brother, and if he couldn't have his vengeance for Zanzer's death, he wanted nothing more than to be reunited with him. Kirito would be doing him a kindness if he took his head.

Realizing he’d forgotten something, he took a moment to glance warily over his shoulder. At some point while he and Mukensha had been focused on each other, Rosalia had recovered and fled the scene—most likely realizing that she had no chance of winning against Kirito one-on-one, especially now that he had a healer backing him up. Looking the other direction, he saw Sasha and Silica standing a cautious distance away, both of them seeming very unsettled. Sasha in particular was trying to stand in front of Silica as if she could shield the girl from what was happening. When the woman's eyes met Kirito's she gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head, her expression all but pleading with him.

It was Silica's presence that decided it for him. The two of them had talked at length the night before about the ambush in Yggdrasil, and while she hadn’t really been able to process it in the thick of battle or its immediate aftermath, she’d broken down in tears when it began to sink in that she’d watched two of the players she’d traveled with for days die—and they would never be coming back. They hadn’t really been friends... but they’d been people all the same.

No matter how deserving Mukensha might be, was it really right that he force Silica to cope with watching someone else get executed? Sending her and Sasha away would be scarcely better—he’d still have to face them when the deed was done. And at any rate there was no guarantee Rosalia or her people weren’t still waiting somewhere out of sight, hoping that the three of them would separate.

"I've got a better idea," Kirito said to Mukensha, taking a step back as he sheathed his sword. "My friends and I are going back to Arun. We're leaving you here. Your wings should regenerate in a few minutes; when they do, you can fly off and find a healer to restore your limbs—assuming any will touch you, after word gets around of what you tried to pull here." He looked off in the direction of the nearest edge of the island on which they stood. The carpet of tall grass ran all the way up to where the rock and dirt ended, such that you could almost fool yourself into thinking that it was just
the crest of a hill, rather than the brink of a deadly drop to the valley floor more than half a kilometer below.

Leaning over his fallen foe, Kirito bent until he was close enough to speak words that were only meant for Mukensha's ears. "On the other hand, it's a long way down from here. If you want death so badly, you know where to find it."

"We're not reviving Pina now?"

In lieu of answering Silica's plaintive question, Sasha looked to Kirito, who still had possession of the Pneuma Flower.

"Not yet," he said as they began their long glide from the top of Cloudspire Island. Their gradual descent was leisurely, and gave them time to talk without being drowned out by wing or wind noise. "There might be another ambush waiting on our way back to Arun, and it's also possible we could run into a tough mob somewhere. Why don't we play it safe and do that when we reach the church?"

"Aren't you worried about the flower disappearing?" Sasha asked.

Kirito shook his head. "Not now that I've seen it. If it had durability, it'd be listed on the flower's status window. But there's nothing there except the name, just like any other crafting component. That tells me it should only disappear if it's left out in the world for more than a few hours." He patted one of his pockets for effect. "That's why it's in my inventory."

The explanation made sense to Sasha, and Silica seemed to accept it as well. "Thank you, Kirito." Then the girl tilted her head over towards Sasha, smiling for what seemed like the first time since the ambush. "And thank you, Sasha, for what you did back there to protect me. I've never seen anyone do magic like that before; it was amazing!"

Sasha felt faintly embarrassed at the praise, but that was overridden by her pride at being able to come up with such a complex spell on the fly. "You're welcome, dear. It was nothing, really—I just applied what I knew about the language to make up a spell that did what I needed it to do." She gave Kirito a meaningful look.

He didn't miss the meaning behind that look. "I only caught it as the AOE was going off, but it was definitely impressive."

"Thank you."

Kirito nodded. "I'm still not sure I could do that, though. I don't really have any special aptitude for languages. My talents are more with computers, programming and video games. And in here I focus on my sword skills anyway."

Sasha measured Kirito with her gaze—a searching, penetrating scrutiny that usually prompted children to look away uncomfortably. "You like to understand the mechanics of how things work, isn't that right?"

Another nod.

"When we were talking before, you said this wasn't a language so much as a set of… what did you call them? Voice commands."

"Right. Like talking to your smartphone to do an Internet search."
Sasha thought this over carefully, considering whether or not she'd been using the wrong approach on Kirito. Everyone learned different subjects in their own way, and from their own frame of reference—she was a linguist, so of course she best understood the language of magic by approaching it as a language. But this Kirito was a gamer, and from the sound of it someone who related much better to technology than to people.

"Try this, then," she said finally. "Forget what I said about languages. Let's say they are voice commands. Let's say… aren't there computers where you type in keywords to do tasks instead of clicking on icons?"

"Some UIs and older operating systems are like that," Kirito confirmed as they banked wide to go around another island. "It's called a command-line interface. They're less common than they were ten or fifteen years ago, but they're still used by power users…" He trailed off, expression briefly distant before a smile began.

Capitalizing on that apparent leap of intuition, Sasha went on. "So if you wanted to be good at using a system like that, you'd learn all of the commands, and all of the words you'd type to make it do different things. Maybe you could look it up on the Internet when you needed to do some specific thing, but to really master it—"

"You'd need to know all the parameters, switches, or other arguments the commands used," Kirito said, interrupting. "You'd need to know the list of commands, the syntax for each one, and…"

Sasha briefly felt smug about her teaching ability, especially since she only barely understood what Kirito was talking about. "You get it now."

"I get it," Kirito admitted, smiling at her. "You're a Linux mage in a world of GUI apprentices."

Sasha laughed. She hadn't the faintest idea what Kirito had just said to her or what he meant by gooey, but she guessed that it was complimentary and meant that he grasped the import of what she'd been trying to get across to him.

He was complex, this boy. More than once on this outing she'd thought she had him figured out, only to discover a new side of him. In many ways he fit the stereotypes she'd heard about the Spriggan faction: loners, people who don't play well with others, able to kill without hesitation regardless of what the Treaty of Arun said. He'd struck down at least one of their assailants with no visible remorse, and if that Salamander, Mukensha, was to be believed, he'd killed others. The thought was chilling, especially given his apparent age.

On the other hand, when it came to Mukensha himself… Kirito had hesitated. And spared his life when he didn't have to, when he had every reason to end it. Moreover, he'd fought against overwhelming odds to save Silica not once but twice—and had risked his life to help bring her pet back.

This hadn't been the first time Sasha had seen someone die in the game, but it was the first time she'd been exposed to player-killing firsthand—let alone the kind of brutality and killing intent that had taken place on Cloudspire Island. No matter how desperate their situation, and despite the fact that the other party had been trying to rob and possibly kill them, it left a sickening feeling in her gut. When that red Remain Light had flickered and gone out, the light had gone out of someone's life. Somewhere in Japan, a soul was torn from a body whose eyes would never again open. Whoever they were, they had been important to someone.

She tried to remember the dead Salamander's face—she'd only seen it briefly before the fight began. How old had he been? Between the bulk of their armor and the way these fae avatars distorted a
person's features, it was sometimes hard to estimate the age of any adult, but she would've bet that he wasn't far out of high school—if he even was.

Had been.

Something of her state of mind must have shown on her face or in her body language; when they first landed at the peak of a large hill near Arun to rest their wings, Kirito approached her. "You all right?"

Sasha almost put up the same kind of reassuring front she would've shown to any of the other kids, but something in Kirito's expression suggested that he knew better. "I was thinking about the player you killed."

Kirito's suddenly looked conflicted. "Sorry I asked."

"I'm not blaming you," she said quickly. "You fought to protect us, and I'm grateful for that. It's just…"

"I still see them, you know," Kirito said quietly, glancing in Silica's direction to make sure she was out of earshot.

Sasha was confused at the seeming non sequitur. "Who?"

"The players I've had to kill. Every one of them. I see them when I close my eyes at night. I see them in the faces of people in the crowd in Arun. I see them every time I see a red cursor." For a time he looked away, gazing off in the distance towards where Arun itself was faintly visible at the foot of the World Tree. They stood on the crest of the hill—not the tallest in sight, but high enough to be able to catch a glimpse of the grand neutral city at the center of Alfheim. After seconds passed with no answer from Sasha, he looked back over his shoulder at her.

"It was different in the beta, you know. PvP was half the point. Sometimes I'd run into people I'd 'killed', and maybe we'd talk about tactics or promise a rematch. Maybe a little trash talk, but that's just part of playing online games. There was a sense of camaraderie with your opponent, and respect for their skill. It was intense, and I took it as seriously as any other hardcore gamer, but it was…" Kirito then turned back and met Sasha's eyes. "It was still fun. Not a matter of kill-or-be-killed."

For a moment, just a moment while he was talking about the game when it was still a game, Kirito had looked like the boy that he was instead of the killer he'd become. Sasha had spent much of her time in this world trying to create a safe place for the children of Alfheim, and it broke her heart to think of the weight that this boy, this child, had to bear at an age when his worst worry ought to be passing high school entrance exams. She wasn't sure she wanted to ask the next question. "Was it hard for you, your first time?"

His gaze didn't waver. "It's hard every time. But only afterwards. When you're in the middle of a serious fight—if you want to survive it—everything narrows down to just you and the person trying to kill you. Sometimes… sometimes it feels like a part of me blacks out until it's over." He shook himself briefly, glancing over at Silica again. She, too had been quiet, but in her case it was ever since they made the decision not to try rezzing Pina until returning to Arun. She seemed to sense that Kirito and Sasha were having a private conversation, and kept her distance while they rested their wings.

"What about you?" he asked after another interval of silence had passed. "Was that your first time?"

Sasha stared at Kirito in confusion, unsure of what he meant. "My first time for what?"
Kirito’s expression was momentarily just as confused as hers, before tightening up. "You don't know?"

"Know what? I don't understand what you're trying to ask. I need some context for the question."

Several times Kirito opened his mouth to answer, stopping before he could say anything as if he'd thought better of the words. "When you blasted away those three players, what status effects did you hit them with?"

She remembered all too well. "About six seconds of Paralysis, followed by nine seconds of Delay stacked with eighteen seconds of Silence. I had to make sure they were disabled as long as possible. Why?"

Kirito nodded thoughtfully. "You were inside that earth wall, so you probably didn't see one of them go over the edge from the force of the AOE. It's a long way to the ground below. You can't fly when you're paralyzed; after six seconds he would've fallen about…" He closed his eyes for a moment, as if doing calculations in his head. "About 150 meters. Six or seven more seconds and he'd hit the ground at terminal velocity. He'd still be suffering from Delay status, but if he kept his wits and was skilled at Voluntary Flight, he might've been able to pull up in time."

The growing sense of horror that filled Sasha as Kirito spoke must have been clear as day. His own expression became sympathetic as he added, "I'm sorry. It doesn't get any easier."

She barely heard him. *I just wanted to make sure they couldn't hurt us*, she thought, the comforting temptation of denial rising in her. *They were just status effects; they shouldn't have been a danger to anyone's life.*

But in order to deliver them in an AOE, she'd had to stack those effects with direct damage. And the concussive physics impulse of Wind magic damage had thrown her assailants away from her with great force, immobilized. If that force had carried one of them far enough…

Every race might be able to fly, but falling from a great height could still kill. She might as well have tied that player up, stood at the edge of the island and pushed them off with her own hands.

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The Spriggan boy's name was Kirito, and according to Miss Sasha he was a complete and total badass.

Not that she would ever use those words. Tetsuo would've laughed himself silly if she had. But from what little she was willing to divulge of their ambush and the battle that had ensued, the black-haired boy had taken on half of a group of six bandits intent on robbery and murder, and bought Sasha and the adorable little Cait Sith girl named Silica the time they needed to escape the others. Silica's tail twitched excitedly as she recounted choice bits of another battle against even worse odds from the day before, where Kirito had shown up in the nick of time and fought off twice as many bandits single-handedly in order to save her.

Tetsuo suspected that she was exaggerating, and that she had a crush on the boy the size of the Tokyo Tower.

Keita leaned over and stage-whispered to Tetsuo right as Silica's story came to an inconveniently-timed pause. "I guess Miss Sasha wasn't on a date after all."

"Unless she likes underage guys," Tetsuo remarked.
Both of them exclaimed loudly—in surprise despite the lack of pain—as Sasha came up behind them and gave the two of them sharp smacks on the back of the head. "I heard that," she said crossly. "Sachi, what did you tell these boys?"

Sachi appeared to be having a very hard time not succumbing to a fatal case of schadenfreude. She covered her mouth with both petite hands, but Tetsuo could tell she was smiling. "Just that you and some swordsman were going off on a quest," she said, voice muffled.

Sasha turned her burning gaze on both Tetsuo and Keita, who recoiled from the force of it. "One more word," she said. "One more word like that from your uncouth mouths, and you can find somewhere else to sleep tonight. I know both of you clearer can afford an inn."

Tetsuo nudged Keita. "What does 'uncouth' mean?"

"It means you're a jerk," Keita said quietly. Then, more loudly: "Sorry, Miss Sasha. We didn't mean anything by it."

One by one the back-and forth conversations died down, until eventually there was a moment of stillness where Silica and Kirito both looked meaningfully at Sasha.

She nodded, pressing the palms of her hands against the sides of her dress and bunching them into fists briefly. "It's time."

Tetsuo leaned over to whisper to Keita again. "Time for what?"

Keita shushed him with an annoyed look and didn't answer, as both Kirito and Silica made a two-fingered gesture in the air familiar to any player as the motion of opening their menus. Moments later each of them materialized an item in their hands; in Kirito's was a single delicate purple and white flower on a fresh-looking stem, while Silica held a glittering blue feather that seemed to radiate magic.

Sasha took the flower from Kirito and looked at it with a pained expression for a moment. Tetsuo had no idea what was going on; he couldn't even begin to guess at her thoughts.

"Miss Sasha," Silica said, voice suddenly alert with concern, "are you alright?"

Sasha bit her lip, nodding. "I'm sorry, dear. I'm fine. Just... thinking about what this flower cost."

Tetsuo suspected there was more to this quest than anyone was letting on, but for once decided to exercise discretion. Sachi opened her mouth partway as if preparing to pry, but closed it at a shake of the head from Keita.

"Here's «Pina's Heart»," said Silica, presenting the feather to Sasha with both hands as if offering up something intensely precious.

"Does it matter which one you hold in which hand?" Kirito asked curiously.

She shrugged fluidly as she took the feather. "I don't think so. The transmutation recipes I know of so far don't differ in their results based on which hand you use to hold which ingredient." She looked around at everyone, and took a deep breath. "I guess I had better get on with it."

"Get on with what?" Tetsuo said, his curiosity finally getting the best of him.

Sasha looked at Silica instead of at him, and a gentle smile touched her face. Silica's own eyes were alight with something that might've been hope, the beginning of tears showing as a glimmer in the
corners of her eyes, and her tail was slashing the air in an agitated way that Tetsuo doubted she was even aware of. "Bringing back a friend," the woman said finally.

And with that suitably cryptic answer, she held out both hands in front of her, palms up. In her left hand she held the feather; in the palm of her right hand was the flower. She gazed at both for a moment, her lips moving silently as if rehearsing lines.

"Dotto mezal," Sasha began, dark amber energy flaring around her and coursing down her arms, surrounding each hand with a nimbus of light. After a half-beat pause, she went on, each word crisply enunciated and far clearer than Tetsuo thought he could manage: "kejevrelth, shaja min."

For all the fuss and ceremony everyone was making, it was a surprisingly short incantation. Tetsuo only recognized what sounded like the beginning of an Earth spell, and nothing thereafter. The feather and flower both lifted into the air, floating around twenty centimeters above Sasha's palms and connected to her hands and each other by chains of golden energy that filled the room with warm light. Moments after the last word of the incantation, the light became almost too bright to watch for the briefest of moments, and Tetsuo doubted he was the only one who flinched then.

The crackle of energy built to a peak, and both items dissolved into motes of incandescent energy which merged with the scintillae of the spellword runes that scattered from around Sasha's body at the completion of the spell, coalescing slowly into a dog-sized form hovering in front of her. There was a short gust of displaced air as the form solidified and became corporeal, the loose strands of Sasha's braided hair fluttering briefly.

It took a moment for common sense to overcome Tetsuo's instinct to draw his weapon when he saw the water drake hovering there in the air. In that moment he almost lurched from his chair, and felt extremely foolish when it occurred to him that not only were water drakes non-aggro, but that there was no good reason to fear anything in the safe neutral territory of Arun's city limits. His suspicions about what was really going on were verified when the light blue drake gave a keening cry and fluttered over to the Cait Sith girl, whose answering cry of joy could've melted even Eugene's heart.

Okay, maybe that was taking things a bit far. But she really was acting like the family pet had just come back to life—

Tetsuo smacked his forehead. Oh.

The drake—Pina, she called it, crying out the name over and over again—seemed just as happy to see her. It practically mobbed Silica, clinging to her and licking her face in a display that was unlike any behavior he'd ever seen from a mob. Not that he really had any experience dealing with Cait Sith tamers; the only person of that race he knew personally was Sasamaru, and his friend didn't really use the Beast Taming skill much.

Keita cleared his throat suddenly, giving meaningful looks to the others of their group as he stood. "I feel like we're intruding on a family reunion," he said. "Miss Sasha, maybe my friends and I should take our gathering somewhere else."

"No, it's okay," Silica said between giggles as Pina nuzzled her face and then clambered atop her head with a trill. "I'm just really, really happy right now. Thank you, Miss Sasha. And thank you, Kirito. Without the two of you, I would've lost Pina forever. I'll be much more careful about who I go out partying with from now on, and where we go."

Sasamaru had been his usual quiet self up until that point, but Tetsuo caught motion out of the corner of his eye and saw his Cait Sith friend whispering in Keita's ear. The tall Gnome got a broad grin on his face, and gave Sasamaru a sharp slap on the back. "Say, Silica... I don't know what your level is
and I wouldn't ask, but maybe sometime you'd like to go out with us?"

The girl's eyes went wide. "Really? I mean... I can go into Yggdrasil, at least in some places, but... are you sure?"

Keita nodded enthusiastically. "To be honest, we don't get together as often as we'd like... but Sachi could really use a friend closer to her age than most of the kids here, and there's usually only four or five of us when we do go out—it'd be nice to have someone else along."

Sachi raised her hand, eyeing Keita. "I'm right here, you know."

Waving apologetically, Keita grinned at her. "Really though. If you want to go out with us when we get together, just say the word. In fact, that's why we were all meeting up here—we've just been waiting for Sachi to get done with babysitting duty."

"We'd love to have you along," Sasamaru added. "Most of us are clearer, so we can protect you."

Silica looked over at Kirito for a moment—for what reason, Tetsuo couldn't guess. He smiled and gave her an encouraging nod, which seemed to be all she needed. She turned back to Keita with a glowing expression of happiness. "Yes!" she said. Tetsuo had to assume that the noise Pina followed up with was assent as well.

"Well then, that's settled," Keita said, gathering everyone up with his gaze. As his friends all got to their feet, Sachi started suddenly and turned to Sasha. "Oh, before I go, I almost forgot to mention. You might want to have a talk with Genji. He and some of the others have been practicing combat magic in the yard, and he tried to sell me some story about you saying it was okay."

"Which I most certainly did not," Sasha said archly.

"Why not?" Kirito said, saving Tetsuo the trouble of butting in and asking the same question.

Sasha gave him one of her well-worn looks meant to make him feel like he'd asked a stupid question. Kirito, to his credit, didn't seem to be buying it. "I'm serious," he said. "Why not let them practice how to take care of themselves? They can't hurt each other in the city."

"Because it's not just 'taking care of themselves', Kirito. You should know that better than anyone here. It's one thing if they want to practice healing magic or defensive shields. But when they practice how to throw fireballs at each other, they're not just training to stay alive." Her eyes narrowed meaningfully. "They're training to kill. Most of them are too young to really know what that means. I hope they never have to find out."

"I hope so too," Kirito said. "But it would be a lot worse if they had to find that out by dying because they couldn't fend off an attacker."

"They won't have to," Sasha said firmly. "That's why I brought them here. So that they don't have to take risks outside."

"Are you really that naive?"

Sasha wasn't the only person in the room whose jaw fell open then. "I beg your pardon?"

Kirito looked around, found an open door, and made a point of shutting it before turning back to Sasha, his black eyes cold. "Do you really think that none of them ever sneak out when you're asleep or not here? That they don't practice magic whenever they can get away with it? They have wings just like every other player in the game. They get incantations automatically in their spellbook as their
skill goes up, just like everyone else. They're kids who are trapped in a world that lets them cast magic spells, a world where they can fly and be fantasy heroes slaying monsters that they know they have just as much power to defeat as anyone else... and you think they're just going to forget about all of that and sit around playing in the yard just because you say so?"

It was the first time Tetsuo had ever seen Sasha speechless. He would've given every yuld in his pocket right then for a recording crystal.

"Train them," Kirito urged. "They're going to grow up with or without you, and I'd bet you anything some of the older kids are already sneaking out at night to practice and level up. Eventually some of them are going to get killed because they don't know things they need to know. You're in a position to teach them those things. And with what you know about the language of magic, you're in a position to turn some of them into better mages than anyone else in the game."

He locked eyes with her. "And to teach them how to use their magic responsibly, instead of leaving it up to them to figure that out."

"So let me see if I have this right," Jahala said in between sips at his tea. "You're proposing that the clearers of each faction agree on an order in which to prioritize which races get selected. The purpose being to ensure the races left behind are in the best possible position to clear Yggdrasil again with the remaining population and their skill sets."

Argo grinned toothily across the tavern table at him. "You get a gold star."

"No, Diavel is the one who has the gold star," Jahala said. "Which brings me to my next question: why are you talking to me and not to our leader?"

"Because you're here in Arun and I didn't feel like making the trek to Parasel." It was a good answer, and it had the benefit of being true, but it wasn't the whole story. Argo had decided to engage the lead clearers rather than the faction leaders for a variety of reasons, not least of which was that the faction leaders wouldn't be there when the choice was made—it would be made by whoever landed the Last Attack on the final boss.

But most importantly, the leadership of the clearing groups only tended to change when someone died. Faction leaders were up for re-election every month, and an agreement with this month's leader might be moot next month. This was the sort of thing that didn't really bear pointing out to people who were very loyal to their faction leader.

It wasn't a conspiracy. Not really. It just had a faint family resemblance to one, as if a conspiracy had once met a gentleman's agreement and had an indiscreet liaison that resulted in a plan to save the world.

"You understand I'll have to consult with him before agreeing to anything."

Not for the first time, Argo had doubts about the wisdom of choosing Jahala rather than some other Undine clearer. He'd always been a useful source of information, but he was so straightlaced that she had to be really careful how she approached him and got him to answer questions. She sighed in mild frustration, tail lashing involuntarily; every time it did so it created a dull thump against the wall behind her. "Do you ever think for yourself, Jahala? It's not like he's gonna be there to hold your hand when the boss is defeated."

"Not when it comes to making policy. The Undines put their faith in Diavel to lead them, and he
trusts me to carry out his will. I'll present your plan to him, and give him my recommendation."

"Well, when you do, I want you to keep in mind what your faction's all about. You guys wanna save lives, right? Save as many people as possible?"

"That goes without saying," Jahala replied cautiously. "I think everyone wants that—most of us, anyway. But that's the end you're talking about, not the means—and people can differ when it comes to what means they'll employ towards their desired end." He gazed down into the small cup that held the remains of his tea, and shook it gently in a circle to stir up the dregs. "And there are two points in your plan that remain unresolved."

Argo shifted the hard candy she was sucking on into her cheek so that she could reply. "Like?"

Jahala held up his closed fist before him, and extended a slender forefinger as he ticked off his points. "First, the question of plausibility. I've yet to hear any kind of concrete proof that the game works this way—that the remaining players will be given a chance to re-clear the game and escape rather than being trapped forever."

"And you won't. It's impossible to prove until we do it," Argo said. "But consider the alternative: that Kayaba decided to screw everyone left behind and leave them with no hope, no reason to go on. Think about what you know of Kayaba. This is his life's work. He trapped twenty thousand people in here to be his captive audience and playthings. Someone clears the game and leaves behind ten, fifteen thousand players still living in this world. People who wouldn't have much reason to continue playing the game if they had no hope of ever escaping."

"And?"

Argo blew out a frustrated puff of air. Jahala had no imagination. "It's a wasted opportunity, Jahala. Whatever else he is, Kayaba is a GM and someone who put a ton of work into this game. After the game is cleared the majority of the players are still here. Chances are they won't have seen even half of the content in the game by then. Content that Kayaba spent countless hours creating. Why would he piss all that away by not giving the remaining players a reason to keep playing?"

She could almost see the hamster wheel spinning behind Jahala's eyes. "All right," he said finally. "I'll grant that your scenario is plausible. It's not proof, but it's a reasonable argument. So what do you propose?"

"There are nine races, and three can escape at a time under the terms Kayaba gave. So the second wave's got only six races to clear the tree with, and the third wave's gotta make do with only three. That third wave should be the races with the highest population and the most essential skill sets. Put simply: Undines should avoid getting the Last Attack in the first two waves if at all possible, so that every wave has access to the highest-level healing and resurrection magic."

Jahala's expression soured more and more as the explanation went on. "You're asking us to deliberately not clear the game, Argo. You're asking us to gamble the lives of everyone in our faction on whether or not you're right about this."

"This whole thing falls apart if the Undines are part of the first or second waves, Jahala. Most of the best healers in the game will be gone, and a lot more people will die to clear the game—if they can do it at all. I'm not asking you to slack off. Keep clearing. Keep fighting. And keep supplying groups with healers. But when it comes to the final boss, let someone else get the LA so that as many lives as possible can be saved in the waves that follow."

Argo gave Jahala all the time he needed to think that through in silence. The tavern was empty aside
from NPCs at the moment; she'd deliberately chosen one of the least popular and most inconveniently-located establishments for this meeting.

He cleared his throat after a minute or so of this. "Let's say Diavel agrees with you. And I can't say that he won't, because the argument about saving lives is likely to be very persuasive to him. Who does get picked first? I'm guessing that you want to leave the Undines, Salamanders and Sylphs for last—the other two are the largest factions."

"You got it."

"First of all, the notion of getting the Salamanders to cooperate with the the rest of us—or vice-versa—borders on wishful thinking. But setting that side, if your priority is to leave the largest and most useful factions for last, that means the first wave would ideally be the smallest and least—" He cut off suddenly, frowning.

"Least useful," Argo agreed, making a loud crunching sound as she finished off her candy. "Meaning that ideally, we want the Last Attack to come from a Spriggan, Puca or Imp—in order of preference—and that no matter who does get the LA, they pick the other two races from that list in order."

Whatever response Argo had expected, it wasn't laughter. The normally sober and serious Jahala leaned back and laughed long and loudly, slapping the table once when his amusement died off. "I didn't take you for a joker, Argo."

"Then you don't know me very well," Argo said. "But that wasn't a joke."

"I wish it had been," Jahala said. "Because there is no way in hell Diavel is going to authorize choosing the Spriggans. Good luck getting anyone to go along with that."

"Is this about the Treaty?"

"What do you think?" The Undine clearer's tone was incredulous; Argo was again grateful for the privacy of the empty tavern. "Their leader refused to sign on, and their emissary made it clear that even if she had, it would've been impossible for her to enforce. They've had months to deal with the consequences, and judging by the fact that they keep re-electing her, apparently this is what the majority of the Spriggans want. I'll bring your message to Diavel, but I can already tell you what he's going to say."

"Which is?"

"That they've made their bed," Jahala said frostily. "And now they can lie in it."

Argo sat up in her seat and met the young man's cold gaze squarely. "This is bigger than faction politics, Jahala. Forget the damn labels for a minute and remember that we're all people. Wasn't that at the heart of the Treaty? The fact that these divisions are artificial, and that we're all human beings?"

He looked back at her just as directly. "Yes. And human beings still have to answer for the consequences of their choices. The Spriggans—that group of people, if you like—have chosen a leader who tells us that they can't be trusted to play by the same rules as everyone else. So why should we do this for them?"

"Because it's not about them," Argo said. "It's not about who deserves to go first, or who wins the Alfheim popularity contest. It's about giving the people left behind the best chance of surviving and escaping this world. Think about it this way: if the Undines were one of the races left behind, who
would you most want there with you when you tackled the World Tree again? Who wouldn't you want there?"

She could see that the last argument had penetrated a bit. With a sigh, Jahala set down his teacup and pushed it away from him as he stood. "I'll talk to Diavel. But a word of advice, Argo. You get a lot of leeway because you're useful to everybody, and you're not known for taking sides. And you earned a lot of respect for the way you helped pull everyone together at the treaty summit. But this little idea of yours about prioritizing who gets out first... you're not a neutral party, here—it's your agenda that's on the table. And a lot of people aren't going to like being told that they have to fight to free someone else from this world first."

Argo nodded once. "So don't tell 'em. When the time comes to take down the final boss, there's a very finite number of people who're gonna be in a position to get that killing blow in. They're the only ones who need to know, and they only need to know once we're planning that raid and know who'll be there."

Jahala's ice-blue eyes glittered in the lamplight that guttered as the door to the pub opened, admitting a sullen-looking Salamander woman who made for a seat in the opposite corner of the L-shaped room. He waited until she was out of sight and earshot before lowering his voice and saying one final thing. "We're talking about people's lives, Argo. You're playing a dangerous game."

Argo looked back at him unblinkingly. "Aren't we all?"

"You failed," the cloaked man said. "And you failed spectacularly."

Rosalia said nothing, looking down into her wine glass as if she could find an excuse somewhere in its depths. What was there to say? Of the five warriors she'd brought with her, two were dead and a third—her own nominal second in command, Mukensha—apparently survived despite being abandoned, and had yet to return. The once-feared Titan's Hand privateer unit had lost half of its members in the span of 24 hours, and she knew more were considering leaving and signing on with other groups. They weren't here in the pub with her now, but she'd fought with them long enough to know that much about them.

It was easy to claim that this wasn't her fault, that it was simply bad luck. But groups like these thrived on success and made examples of failures; her ability to lead was dependent on her ability to deliver results.

"You took two simple robberies and turned them into clown shows," the man went on as he paced slowly around the table. His voice was conversational, unruffled, but there was a hint of steel in it, a hidden blade behind the words.

"Look," Rosalia said defensively, "I'll grant that I failed—"

"Such admirable honesty." The compliment was tainted by a sarcastic sneer that the other man didn't bother to conceal.

Rosalia decided against calling him on it; she was in deep enough as it was. "But I don't see what we could've done differently yesterday. We'd already successfully hit that group I'd been watching; how were we supposed to anticipate some high-level clearer showing up and wiping the floor with us?"

"And today? Today you already knew how strong he was. Yet you took only a single group with you and tried to take him on anyway."
"A raid party would've made too much noise and attracted too much attention," Rosalia protested, craning her head uncomfortably to follow the man as he paced around the table behind her. "We were lucky the girl didn't catch on to the tracer as it was. And we had a solid plan to even the odds by using her as leverage. He would've given up the flower if not for that damned schoolteacher."

There was no reply until a few uncomfortable beats of silence had passed. "Do you realize just how ridiculous you sound?"

Rosalia bristled. "Now listen—"

Before the second word passed her lips, she felt a strong hand tangle itself in her hair and yank her head back across the edge of the chair. The move would've risked snapping a person's neck in the real world; she cried out and tried futilely to pry at the wrist of the hand that seized her, squirming in her seat helplessly.

"No," said the voice softly in her ear as he leaned over her, his breath on her cheek. "You listen. Do you know what your problem is? You're an amateur. You do things by half-measures."

"I—"

"Silence. Back in the world you were likely a waitress or a stripper, or perhaps some yakuza punk's bitch. Once trapped here you got a taste of power, a chance to be something more." He jerked her head by the hair again to command her attention. "But deep inside you're still the same weak, cowardly trollop who's ruled by her emotions."

As Rosalia pulled desperately at the man's arm, she felt the cool edge of a knife on her throat, and despite herself, she froze. The man laughed. "See? You know that we're in a safe zone, and that this knife can't do anything to harm you. But your fear rules you anyway." He released the fistful of her hair and gave her head a rough shove back upright.

Rubbing the back of her neck, Rosalia looked at the anti-harassment window that was hanging in front of her chest, prompting her whether or not to report the violation of her personal space and send the offender to the nearest jail for a day.

He couldn't have seen her UI, but he had to know what was there. The smile that peeked out from the shadows of the hooded cloak was inviting. "Well? You have an easy way to end this conversation right now. One fingertip will do it. All you have to do is answer yes to the prompt." The corner of his lips curled into a sneer. "And accept what will happen to you when I find you."

Slowly, with a hand she couldn't entirely stop from trembling, Rosalia pressed no.

"Good girl," he said as he slid smoothly back into the seat opposite her. "Now… tell me about this schoolteacher."
Chapter 19

"An «Access Quest» is a specific type of quest which, upon completion of its prerequisite conditions, flags a player with permission to do something or go somewhere they could not before completing the quest. The prerequisites could be virtually anything, but are most commonly an item or items which the player must collect—items which in game jargon are usually referred to as «Key Items» or «Keys» whether or not they actually look or function like one."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Access Quests»

24 ~ 28 April 2023
Day 170

From Kirito's point of view, it was entirely possible that there was something in the known universe more excruciatingly boring than trying to farm quest items that were supposedly an uncommon mob drop. Especially in a game where the random number generator occasionally seemed to possess a novel—or cruel—notion of what "uncommon" was supposed to mean.

Guard duty, for example, Kirito thought as he deflected a last desperate strike from the serpentine «Slitharch sentry», using the opening to eliminate the last of the mob's HP bar. When it shattered into polygons, he swept an eddy through the falling blue particles as he gave his sword a habitual flourish and sheathed it. That sentry was probably far more bored than I was. He was just sitting here guarding an undistinguished patch of ground in front of an unnamed ruin for no reason other than being placed here by a game designer, and he couldn't even wander further than his 50-meter tether.

Kirito’s gaze drifted as the sounds of clashing metal and hissing Slitharchs met his ears. At least he didn't have to wait long, he thought. Now that everyone knows what they need to get in order to pass through the portal and progress further, everyone is camping these mobs for the quest item. We're almost to the point of fighting over repops.

It was an unfortunate train of thought to have interrupted by being addressed unexpectedly from behind. Kirito's sword had already cleared its sheath by the time he recognized the voice. He realized his mistake just in time to feel—and look—very foolish. "What?"

The slender Undine girl who'd surprised him was unapologetic, and perhaps a little bemused to have steel bared at her. She shared a roll of the eyes with the very young Imp girl at her side. "Good reflexes," Asuna said. "I asked, how many do you have so far?"

Kirito made a face as he sheepishly returned his sword to his back. He didn't even have to open his inventory to look. "Three," he said.

"You need two more," Asuna pointed out.

"Tell me something I don't know." Kirito gave a shrug that hinted at more indifference than he actually felt. "They'll drop eventually if we keep clearing."

"Camping, you mean," Yuuki said, unnecessarily shading her eyes with the flat of her hand as she turned her head, possibly looking for unclaimed mobs. She gave Kirito a friendly smile that was as sudden as it was brilliant. "Aren't you gonna ask how many we have?"

He didn't exactly care, but Yuuki's open friendliness and his competitive nature got the best of him. "All right," he said. "Since you're so itching to tell me. How many?"
Yuuki giggled and held up both hands with V-for-victory symbols. Asuna's expression tended more in the direction of smugness as she waved a hand with all five fingers spread.

"All you left out was the word 'neener'," Kirito said with a note of grumpiness.

"Neener," Asuna said obligingly, showing a smile and bouncing on the tiptoes of her boots.

"Thanks. So why are you still here if you've got all five of your keys?"

Asuna's expression changed to one which by now he knew almost as well as her name. It was a withering look she'd mastered through long interactions with him, one which could quite possibly be replaced by nothing more than the word *baka*, shouted excessively loudly. "Because Yuuki doesn't yet. It's called partying—heard of it? It's something two or more people do when they want to cooperate—"

Kirito turned away. "I think I hear a repop. Leaving now."

"Why are you such an idiot, Kirito?"

The volume of Asuna's outburst not only stopped Kirito in his tracks but made him wince, hand almost coming up to one ear. He caught her eyes out of the corner of his as he glanced over his shoulder. "If you're trying to get me to party with you, you need to work on your sales pitch."

"Oh, stuff it. I've tried asking nicely," Asuna said, unhappiness dripping from each word. "I've tried being blunt. I've tried persuasion and once I even tried just sending you an invite as soon as I saw you."

Something in her words or tone compelled Kirito to turn and face Asuna. She wasn't crying—if anything, she looked furious—but from hearing her he could've sworn that she had been. It took him a few moments to find his words. "Why does it matter to you?"

"Because you're going to get yourself killed, always going solo like this in dangerous areas. Every Spriggen is already walking around with a target on their back, and you're becoming pretty well-known among the clearing parties. I always wonder if I'm ever going to run into you again."

Kirito needed some time to process this. He could never make heads or tails of Asuna or what she wanted, and this was easily the most confusing thing she'd said yet. Confusing or possibly ironic, depending on how well she remembered the circumstances of their first meeting.

When he didn't say anything immediately, Asuna took a step towards him and swept her hand through the air to open her game menu. Moments later a stone object shaped roughly like an arrowhead appeared in her hand with a shimmer and a sound effect, and she held it out to him.

Kirito stared, eyes alternating between the quest item being offered to him and the face of the girl offering it. "You already have your five, Asuna. You can complete the star emblem in the Slitharch temple and go through the portal to the next area yourself."

"Or," Asuna said, reaching out and carefully dropping the item into one of the pockets of Kirito's coat, "I can give you one so that we all have four, we party up, and we farm Slitharchs until all three of us have the last one we need."

The confusion in Kirito's mind was threatening to overwhelm him. *Why would she do something like that?* he wondered, reaching up to fasten the seal on the pocket and feeling the lump of the item contained within. "I really don't understand you sometimes," he said without heat.
"I know," she said as she manipulated her menu again and sent him a party invite.

There was one thing to be said for being in a party—you could clear a lot faster. The solo mobs here were a bit above Kirito's level, and although he could take them himself, it required time and caution—isolating the right mob, waiting until there were no aggro roamers nearby, and carefully burning it down. The mobs seemed to be on a ten-minute respawn timer, and they took several minutes each for Kirito to bring them down on his own.

With Yuuki and Asuna backing him up, though—or was it the other way around?—they could move a lot faster, and take chances with mobs Kirito wouldn't touch by himself. He and Yuuki, as longsword users, had a good grasp of each other's capabilities and seemed to flow into a rhythm of "switching" fairly easily, dodging in and out and tag-teaming the mob to take advantage of the brief delay while the AI changed targets. And Asuna's healing was nothing short of invaluable, especially to someone whose usual source of healing came from potions.

The routine became comfortable before long, and Yuuki was the first to get her fifth quest item. Thereafter they went through a long chain of fights which yielded nothing but experience and yuld, and then a long interval where there were no enemies. Asuna insisted on re-engaging Kirito in conversation while waiting for repops.

"You work well as a party member, you know. You know what to do when someone calls for a switch, and you shift roles in a fight at least as well as anyone I've seen in the Undine clearing groups, and with a healer backing you up I doubt there's any non-named mob you couldn't bring down."

"So why do I prefer to play solo?" Kirito asked, black eyes alertly scanning the dimly-lit chambers as he listened for the sound of a respawn effect.

Asuna nodded earnestly while she performed her own vigil for repops. "You could be more efficient, do so much more as part of a clearing group," she said. "You could help us progress further, possibly even catch up with the Salamanders and beat them to this next boss."

"And we'd love to have you," Yuuki put in.

"Is this where I point out that at least Mortimer lets Spriggans come and go in Salamander territory like anyone else unless they violate the Treaty? Diavel banned us from Undine cities no matter what, and I haven't exactly gotten a warm reception from your clearing group before."

"And I put an end to that, didn't I?" Asuna folded her arms under her modest bust, rapier sticking out to one side where she still held it in her hand. She gave Kirito a defiant look aside. "I went right to Jahala and had him set the group straight." Yuuki nodded along, occasionally glancing around cautiously.

"By which point we weren't functioning as a group anyway, which is why I left. You want to go through that again?" Kirito just didn't get it. Her faction didn't want his kind in their clearing group or in their cities. Whatever the merits of her arguments about clearing more efficiently, there was no point in trying to be part of a group where the members didn't like each other—they could fail to support each other at a critical moment and get someone killed.

Asuna sighed, sinking down to sit on one of the many damp wooden knots sticking out of the ground. "I just don't understand why you have to play to stereotype, Kirito," she said. "You're not a larper. You don't buy into all the racial divisions. You don't have to be the 'loner Spriggan' that everyone expects you to be. It's not who you are. I've played with you long enough to know that by now."
Kirito was about to ask sharply exactly what made her think she knew that, but held it in. She wasn't right, but she wasn't entirely wrong either. "Do you know why I picked a Spriggan to play?" he asked finally.

She shook her head. Kirito sat down beside her and angled the blade of his sword across his lap, tapping it to bring up its status screen and check its durability. "Because they wore black," he said. "I wear a lot of black in real life, and I thought they looked cool. I didn't care about what magic they used; I liked melee combat. In the first few weeks I tried some other races that didn't click with me, and finally I rolled a Spriggan and stuck with it. You have to understand... in the beta, there were maybe a little over a hundred Spriggan players. It was a small community, and most of the players were solo treasure hunters, so I got used to exploring on my own and being self-sufficient."

"But this isn't the beta anymore," Asuna said. "And the circumstances have changed a bit, don't you think?"

"Pop," Yuuki said quickly, right as Kirito and Asuna reacted to the sound of a mob respawning. A column of brilliant blue light around twenty meters away faded and left a mob with the diamond-patterned lower body of a snake and the muscular armored torso of a man. A wine-red cursor appeared over the head of the «Slitharch transgressor», and all three players were ready when it aggroed and rushed them.

Yuuki was the first to meet its opening strike, her sword cutting a blue arc through the air and repelling the Slitharch's two-handed swing with a loud ringing sound and flash of light. When she called for a "switch", Kirito was already racing into the opening, a multi-hit technique tearing great red furrows in the mob's exposed underbelly and sending it reeling back with a sibilant screech. Then they both forked to either side of the mob, leaving Asuna with an unobstructed line of sight which she used to cast a Delay status spell, slowing the mob's reactions and allowing the three of them to finish it off without any real difficulty.

"See?" Asuna said as she scanned the area for any further enemies before giving her own weapon an inspection for wear. "These are solo mobs, but they're tough enemies above our level. The three of us working together can clear them a lot faster, and with a better safety margin."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know, Asuna," Kirito said with a hint of rising weariness. "Then why?" The exasperation in her tone was unmistakable. "Why are you so determined to be alone?"

Kirito deliberately took his time checking the status of the rest of his gear so that he didn't have to look at her, kneeling when it came time to examine his boots. "You know I have a target on my back, right? Every Spriggan does. Since we're not signatories to the Treaty, there are some players who make a point of hunting us. And even the people who won't go that far are often openly hostile to us." He closed the last status window, still staring at his foot as if the window was still there to be seen. "Or to anyone traveling with us."

"Is this still about protecting us?" Asuna asked incredulously. When Kirito nodded in silence after a moment's hesitation, she sighed. He could hear footsteps behind him, and then he started slightly as Asuna's hands came to rest on his shoulders. "I can take care of myself, you know," she said a little more quietly.

Confusion and hesitation tore Kirito in several different directions before he came up with what he wanted to say. "I know. That doesn't mean it's a good idea to tempt fate by creating more problems for you and Yuuki."
"Isn't there something you can do?" Yuuki asked after her name was mentioned, dropping down into a cross-legged sitting position opposite Kirito and Asuna.


"Change the politics," Asuna said from behind him. "You're well-known whether you know it or not — everyone in the clearing groups knows who you are from your work on boss raids or from seeing you clearing alone, even if they only know you as 'that black swordsman'. I'd be surprised if you weren't just as well-known even among other Spriggans. You could run for the leadership and bring the Spriggans into the Treaty—"

"That's impossible," Kirito said flatly, Asuna's hands trailing off his shoulders as he abruptly came to his feet in a ripple of black. "If I was the Spriggan leader, I wouldn't be able to be a clearer anymore. If I ran on a platform of enforcing the treaty, I'd never get elected anyway. And even if I could and was willing to give up clearing... Yoshihara was right, as much as I hate to admit it. How could I enforce it? Exile? Banishment? Those things don't mean anything to most Spriggans—they've relocated to Arun and hire out their skills anyway."

Asuna grabbed his arm before he could walk away, forcing him to turn and look at her. "I refuse to believe that over a thousand people who just happened to play Spriggans also just happen to have no desire for a real leader and don't care whether or not people get killed. The players in your faction weren't born this way, Kirito. If you show them a better way... they'll follow you."

The last few words faded in his ears as Kirito's attention was snared by an approaching sound. He held up his hand sharply as his eyes went to the west, activating his Searching skill and looking for cursors. Asuna seemed to pick up on the meaning behind his gesture and change in demeanor; she stopped talking and held her rapier ready.

"It's the others," Yuuki said, pointing.

Kirito saw them at almost the same time. A few groups of Undines, perhaps nine or ten players in all, became visible as they made their way up the natural stairway that opened into the World Tree caverns where the three of them had been hunting. Kirito knew most of them by sight if not by name, although there were a few unfamiliar faces—some of whom gave him very ugly looks as the group caught sight of theirs and approached.

"Relax, Kirito," Asuna said, sheathing her rapier and taking a few steps towards the other Undines.

"Give me a reason to," he said quietly, making no move to put away his weapon but holding it casually at his side.

"Looks like this area is bare too," Jahala said with a grimace as he and Asuna came within a few meters of each other.

"Still short on keys?" Asuna asked.

Jahala nodded, sparing a glance for Kirito without commenting on his presence. "We all just rendezvoused and compared inventories. I need one, and so do several others. I was hoping to find you and Yuuki so that we could stake out an area as a raid to get the last drops we need. The Salamanders have the next level down camped and I'd rather avoid conflicts with them."

"What's he doing here?" asked a man with a slightly nasal voice and hooded eyes, one of the Undines who'd been glaring at him ever since they showed up.

"Save it, Kuradeel," Jahala said, though his own expression wasn't a whole lot friendlier. "Obviously
Asuna and Yuuki felt it prudent to form a pickup group to speed up their farming."

"Kirito is our friend," Asuna said firmly, her posture daring either Jahala or Kirito to contradict her.

Yuuki stood at her side, nodding. "We don't have to have a reason to want to party with him."

"That being said," Jahala put in, "I'd like you to rejoin the clearing group now so that we can camp this area. We need to get everyone keyed for portal access so that we can move on. The Salamanders aren't far behind."

Kirito was inclined to take that as an opportunity to remove himself from the situation. Before he could, however, Asuna spoke up. "That's not quite fair, is it Jahala? We were here first, and Kirito still needs one more."

"Kirito's progression is his own affair," Jahala replied, holding out a hand to still the discontent from a few of his group members. "Your role as a member of this clearing group is yours."

"Yes, it is," Asuna said in clipped tones. "So don't make me rethink my business by asking me to do something unreasonable and rude. We were camping this area first. There's plenty of pops for you elsewhere. I'll meet you on the other side once we're all keyed." Kirito did not hear a question in anything Asuna said. She was laying out reality as she saw it.

Jahala did not seem to miss that nuance. His jaw set tightly for a few moments before relaxing. "Fine," he said, twirling his finger in the air to rally everyone to him. "I'd like to have a talk about this later, though."

Asuna's reply bordered on unhelpful, in Kirito's opinion. "You may not like what I have to say if you do."

Yuuki seemed to think so too. Once the other Undine clearers had marched off to find unclaimed mobs, she elbowed Asuna lightly in the ribs. "Wasn't that a little too much?"

"They need to get it through their heads, Yuuki," Asuna said, rubbing her side. "They're no better than the Salamanders when they act like that."

Kirito decided prudently not to point out the irony of criticizing someone for their prejudices against one race by making generalizations about another. He made an uncomfortable throat-clearing noise and sheathed his sword. "Don't you have a duty to help your clearing group, Asuna?"

She nodded, then met his eyes with hers. "But my duty to my friends comes first."

"Sallie griever!"

The slur was accompanied by a rapid motion in Tetsuo's peripheral vision that got his attention just as the rock connected with his head, producing a purple flash of light that briefly dazzled him. By the time his vision cleared, the assailant had disappeared into the alleyway from which they'd ambushed him.

Being in Everdark always made Tetsuo nervous. This was why.

It wasn't that he particularly feared for his life. Although the Imp home city hadn't been Salamander territory since that first month, the degree to which the Imps had become dependent on their Salamander neighbors during that time had led to an official state of alliance between the two
factions—an alliance which in practice functioned more as a relationship between vassal and patron. That alliance meant that Everdark was a Safe Zone for Tetsuo just as much as it was for the Imp who'd just harassed him. But it didn't make experiences like that any less unsettling.

There was no point to giving chase and trying to confront the culprit. The city was aptly named; there were no streetlights in Everdark, only a dim glow from the raw orelight embedded in the cavern ceiling a few dozen meters above. Tetsuo supposed that the Imp players who were intended to live here could see just fine; he had to strain his eyes to make out some of the signs, and the narrow alleys between the dark stone buildings could have held anything or anyone. And there were recurring rumors about Salamanders going mysteriously missing after visiting Everdark; Tetsuo suspected that if there was any truth to the rumors, the victims were being ambushed in the caves outside the Safe Zone.

It was no surprise that some Imps felt a need for vengeance after Kibaou's campaign of invasion, conquest and murder. The surprise, from where Tetsuo stood, was that the alliance had persisted at all. Officially, both factions had strict laws against inter-faction fighting and harassment. Unofficially, the power imbalance between the two meant that Salamanders could more or less freely bully Imps in Gattan, while Imps who bothered Salamanders were dealt with harshly in both home cities.

It wasn't right and it made Tetsuo deeply uncomfortable. But it was the world in which he lived.

Twice more he heard catcalls from the alleys; the second time drew the attention of a patrolling Imp watchman who raced off into the darkness, yelling. After that there were no more incidents, likely in part due to the increased density of patrols the closer he got to the entrance to the Grand Nexus where the Imp leadership lived and worked.

There were guards in front of the broad entrance to the network of tunnels and chambers of the Imp executive residence, but they uncrossed their halberds and stepped aside for Tetsuo as soon as they caught sight of the sigil on his armor that marked him as a member of a clearing group. It made Tetsuo feel a little guilty; he was no one of any real rank in the Salamander clearers and wasn't trying to use his status to his advantage—but he couldn't help their reaction, and it was nice to get a reaction that wasn't hostile after his trip through the city and the surrounding tunnels. He at least made a point of nodding to them as he passed.

The light level in the tunnels of the Grand Nexus was a bit better—not only because there was more light, but because the tunnels were more like hallways than the vast caverns in which the core of the city was built; there were no dark corners or huge rooms. Someone had thought to craft hooded lanterns to hang in the hallways, perhaps for the benefit of non-Imp visitors.

When he came to an intersection, he was greeted by a slender woman who seemed to be closer to Sasha's age than his own—although it was hard to tell, between her deep violet eyes and the way her curly black hair framed her face. She detached herself from the wall against which she'd been leaning and stepped into the middle of the hallway, blocking his way without being obvious about it. "Lost, or here for the tour?"

She was also fairly pretty. That didn't help; it introduced a significant delay into Tetsuo's reaction time, a time during which he couldn't do much except stutter. After a few moments of this he made a throat-clearing noise and tried to act like he knew what he was doing. "I'm here to see Lord Haydon. It's important."

"Important, is it?" It was hard to tell where the woman was looking; the combined hue of the orelight and lanterns turned the violet of them almost black, obscuring pupils that were already contracted in the brighter light. It made her gaze very unnerving, and she probably knew it as she openly looked him over. "Lord Haydon is already occupied with important matters. I'm his assistant, Kumiko, and..."
As uncomfortable as the automatic deference of so many Imps had been to him, the shift to Kumiko’s standoffishness and resistance gave Tetsuo a brief case of mental whiplash that almost derailed him as successfully as her appearance had. "I, um... I don't think you can really help with this."

Kumiko sighed and gave him an impatient look. "See, no offense, kid, but you might want to think about where you are and what you're doing. You're walking into the residence of a faction leader—and not even your own—expecting him to drop everything for whatever personal errand you're on. It doesn't work that way."

"What makes you think this is personal?" Tetsuo asked, trying to regain some momentum.

"Because I know who the leaders of your clearing groups are, and they're meeting with the leaders of our clearing groups right now. And people on official business make appointments."

There wasn't really anything Tetsuo could say to refute that—she had him nailed. "It's really important."

Kumiko folded her arms tightly, unmoved. "People who can't get straight to the point annoy me, and you are beginning to annoy me something fierce. Tell me what you're here for and I'll be the judge of how important it is."

Tetsuo did. Kumiko listened, although he couldn't have said whether she was actually listening or if she was just waiting for him to shut up so that she could send him away; the woman was impossible to read. When he was done, she stayed in place for a few beats, almost-statue-like. Then she turned around and made a curt beckoning gesture, walking away without looking back to see if he was following.

It was progress, and more than he thought he'd be making a minute prior. Tetsuo's armor rattled as he jogged to catch up. "So was that a yes?"

"That was 'your request is interesting and we will see what Lord Haydon thinks of it'. I suggest you be polite and keep your weapons in your inventory. You may be a Salamander, but don't forget that faction leaders have the power to banish specific individuals from their territory, regardless of who they are. Behave, or you may find yourself without the protection of the city Safe Zone."

It was the closest anyone had come to threatening him in a long time, and it was coming from an Imp. Tetsuo couldn't decide whether to be impressed by the woman's courage or offended at the threat, but while he was trying to decide, the implications of having to walk all the way back out of the city without the protection of the area code pushed fear to the front of the line.

Tetsuo had expected some kind of throne room like the one that existed in the palace in Gattan, or at least something more befitting the grandeur he expected of a faction leader. Instead, Kumiko led him eventually into a small, cozy room lit only by orelight that was dominated by a low rectangular table. Scores of scrolls and maps were laid out, and several Imps were seated cross legged in front of the table.

A fourth knelt on the opposite side and tapped at one of the maps with the tip of a long dagger as he spoke, and he had the rapt attention of the others. He was a short, older man with a tied-back mane of gray hair much like Tetsuo's clearing group leader—although in the Imp's case the shade of gray was a little darker.

"I told you, that's why Eugene's asked for more of our people for this one, in addition to the groups
already embedded with the Sal clearers. There's going to be a lot of adds, and we'll need at least one dedicated debuff group that can keep them locked down or disabled without killing them—every add you kill buffs the boss.

The three sitting across from the man who'd been speaking nodded thoughtfully. One of them, a broad-shouldered Imp with a spiky purple mohawk that made it difficult for Tetsuo not to stare at him, made a chopping noise at his throat and tilted his head in the direction of the doorway as Kumiko and Tetsuo entered. The older man looked up from the table and glanced at Kumiko with an unspoken question.

"Pardon the intrusion, milord," Kumiko said as she knelt and bowed. Tetsuo imitated her movements after a short delay. "This boy has an interesting question which I think you should hear."

"So he's not an emissary from the clearers?" said the man Tetsuo presumed to be Haydon. "I suppose Eugene would just send a message when he was ready to pull the trigger on this raid. Well, son?"

Tetsuo was growing tired of being talked down to because of his age, but reasoned this probably wasn't the best time to point that out. "I'm told that the leaders can see a list of all their faction members in their menu. Is that true?"

Haydon snorted loudly. "Be a bit hard to govern if we couldn't. Kumiko, I thought you said his question was interesting."

Tetsuo spoke quickly before the Imp leader could decide to dismiss him. "If I give you a name, can you tell me whether or not they were ever an Imp?"

"I can," Haydon confirmed after a few beats of silence, rotating his sitting position on the floor until he faced Tetsuo. "But I'd need a pretty good reason to give you information like that. Who is this person to you?"

"It's not a vendetta or anything," Tetsuo said. "He's a friend from my school computer club. He said he was going to be playing an Imp, but he never showed up after we all logged in and we haven't been able to find him."

Haydon and Kumiko looked at each other. The Imp leader turned to the three sitting across the table from him and made a flicking gesture with his fingers. "Go on, get back to the other group leaders and start rounding up volunteers for the groups Eugene needs. Make sure everyone's keyed for access. We were done here anyway." When the others had disappeared down the hallway, Haydon stood up and met Kumiko's eyes again; they both nodded.

"I suppose there's no harm you can do just knowing that someone is an Imp. What's the name?"

"Ducker," Tetsuo said, spelling out the English letters and then giving Haydon several possible alternate spellings. "He plays rogue types. Probably uses a dagger or a short sword. Kind of a prankster and a joker."

"Lovely." Haydon grumped as he made a gesture in the air, fingers dancing as if tracing shapes or letters in front of him. His eyes scanned back and forth. "Well, the list of players that start with the letter 'D' is pretty short. Are you sure that was the name?"

"Positive," Tetsuo said. "It's his nickname and he uses it in every game we play."

Haydon shrugged and made a very wide, expansive arm movement that Tetsuo guessed meant he was closing his menus. "Sorry, kid. Your friend's not an Imp."
Tetsuo didn't want to ask the next question, but it had to be done. He took a deep, halting breath before trying to get it out. "Is it... is it possible that he was..."

"Killed when your people invaded us?" Kumiko said frostily.

Tetsuo couldn't meet her eyes or Haydon's. "Or in some other way. Ducker was always kind of... hyper and reckless."

"Nope," Haydon said, drawing Tetsuo's attention back to him. "Even if he was dead, he'd still show up in the faction list—grayed out, just like someone in your friends list who dies." Tetsuo wondered briefly how Haydon knew the last bit, and decided he didn't want to ask or even know.

"So Ducker made a character in some other faction," Tetsuo said. It wasn't precisely bad news, but it didn't get him any closer to finding his friend either.

Haydon shrugged. "Or he chose another name. Or maybe he got lucky and didn't log in."

*Fat chance of that*, Tetsuo thought. He bowed in place once more. "Thanks. It's not what I was hoping to hear, but it's better than finding out he's..."

"Yeah," said Haydon, waving at the air. "Anything else you need? Long-lost girlfriend you want me to track down?"

Tetsuo didn't miss the dismissal behind Haydon's dry sarcasm. "I'm good," he said as he got back to his feet. "Thanks again, and sorry to bother you."

The experience left a bad taste in Tetsuo's mouth, and not just because it left him right back at square one as far as finding Ducker was concerned. It hadn't been the first time he'd visited Everdark, and it wasn't as if the complicated state of relations between the Imps and his own faction were a secret—or even surprising in any way.

But he'd never been treated with the kind of contempt and dismissal that Haydon and his assistant had shown for him—not to his face, anyway. To his face, Imps were always polite and respectful, even the ones in the clearing groups. The only open hostility came from anonymous harassers as he was passing through the city, and it was easy to dismiss them as criminals and cowards. This had been different, and it ate away at him on his way out of the city, occupying so much of his attention that he almost didn't notice the alert notifying him of a new message from his group leader.

「Wrap up your business and meet us outside Everdark. The Undines are preparing to hit the boss and we need to beat them there. Make sure you have all of the supplies and quest items you need. We depart for Arun at 1:00 PM.」

*Power*, Tetsuo realized as he checked the time and broke into a run, eyes straining to make out the contours of the dimly lit tunnels. *It's not about what's right, it all comes down to who has the power. The power imbalance between our factions means that we get to do what we want and the Imps have to suck it up—as crappy as that is, that's what the truth boils down to. But Haydon and Kumiko have enough power, personally, that they don't have to care about someone like me even though I'm a Salamander.*

The light was dim enough, and his own thoughts immersive enough, that he didn't notice the other player until he'd run headlong into him, sending both people sprawling to the ground with yells of indignation.

The response from the Imp was immediate and caustic. "Watch where the fuck you're going, monkey!"
Tetsuo's jaw fell open as he and the Imp both unsteadily got to their feet. It wasn't the first time an Imp had called him Saru; like Sallie it was a corruption of the Japanese pronunciation of Salamander, albeit a particularly nasty one given the meaning of the word in everyday Japanese. But as with the frosty treatment from Haydon and Kumiko, it was the first time anyone had ever said it to his face. If any Imp dared call a Salamander that in or around Gattan... Tetsuo hadn't seen it happen, but he could imagine what the reaction of Corvatz or one of the other hard-line clearers would be.

"What's wrong, monkey, Cai't Sith got your tongue? Apologize!" The Imp was taller than Tetsuo and more solidly built, and while that didn't necessarily directly relate to power, there was ample strength behind the shove that drove Tetsuo back against the wall of the corridor.

Tetsuo would've been inclined to apologize—it had been his fault for running without paying attention—if not for the way the Imp was escalating the situation and insulting him. He shoved right back, and had the pleasure of seeing the Imp's eyes widen a little at the force produced by his own STR stat. Tetsuo had never been a particularly athletic boy in real life, so it was nice to have the strength to stand up for himself in a world where the only things that mattered were his character's—no, his—stats.

"It was an accident," he said, hand dropping to the grip of his weapon out of wariness. "I wasn't trying to start a fight or anything."

"That's too bad," came another voice from behind him. "Because you've got one now." The words were accompanied by a sharp blow to the back of the head which sent him back to the ground, and Tetsuo was horrified to see some of his HP drop. He hadn't realized that he'd left the city limits of Everdark... and that put the situation in a very different light. A very deadly one.

A hand grabbed the collar of his armor at the back of the neck, lifting him up and then smashing his face down into the dirt. He squirmed and kicked out blindly, satisfied by the yelp and the solid feeling of connecting with one of his attackers, and used the opening to scramble to his feet and break into a run.

It was a short-lived victory. He was running as fast as his feet would carry him, and even with the superhuman speed of his fae avatar he was still shocked to hear the sound of Imp wings behind him, gaining on him. He dove to the ground and rolled just as one of them swooped past him and took a swing with his sword. He heard chanting, something complex and unfamiliar, and as soon as his roll came to a resting point he felt the cold impact of spell energy wash over him. All of his joints seemed to relax, a sense of profound weakness filling him, and while he crumpled to the ground he noticed the Paralysis status effect icon in his HUD. He could barely move his fingers, let alone defend himself.

"That's right, monkey, forgot who can fly in here and who can't? Not so big without your army behind you, are you?" The two Imps stood over him, weapons drawn, and terror warred with anger for control of him.

"You made one mistake too many, monkey," said the one he'd run into as he raised his sword. "You shouldn't have come here alone."

"He didn't."

The two Imps whirled at the sound of the third voice—but not in time. There was a brilliant blue glow and a sound like a traffic accident, and one of the attackers went flying back against the wall, very nearly embedding himself in it from the force of the blow. His face wore a look of stunned disbelief as he slid down the wall, jaw hanging slack. The one with the sword staggered back and
tried to initiate a weapon technique, but before he could get into the opening stance the other Salamander drove him back with a viciously quick series of single strikes until the Imp's sword went spinning away from a hand that was missing several fingers.

Tetsuo didn't think he'd ever been happier to see his group leader than he was at that moment—or happier to see a status effect wear off. While strength slowly began to return to Tetsuo's avatar, the older man drove the edge of his shield up under the disarmed Imp's chin and pinned him against the wall, leaning in. "All I would have to do is push," he said calmly, as if discussing objectives in a minor side quest. "You're fortunate that I have no desire to create drama between your faction leader and my own. Assault a member of my group again and I will show no further restraint."

Getting back to his feet, Tetsuo readjusted some of his armor and dusted himself off. "You're not going to—?"

He shook his head, pulled the shield back just a little and allowed the Imp to drop to the floor. The beaten man clutched his throat with his maimed hand and coughed as he tried to stand, glaring at the two Salamanders.

"Now that it is no longer an issue of self-defense, it would be a violation of treaty. Moreover, it would reflect poorly on us as clearers at a time when we must have unity with the Imps for facing the upcoming boss." The other Salamander clearer's sword lashed out, point stopping bare centimeters from the Imp's face. "But do not push your luck. Begone."

The Imps complied with alacrity, one supporting the other as they fled down the dim hallway as quickly as they could. Tetsuo shook his head to clear the last of the lingering after-effects from the debuff. "Thanks, Heathcliff. That fight was actually my fault, I was running to catch up with you and wasn't looking where I was going."

Heathcliff nodded, sheathing his sword and slinging his shield onto his back. "I take care of my group members," he said. "We need to get moving if we're going to catch up with the others."

Despite the admonition, Tetsuo couldn't help but ask one more question. "What if there was no treaty? What if we didn't have to worry about making the Imp leadership happy? Would you still have let them go?"

As they jogged towards the first sign of sunlight at the end of the corridor, the silver-haired Salamander clearing group leader gave Tetsuo an odd, penetrating look. It was a look he'd seen before, and as much as Tetsuo trusted Heathcliff from all the battles they'd fought together, it was a look that never failed to unnerve him. It was as if the man was looking through him rather than at him.

"Have you ever taken a life in this world, Tetsuo?"

He shook his head. "I've never had to. I wasn't part of Kibaou's invasion force. I've fought other players, we all have, but even before the treaty someone always retreated before it came to a killing blow." He hesitated, and then said, "have you?"

Heathcliff nodded thoughtfully, returning his attention to where he was going. There was a span of time where the only sound was the rhythmic drum of their boots on the ground, and Tetsuo had already decided that was the only answer he was going to get when his group leader spoke again.

"More than you will ever know," Heathcliff said finally after they broke out into the open, his gaze refocusing on Tetsuo in that unnerving way. "But not without first giving them a chance to live."
Argo wasn't sure why she'd bothered to ask Kirito where he was. Although he was set as «Unfindable» even to his friends, she had other ways of tracking his whereabouts at the moment. What's more, he almost certainly knew that—or could at least guess at it.

But she knew she'd never explicitly told him before that she could track the locations of all of her pets on her map, and that wasn't information she wanted to give out for free—not even to Kirito. Not without cause.

*A polite fiction,* she told herself. *I'm giving him the illusion of privacy—something he probably knows he doesn't have right now.*

She found him deep within the suburbs of Arun, in a heavily-forested area that might almost be taken for wilderness—if not for the cobblestone roads that thinly criss-crossed it at haphazard angles, or the occasional smell of woodsmoke long before catching sight of buildings nestled into a clearing here and there. These areas were far from the World Tree, although still beneath its branches—and far from the warpgate that led to the higher levels of Yggdrasil with active gateways.

The inconvenient location made the player population fairly thin; clearers wanted to be closer to the action and merchants wanted to be where the clearers were. Here in the forest, most of the people Argo saw had the white cursor of an NPC. It was a great place to meet in private, but it bored her beyond the telling of it. There was *no one* to listen to besides quest NPCs, and they didn't have much to say that she hadn't already memorized.

Argo heard the river before it came into view, a narrow channel with slow, gentle waters cutting a meandering line through the forest. The road leaned to the west to cross over it, cobblestone giving way to the wooden planks of a bridge with open sides and a steeply slanted thatch roof. Kirito sat in a patch of shade on the edge of the bridge, facing away from her.

There was a fishing pole in his hands.

Argo stopped where she was, a few paces behind him. One of her ears twitched. A moment later she resumed walking, and dropped herself down into a sitting position beside him, legs alternately swinging as they dangled off the edge. Her attention was drawn to the fishing line where it disappeared into the water as she reached over to Kirito, palm held up. Something seemed off.

Wordlessly, Kirito took his nearest hand off the grip of the fishing rod and reached over as if to take Argo's hand. His stopped just short of hers, however, and with a muffled sound of rustling fabric, a shape rippled down his arm beneath the sleeve of his overcoat. A tiny pair of eyes shone briefly out of the shadow of the cuff, and then a tiny mouse with a green cursor leapt across the intervening centimeters and scampered up to Argo's shoulder.

"Thanks for that, Ki-bou."

Kirito nodded. "You were paying me. I've had worse fetch quests than 'carry small animal from point A to point B.'" He turned slightly to look at her. "So what's Skarrip up to?"

Argo momentarily froze, then relaxed. "Who said anything about Skarrip?"

Kirito gave her the kind of knowing smile he used when he was sure he'd been incredibly clever about something. "You asked me to bring a message to one of your contacts in Sylvain. That message didn't say anything about the pet you wanted to hitch a ride back with me."

Argo was pretty certain Kirito had figured out what she was doing. What's more, he had to know
that she knew. But she wasn't going to make it easy, so she stared blankly back at him. "And?"

"So the message was a pretense," Kirito said. "You know that Spriggans are only allowed in Sylvain if they're licensed couriers on a job. And you had to know that sending me would attract attention even for a simple message delivery."

"I'm not getting where you're going with this," Argo lied.

"I'm not dumb, Argo. If you want to pretend you are, go right ahead. I think you knew that if you sent me to deliver a message, anyone prying into what I was doing there would be focusing their attention on finding out who I was there to see and what the message was. Not on the spy you had me pick up."

"A little louder, Ki-bou," Argo said irritably. "I don't think they heard you in Gattan."

After a moment, Kirito sighed and looked back at the fishing line. "I don't mind the job, and I don't mind the pay," he said once the silence dragged on. "But I'd like some warning if I'm being used as a catspaw." Then he made a face, and glanced down at Argo's hands. "So to speak."

Argo sometimes wondered if whatever system ran ALO's dynamic content listened in on player conversations, waiting for someone to make a cat joke to a Cait Sith player. It was the only explanation she could think of for why she couldn't stop her ears or tail from doing something blatantly catlike whenever it happened. She put an effort of will into forcing her tail to stop thrashing, and gestured towards the fishing pole. "When did you pick up the «Fishing» skill?"

"You're dodging."

"So are you. Since when can clearers afford to waste a slot on a crafting skill? Just how much time have you dumped into leveling this up?"

Kirito's eyes met hers, and Argo realized she knew exactly what he was going to say just before he did it. "You tell me your story, and I'll tell you mine."

Argo weighed her options, deciding which information was pertinent and which wasn't, and how much glossing of details she could afford to do and still give him something of equal worth to the story of Kirito—a well-known Spriggan clearer, the representative from the treaty summit—leveling up his Fishing. "Deal. Spill."

"Oh no," Kirito said, reeling the line back in and standing up in order to give himself room to cast. "I asked you first."

For most people, Argo insisted on payment up front, regardless of who asked first. But she knew Kirito would abide by any deal they made, and when prodded sufficiently he could tell a good story.

"Remember when I approached you about that whole thing with who gets the Last Attack on the end boss?"

Kirito nodded. "What about it?"

"The Sylphs are one of the clearing groups I don't have completely on board yet. I need to know what Sakuya, Sigurd and Skarrip are saying to each other about it."

When Kirito realized Argo wasn't going to give any more without having it pried out of her, he tilted his head towards her with raised eyebrows. "And?"
Argo sighed, kicking her legs again. "And I'm worried about Skarrip. This goes beyond just the larper stuff. The guy says and does some weird shit. I mean like, 'elevator not going all the way to the top' shit."

"So you're saying he's crazy?"

"Big ol' bag of roasted chestnuts. But high-functioning. This is a guy who knows just how off the deep end he is, and he's decided he's really okay with it as long as he gets to keep playing his role. But you know what the weird thing is?"

There was only one correct response to that rhetorical question. "What?"

Argo leaned her head to the side, nudging the mouse on her shoulder. It slipped inside the hood of her cloak and disappeared into her clothing. "I'm pretty sure he knew this pet was there the whole time, every time I checked in on him. Like once or twice I think he actually turned and looked right at it. But it didn't stop him from going on, as if he didn't care that he had an audience."

"Why didn't you just abandon the pet then?" Kirito asked. "I don't know much about Beast Taming, but I know you can release a pet. It's not like there was any way to trace it back to anyone, even if he had the skills for it."

"No, you don't know much about Beast Taming, Ki-bou," Argo replied with a snort. "But this much you could get from the manual: the longer we have a pet, and the more we do for it and interact with it, the more Rapport we build with it. I have a lot of time invested in this little guy." Then she gave Kirito a smug look. "Alright, I told you mine, and I gave you a primer on Noob Pet Mechanics 101 as a freebie. So why'd you pick up the Fishing skill, and how high have you gotten it?"

Kirito smiled again as he looked back at the water. "I didn't."

Argo's own smile disappeared. "What?"

"I don't have Fishing."

Argo stared at him, down at the fishing pole, and down to the slow-moving water and the line that trailed into it. "Then… why…?"

Kirito stood up and looked at the rod in his hands as if seeing it for the first time, and shrugged, letting it drop into the water with a splash. "I picked that up at the item shop while I was waiting for you. I needed something to do, and I was curious what it was like."

"Needed… something…"

"Something to do," Kirito said, dusting his hands together and crouching down to gaze at the cloudy surface of the river a few meters below. "I put bait on the pole, but I couldn't seem to get a bite."

"That," Argo said after a very long moment in which she was sorely tempted to push Kirito off the side of the bridge, "was probably because you didn't have the Fishing skill."

"I figured," Kirito said. "But you should've seen the look on your—"

It was a short drop to the water, and Kirito wasn't expecting to need to use his wings. Even under torture, Argo would have sworn up and down that bumping him was a complete accident.

He'd kept his end of the bargain to the letter, and Argo couldn't really let herself be too annoyed at him, considering that it had been her own assumptions that had tripped her up. But even so, the tip
that he'd given her as a peace offering before heading back to the World Tree was a fairly juicy one, and Argo decided it was worth delaying her return to Freelia in order to follow up on it—the trip to the west end of Arun wasn't that far out of her way.

The church she sought was mid-sized and designed in the same vaguely Scandinavian style as so many other special buildings in Arun: steeply slanted roofs and timber frames, the former to better shed the weight of snow during the colder seasons and runoff during the thaws. Argo circled it once from the air, expecting to see children playing outside; there were none. Nonetheless, she had directed customers here before and was certain she had the right church, and once she'd touched down just inside the front gate she didn't even hesitate before pushing open the heavy oak door.

Most players in Arun had at least heard of the orphanage. Argo had been the one to tip off Kirito about Sasha's hobby of collecting incantations in the first place, and he hadn't been the first person to whom she'd sold that tip. But if what he'd told her in return was true, she was clearly missing more than half the story.

That just wouldn't do.

The sound of a woman's voice drew her from the foyer through a short hallway which looped around the south corner of the church in a steeply ascending stairway. This opened up on what seemed to be a spacious attic with linteled windows on either side, the vaulted ceilings reflecting the steep roof that covered them. A little over twenty children were arrayed in a semicircle several rows deep, and a young Sylph girl of perhaps ten or eleven stood to one side facing an older woman opposite her.

"Is it really okay, Miss Sasha?"

The woman smiled at the girl's words, and gave her an encouraging nod. "You're right to be hesitant to cast against another person, Jellica, but it's okay—you can't hurt me here. Just use the Magnitude 1 version of the Wind Blast spell you've been practicing. It's the one that starts with futto kachikke."

The girl still looked apprehensive, but after a moment she bit her lip and moved a hand in the air; Argo guessed that she was opening her menu and looking at her spellbook. She gave a jerky sweep of the hand as she looked up at her teacher, and held up her other hand with the first two fingers aimed directly at Sasha.

Argo leaned against the railing at the top of the stairway to watch quietly. The girl stammered the first time she tried to cast the spell, fumbling it and losing a little bit of MP; with the second time she squeezed her eyes shut and managed it. A burst of green-tinged wind surged from her fingertips and shot towards Sasha.

As Jellica's incantation neared its successful end, Sasha held out a hand palm-forward and rapidly uttered her own spell. "Zukke tamzul dweren!" Water spiraled out from her palm, manifesting as a translucent disc-shaped shield in front of her. The wind spell struck a moment later, shattering the shield into motes of light and staggering Sasha back about a meter.

The Sylph girl was wide-eyed at this outcome, on the verge of distraught. "Miss Sasha, I'm sorry! Are you okay?"

Regaining her balance, Sasha immediately smiled and waved her hand at the girl. "I'm fine—I told you beforehand, it will get through the shield but it won't hurt me; we're in a safe zone."

"I know that, but still…"
"It's okay," Sasha insisted. "This is part of the lesson. Do you know why my shield didn't stop your spell?"

One of the boys in the front row raised his hand. Sasha shook her head at him and looked back at the girl who'd cast the attack spell, whose brow was furrowed in thought.

After a few more moments, Sasha prodded. "Was there perhaps a phrase in my incantation that you didn't hear?"

The girl's lips moved silently. "You um… I heard the word for the shield."

"Tanzul," Sasha said, nodding and tucking behind her ear a stray lock of hair that had come free when the spell hit. "What else?"

"You said, um… zukke. Wouldn't it have been zutto?"

"It would have been if I'd included a magnitude phrase. But I didn't, did I? So what does that make the spell?"

A very young Salamander boy from the front row spoke up. "A noob spell!"

Argo's loud snickers joined those of the rest of the class, finally drawing Sasha's attention from across the room. The woman looked her up and down, then made a beckoning motion and called out. "I'll be done with this lesson in just a minute, young lady. You're welcome to come sit down with the others and watch in the meantime."

*This woman has absolutely no idea who I am*, Argo thought as she fought off the urge to laugh, rounding the corner at the top of the stairway and dropping into a cross-legged position next to one of the other kids. Who was she to argue with free information?

Returning her attention to the class, Sasha resumed her lesson. "What Genji was trying to say was that the omission of the magnitude phrase made that a Base Magnitude spell—often called a starting or beginner spell. Jellica, what magnitude was the wind spell you cast?"

"One?"

"And what do you think that says about what happened when I used my shield?"

To the girl's credit, it didn't take her more than a moment to work this out. "My spell got through 'cause it was higher level than your shield?"

"Not higher level, exactly… higher magnitude. The «Defensive Shield» effect can absorb spell energy equal to its own magnitude before it breaks. If you'd been casting a Base Magnitude attack spell, my shield would have absorbed it and then broken without any getting through. If you hear someone casting a spell at you, take a moment to listen for the magnitude phrase. Make sure you cast a shield strong enough to block it."

"Why not just use your strongest shield?" This question came from a Gnome boy sitting near Argo.

Sasha answered his question with another. "What have we learned about cooldowns?"

The boy's answer was prompt; Argo suspected that had been a well-rehearsed subject. "Higher magnitudes make the cooldown longer for that kind of spell."

"For that effect," Sasha said, correcting him slightly. Looking back over the class, she resumed using
what Argo decided to categorize as her "lecture" voice. "When you use an effect, it puts that effect on cooldown for that magnitude and all below it. So if you always used, let's say, your M4 shield, magnitudes base through 4 would be on cooldown for that spell—and because the length of the cooldown increases with the magnitude, they would all be unavailable for longer. There's no need to do that if someone is only using an M2 spell."

Clapping her hands once, Sasha made a gesture that drew all of the kids to their feet; Argo followed suit after a moment's delay. "Now then, let's divide up into pairs. All of you have at least one school of magic at 200 or above. I want you to take turns casting your Direct Damage attack spell at your partner, who will use their Defensive Shield. Cast slowly at first, and don't tell your partner what magnitude you're using until after you've both cast. The defender should listen and try to match the magnitude of their shield to the magnitude of the attacking spell."

Argo made a point of not partnering up with anyone; she was the odd person out anyway. Once the exercise was under way, the schoolteacher took the bait and approached her. "Thank you for waiting. I'm Sasha—can I help you?"

"Probably," Argo said cheerfully. "What's this I hear about you cracking the code for how the magic system works?"

Sasha's smile didn't disappear, but Argo could tell she was suddenly making an effort to maintain it. "I'm sorry, young lady, but do I know you from somewhere?"

Argo shrugged, ears flicking around in different directions as the children around her continued with their exercises. "Not directly, but I'd be surprised if you hadn't heard of me. Name's Argo. I've sent more than a few people your way because of your little spell-collecting hobby." She grinned. "You're welcome. I talked to someone recently who said you'd put a whole lotta time into researching the language of magic and figuring out how it works, and that you can make your own spells."

"That's true, and… wait." Sasha stopped suddenly in mid-sentence, giving Argo a more critical look. "I've heard that name before. You're the information merchant. You told Kirito and Silica to come to me. Why are you here?"

Briefly, Argo wondered what had happened to make this woman so wary of her. Kirito certainly hadn't suggested that his business with Sasha had been anything but satisfactory. She took a good look around the room to give herself time to think of how to adjust her approach, openly admiring the work of the students. This Sasha was obviously not just playing at being a teacher—she was a teacher, and Argo would've bet any amount of Yuld that she'd been one back in the real world. She clearly loved what she was doing.

And if there was one truth that had always been a constant through Argo's school years, it was this: teachers with a passion for their work were easy to manipulate.

"I was really impressed by what Kirito said about your work with the language of magic. Words are kinda my thing, I'm good at languages, and I love a good puzzle. So when I heard that you'd actually learned the language and become fluent in it… well…" She gave Sasha her best smile and shuffled her feet a little, knowing that her youth and Cait Sith features would probably enhance her performance to good effect. "I had to come see for myself, see what I could learn."

*Pin pon*, Argo thought triumphantly as she watched the expression on Sasha's face change. "Well isn't that nice? You're welcome to join our class, you know. In which elements are you proficient?"

The answer to that was "none"—her skills were largely devoted to melee combat, beast taming and
stealth—but that wasn't something Argo was about to admit at any price. Instead, she countered with a proposal of her own, hoping it would moot or evade the question. "Actually, I was kinda hoping we could make a deal. I know a whole lotta spells—I mean, I've memorized the words to them. Hundreds. I'm real good at that. And I'm willing to tell you all of 'em. I'd bet there's some in there that you haven't heard before."

"And?" Sasha inquired. A little bit of the wariness returned to her face, but she couldn't conceal the hunger that vied for expression. "A deal implies some sort of exchange of value. What do you want from me that would be worth what you're offering?"

"Your notes," Argo said. "I want to read your notes about this language—vocabulary, grammar, the works. All the stuff you wrote while you were figuring it out. You can keep them. I just want to read them—they won't even leave this building."

Sasha's look of wariness evolved into mild disbelief. "That's all? You just want to read my working notes? Not even study them—just read them?"

Argo smiled again, face dimpling. "Don't worry, I can remember stuff. We got a deal?"

Sasha hesitated once more, eyes making a practiced circuit of the room; Argo presumed she was looking for students who needed help. Sighing, she made a graceful motion in the air to open her menu. "Why do I get the distinct feeling that I'm making a mistake by doing this?"

"Because you're a teacher, and I'm a kid," Argo replied without missing a beat. "It's kinda your job to suspect shenanigans. In this case, though, I just wanna learn—and unless I misunderstood what's going on here, that's your job too. I got stuff you wanna know, and in exchange you lose… nothing. Win-win. So we got a deal?"

At first, Argo wasn't sure she was going to get a quick answer. Sasha looked at her, almost past her, eyes searching for deception. Hiding feelings and micro-expressions from being animated by the emotion simulation system ranged from difficult to impossible; Argo had a lot of practice keeping a straight face, but this time—as usual—it was so much better that everything she'd said happened to be true.

After a minute of this, Sasha turned to the class and clapped her hands for attention. "Excellent work, all of you. Let's break for lunch; we'll resume the lesson at twelve-thirty and review your progress." Then she faced Argo again, and this time the look on her face was decisive.

"Deal."
"The expiration of a Remain Light can be averted through the use of resurrection spells and rare items, but even this lesser death is not without consequence. When a player reaches zero HP, they immediately suffer the loss of 10% of the accrued EXP towards their next level, as well as 10% of the points earned in all equipped skills. At low levels, this is not an especially onerous penalty. But at higher levels, when both skills and EXP accumulate far more slowly, a single death can mean the loss of weeks or even months of grinding..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Death Penalty»

4 May 2023
Day 180

People who didn't know Klein very well often assumed that he wasn't very smart. True, he could be dense, especially where women were concerned—but that just meant that he was sometimes slow to pick up on signals that others found more obvious. He was perfectly capable of what he considered to be strokes of genius and insight, they just sometimes took a while—and the last six months in Alfheim had been something of a crash course in adapting to and surviving unfamiliar new situations.

So it was really no surprise to Klein that he found himself reflecting on the wisdom of letting Eugene hire his group as advance scouts for a boss battle—after all, nothing good had ever come of getting mixed up with the Salamander clearing groups. He just wished that the epiphany hadn't come while he and his friends were fleeing for their lives from a gateway boss labeled with the torturously unpronounceable name of «Hrungnir». And that distracting train of thought ended just in time for him to narrowly avoid becoming one with the floor under his feet; he threw himself to the side as a fist like a boulder cratered the herringbone-patterned tiles of the floor, spalled bits of stone and ceramic peppering him with a stinging sensation that the system didn't seem to consider painful enough to suppress.

"Dynamm, Harry, break left!" Coming quickly back to his feet and putting on a burst of speed to avoid the follow-up slash from a shimmering axe blade, he saved himself the time of ordering the other three to break right—the implication was clear, given the wedge-shaped monolith looming before them to let them know what their options were. Klein went left, leaping into the air to avoid the blast radius as an explosion of fire struck the ground just behind them, his natural resistances tempering the damage and leaving him mostly unscathed by the near-miss.

The maneuver worked much like the switch tactic; by splitting his group into two equal parts, Klein had forced the mob to pause for a moment while it prioritized targets and decided which direction to pursue, resetting its attack patterns. It gave them extra meters of space they hadn't had before—possibly enough to get to the entrance or pull the boss beyond its tether radius. Assuming it had one, that is; it had chased them well beyond the chamber in which they'd found it.

The moment's pause seemed far too short; with a grinding snarl, the massive four-armed Jotunn pulled its fist from the ground and lumbered into pursuit of Klein's trio of players. He didn't dare take the time to turn his head to look, but he could feel the ground shuddering beneath his feet as he put on every last bit of speed he could muster, the pounding footsteps growing closer while his group dodged around stone columns to break the mob's line of sight. He could see the imposing double doors where they'd come in, beckoning like sanctuary. "Come on, you piece of crap, tether already!"

It didn't, and Klein could've sworn that the suggestion or the way it was phrased had grossly
offended it. A mighty stone-clad fist pounded the ground again mere meters behind him, sending him sprawling into another breakfall roll across the floor. Harry grabbed his arm as he scrambled back to his feet, and Klein saw several wide-eyed Salamanders holding the entrance doors open as his other friends frantically waved him across the home stretch. He heard the air behind him parting grudgingly once more before the giant's weapon, and put everything he had into one desperate lunge.

Only once he'd thrown himself through the door did Klein allow himself to look back. He could see the boss crouching a few dozen meters inside with a tracer of translucent green fading from the air through which its axe had just cut, space that moments before had been home to Klein's head. It gazed at them with what Klein took for rage or a good attempt at faking it; the doorway was too small for it to fit through despite being thrice the height of even Eugene, and it didn't seem inclined to use its ranged attacks on targets it couldn't pursue. Several mages standing outside unloaded spells at it as soon as they had a clear line of sight, most of them crying out as they found their magic reflected back at them with a flash of yellow from the energy field surrounding the boss, an AOE fireball going off in the midst of their group and scattering them like sticks.

"Stop casting!" Klein yelled from the ground.

Eugene, the Salamander in command of the raid force, seemed to have the same idea—but his gravelly bellows and the demonstrated consequences of such stupidity were a lot more effective at gaining compliance than Klein's hasty warning. Before the other Salamander clearers got the doors closed, Klein caught a glimpse of the boss as it turned and slowly disappeared down the hallway without looking back, each footstep vibrating the ground just a little less than the last.

The silence that settled after the giant's footsteps could no longer be heard was broken only by a handful of murmurs amongst the groups of Salamander and Imp clearers, and by the curt sound of leather brushing metal as Klein got back to his feet and swept his hands over his armor to shed some of the dirt. He looked up as a large torchlight shadow fell over him.

"I think that little show oughta save us the first round of questions, Eugene," Klein said, tilting his head to one side and then the other in a vain attempt to crack his neck—something that ALO avatars didn't seem capable of doing, and that he habitually kept trying to do anyway. "You saw the thing. Name's Furunguniiru, or however the hell you're supposed to pronounce that Norse stuff. He's sitting in a cozy little chamber a ways in; the hallway winds a bit before you get to him. He's easily as big as the Jotunn Lord my guys and I fought in the Valley of Giants. Except this one's got four arms, no gear, and a worse attitude. And nothing we did scratched it—even spells just got reflected back." He grimaced. "You probably noticed."

"You certainly succeeded in getting its attention," remarked a petite Imp woman with curly black hair who stood with a dozen others of her kind, regarding him and his mixed-raced group with open curiosity.

"If by that you mean, we aggroed the hell out of it, then yeah, lady, you're right on the money."

"I've never seen a boss chase a scouting party that far before," Eugene mused, folding his thick arms across the breastplate of his armor. "It didn't even act like it had tethered—just like it decided that it couldn't get at us here."

Something similar had occurred to Klein, and he didn't like the sound of it one bit. It sounded far too much like thinking, and he preferred that the things he had to kill did nothing of the sort, or at least as little of it as possible.

"We've been seeing more advanced behavior from mobs as we get deeper into Yggdrasil," remarked a silver-haired Salamander clearer whom Klein had seen before but never spoken with or heard
named. The man's voice was crisp and smooth, every word precise. "I think it would be wise not to assume that we know how a mob is going to behave just because it resembles a known base type."

Eugene nodded. "I think that's a sound approach no matter what, Heathcliff. I want to hear more from Klein and his group, though. Tell me about its attacks."

"Well, you saw it had four arms," Klein said, liking this boss fight less every time someone opened their mouth. "Each seems to do something different. Lower-left arm tosses fireballs—and they're fast. Faster than a player projectile, and no incantation to warn you it's coming. Small splash radius but plenty of oomph. The upper-left has some kind of wispy transparent axe that's hard to see and is longer than it looks; that's its primary melee attack. The lower right is empty-handed but gets used for grappling and melee—that's the one it pounds the ground with. Upper right is empty-handed too, but I didn't see it attack with it."

Eugene received and digested this information in patient silence. "So the only ranged attack you saw was fire. That's good news for us. Did you learn anything else that could help? Any idea why spells are getting reflected?"

"I think there's some kind of magic shield around the boss," Klein said after a moment, looking back at the doors leading into the boss room as if half-expecting the giant to come bursting through them. "Whenever we struck it, it would flash real bright for a moment. Any physical attack just got an «Immortal Object» pop-up. And you saw what happened when your guys lit into it with spells."

Eugene gave several of the mages in his clearers a pointed look. "And this is why we wait for the scouting data, people. I'm glad you're so enthusiastic, but let's not go off half-assed. Some of you are goddamned lucky we've got solid fire resistances."

"You forgot something, Klein," Dale said once Eugene's little tirade was finished. In response to Klein's raised eyebrows, his oversized Gnome friend elaborated. "Before we hauled ass out of there, I tried hitting it with a Stumble spell to give us some time. You know how the shield around the boss briefly flashed yellow every time the rest of you cast at it? Nobody else was casting right then, and when my Stumble spell hit, the shield flashed green instead. And my spell wasn't reflected. But he sure as shit came after me then."

"There's a puzzle here," Eugene said immediately. Klein wasn't the only person nodding at his words. "A sequence of some kind. Hit it with the right spell at the right time and you… I'm betting that's how we get through the shield."

"So what's with the colors?" asked another of the Salamander clearer leads.

"Yellow was a failure, green a success," Eugene said. "Were there any other colors? Any different reactions from the boss or the shield?"

He looked at his friends one at a time before answering; they all shook their heads. "That was all we saw. Physical attacks got the pop-up message. Everyone's spells except Dale's got reflected with a yellow flash and made you sorry you cast. Dale's got eaten with a green flash but didn't reflect. Nothing did jack for damage or had any noticeable effect."

Eugene turned and looked at his senior clearers. "Thoughts?"

"It's definitely a sequence puzzle," said the Imp woman who'd spoken before. "We've been seeing a few of these here and there as we progress—where you have to hit a key crystal or something with a specific element. That's blocked us a few times until we found someone who had the right school of magic."
"I think you're on to something there, Kumiko." One of the unnamed Salamander clearers chewed at his lip and narrowed his eyes in thought before going on. "Every element has a color. It's the color of the spell effects for that element, and it's usually the color of the flight trail for the race linked to that element."

"Earth is yellow," Dale said, that being the element with which his own race had an affinity. "But that's the color it flashed every time we hit it with the wrong thing."

"No," said Eugene with a snap of the fingers. "That's the color it flashed to let you know what the right element was."

"But obviously just hitting it with the one Earth spell wasn't enough this time," Heathcliff pointed out. "Think it through. What's the next step?"

Klein was starting to get his head around the strategy for this battle, and it filled him with an aggressive desire to be somewhere else, doing something else. Anything else. But he'd been hired to take his group and scout this battle, and that meant giving a full debrief. And the more the raid group could figure out before giving battle, the less likely anyone was to die in the process.

"When we hit it with anything that wasn't Earth," Klein said slowly, "it flashed yellow to tell us what we should be using. Then it flashed green when Dale hit it with Earth. So is the green like a green traffic signal, telling you you got it right?"

"No," said one of the Salamander mages, one who hadn't joined in on the wild flurry of attacks a few minutes prior. There was nothing but confidence in his voice. "Green is the color of Wind. It's telling us the next element in the sequence." Dynamm, the lone Sylph present and the recipient of more than a few unfriendly looks from the Salamander raid, nodded along. Now that the mage had pointed it out, Klein was surprised it had taken even that long—after all, it wasn't as if the veteran Salamanders had any shortage of exposure to Sylph magic in combat. But then, Klein hadn't figured it out either, and he fought alongside Dynamm every day.

Eugene seemed to have similar experience with that magic, and knew a breakthrough when he heard one. His head whipped around, and he smacked a fist into his open hand with a solid metallic sound. "That's got to be it, Pyrin. I know you've got Wind—how many others?" Two hands went up; a boy in light plate armor standing next to Heathcliff and another of the mages. Eugene's lips twisted. "Bunch of slackers."

"Be fair, Eugene," protested the named mage who'd pointed out the significance of the color. "We've only got so many skill slots, and with the Imps handling most of the debuffs, we don't usually need more than one or two people with Wind."

"Let me know when this game becomes fair," Eugene growled, turning to address Pyrin. "You're not wrong, but after this raid I think we're going to sit down and review the skill balance in our mage groups. I may have one or two of you clear up a slot for lesser-used elements."

"That'll mean losing progress in whatever element one of us swaps out," Pyrin replied, dragging open his menu and making vertical motions with one finger as if scrolling through a list. "We'll adapt, but just remember that unequipped skills decay when you don't use 'em for long."

Eugene glanced sidewise at Klein and his group. "We'll table this for later. Any more observations your guild wants to add?"

Klein made a brief circuit of his friends with his eyes; when no one spoke up after a moment, he shook his head. "Nah. Just… be careful with this one, man. It wanted us, bad. And the mechanics
are new, uncertain, and full of suck."

Eugene snorted. "We'll learn the mechanics, and we've got a solid group of clearers here that can handle anything. But thanks." He drew open his menu and manifested a small bag in his hand; Klein accepted the payment with a nod. "Good scouting work, but it's time for you to go now—we'll take it from here." And so saying, he turned back to the clearers and loudly clapped his gauntleted hands above his head. "Okay, listen up! MT group on me, OT 1 and OT 2 flanking, mage and DPS groups in reverse chevron formation behind, loose columns with melee on the outside and ranged taking up the rear—"

"Ranged always takes it up the rear!" The catcall came from near the back of the raid, and the nervous laughter that ensued caused Eugene to stare broadswords in the presumed direction of the heckler before continuing.

"Tank groups will form a rotating bulwark—buy us time to experiment. Mage groups prepare defensive buffs, but *cast nothing else*. I want *no attacks* except on my word—no debuffs, no DPS, *nothing* hits that boss until I call for it. All melee groups, until I call for DPS use weapon techniques to parry only—nothing that inflicts status. Pyrin, I want you to shuffle two of your mage groups so that all schools of magic are represented at least once in each group..."

Klein couldn't bring himself to be unhappy about being left out of this one—he had a bad feeling about this particular boss, and he *hated* timing puzzles with a fiery passion. Besides, his group had been clearing almost non-stop for the past week, and they were due for a couple days of downtime. Maybe he could justify a trip to Freelia...

"Klein?" Dynamm waved a hand in his face, dropping him out of his thoughts.

Absently slapping away the hand, Klein pushed the Salamander raid out of his mind. "Right. Anyone up for a vacay in the Land of Flying Cats?"

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Something must have shown on Tetsuo's face. Always attentive, his group leader's slate-gray eyes slid to the side and regarded him with that same unflappable calm that virtually never seemed to escape him. "Don't get yourself worked up without cause," Heathcliff said after a few beats, his eyes going back to Eugene while their raid leader made last-minute adjustments to the group makeup. "General Eugene is quite adept at analyzing mob mechanics and devising strategies to counter them; you need only wait for him to select a course of action and then follow his instructions to the letter. That makes your job much easier."

Tetsuo couldn't quite suppress the snort, but he tried to cover it with a cough—he had no desire to offend his group leader; the man had never treated him with anything but respect. "Um... yeah, I mean, I get it and I'll totally do my job... but how do you figure that makes things any easier for me?"

"Because it frees you from the need to burden yourself with complex decisions in the midst of battle," Heathcliff answered quietly. "You have a defined role in this raid, this group—and no uncertainty about what the right choices are. You don't have to analyze. You don't have to decide. You just have to pay attention to your raid leader, and act on their word." He paused. "It's liberating, in a way. You're giving yourself entirely over to the role you're here to play."

"You know," Tetsuo said following a train of thoughts during which he didn't quite manage to fully engage the filter between his brain and his mouth, "sometimes you sound a lot like a larper."

"Show some respect, kid," came the snappy aside from another of their group members, a stocky
Salamander with a thin path of fine red hair framing his jaw. He swatted Tetsuo in the arm for emphasis with the back of one mailed hand, although the blow was light and perfunctory—anything harder would be more uncomfortable for the person punching plate armor than it would be for the person wearing it.

But to Tetsuo's relief, Heathcliff seemed to find this exchange amusing for some reason. "Easy, Nephron," he echoed with the faintest of smiles. "Interesting that you should choose that particular neologism, Tetsuo."

Tetsuo wasn't quite sure what to make of that particular answer. He craned his head to try to see what Eugene was doing back near the mage groups. From what he could tell, their leader seemed to have them taking turns casting low-level spells at the wall as fast as possible. It didn't make any sense to him, which perhaps went a long way towards making Heathcliff's point. He turned back to his group leader with a belated reply. "Interesting?" he prompted.

"Interesting," Heathcliff agreed. "What is a larper, really? I don't find the label particularly useful, nor do I apply it to myself or anyone else. Is it not simply a term for someone who accepts the reality in which we find ourselves?"

"But this isn't reality," Tetsuo said with a frown.

That smile again. "Ah. But what is reality?"

"It's the place where I used to go on dates with Tetsuo's mom," said their group's healer, prompting a few snickers from the others and a roll of the eyes from his intended target, who made a point of not responding to the dig.

"Reality is… um… where things are real?"

"Define real," came the infuriatingly cryptic answer from his group leader. "How do you know what's real and what isn't?"

"Reality…" Tetsuo turned his brain inside out trying to grasp what Heathcliff was trying to say or ask. "It's… the things that actually are. Like, they really exist, and you can prove it."

"Prove how?" Heathcliff pressed. "Based upon what evidence?"

"Well… like… I don't know… like you can see and touch them?"

Wrong answer. Heathcliff looked back at him with that faint ghost of a smile, pointed at his eyes with his first two fingers, and then tapped those fingers on his other wrist. The message was abundantly, embarrassingly clear. Tetsuo looked down at his feet.

"I get it, boss," said Nephron, scratching at the line of his beard. "You're saying our reality is whatever we can actually see and touch and all, at any given time."

Heathcliff nodded with a satisfied look. "It's more complicated than that, but essentially, yes: perception is reality. There is, of course, the physical world we all left behind when we logged in. And do not misunderstand me—I look forward to the final boss battle as much as anyone in this world. But until then, all of this—" He waved a hand loosely at the walls of the World Tree dungeon around them. "This is our reality. The bodies and events in that other world matter only insofar as they permit our minds to continue to exist. The scope of what our minds perceive is what is truly real to us, and right now our minds perceive the world of Alfheim and all of its rules and logic." He looked pointedly at Tetsuo. "The sooner you embrace that truth, the likelier you are to survive to one day return to that other world, that other reality."
A sharp whistle relieved Tetsuo of the need to consider how to respond to that. All eyes in their group turned to where Eugene was standing with the mage groups. He locked eyes with Heathcliff and jerked with his thumb as he called out. "Get over here and bring that kid with you."

They both complied without hesitation; Heathcliff seemed perfectly content to drop the unexpected philosophical conversation about the nature of the universe. "What do you need, General?" he asked once they drew closer.

The Salamander raid leader focused on Tetsuo, giving him a measuring look that threatened to upend the composure he'd been trying to establish. "Tetsuo," he said, with an undertone that suggested he'd spoken the name mostly to remind himself of what it was. "You raised your hand when I asked about Wind magic. You're melee DPS, right?"

"Mostly," Tetsuo answered, nervously fidgeting a little and not caring for the way Eugene was asking about his choice of skills. He hastened to explain. "But I don't need hate skills in my role, and everyone in the DPS groups is encouraged to pick up a school of magic other than fire if we've got the slot. I picked Wind 'cause I party with friends in my free time and it's got some decent buffs."

Heathcliff raised his eyebrows slightly when Eugene turned to look at him. "A fair answer," the raid leader grunted. "And it might come in handy here. Are you good with it?"

"Skill's almost to 400," Tetsuo said with a little surprise. "And yeah, I can cast it in battle, if that's what you're asking."

"Good," Eugene said. "Heathcliff, I'm taking your boy and putting him in Emberlock's group for this fight; they've got no Wind users. He can tank for them if needed, and I'm giving you their tank—chances are the guy won't have much to do until we get the shield down anyway."

Tetsuo's mind whirled at this sudden change in what he'd thought his job was going to be. He looked to his group leader with a note of panic in his eyes. Heathcliff simply shrugged.

"Remember our earlier conversation? You don't have to figure out the right thing to do. You just have to obey the person whose job it is to figure that out. Look to your assist and do what he says." He patted Tetsuo on one pauldron almost paternally.

The advice was still less comforting than Tetsuo would've liked, but as their raid group began to maneuver through the yawning double doors, he tried to push stray thoughts out of his mind and focus on his surroundings, months of training beginning to assert itself and the tricky layout of the cavernous hallways through which they tread requiring all of his attention. The ceiling disappeared somewhere beyond the reach of torchlight, and numerous rune-carved obelisks stuck out from the ground at various heights and irregular intervals and angles like crystal formations. It looked to Tetsuo almost as if they'd burst through the tiled floor at some point in the ancient past, both blocking light and disrupting their formation—which had to loosen up in order for everyone to navigate the field of obstacles.

When they finally laid eyes on the boss, the sight of it nearly robbed Tetsuo of a few breaths. It was the largest boss they faced yet; he would've been surprised if it was much under twenty to twenty-five meters tall, its gnarled fists each big enough to crumple him up and swallow him whole with nothing sticking out. It sat at a stonework table that rose as high as a four-story building, and as the raid group rounded the corner and stopped at Eugene's signal, the giant tossed back the last of its drink and rose from its stool, a low growl rising into a snarl that reverberated from every surface as a red cursor and four HP bars appeared over its head.

"Incoming! MT in!" Eugene shouted. "Off-tank groups prepare to rotate!"
As it gave a great roar, flames danced around one of the giant's hands, coalescing rapidly into a churning fireball that it hurled at the oncoming group. A disc-shaped shield of fire appeared before the main tank group after a rapid chant by the group's healer, but their charge carried them past the attack and the fireball struck the ground a few meters behind them. Before the projectile struck, the air around another hand shimmered and formed into a sickly-green translucent axe, which it whirled without ceremony and swung towards the vanguard of the MT group. Their main tank's own parry sent the axe rebounding back, although Tetsuo saw the attack erode the player's HP despite the successful defense. As soon as the giant recovered, one of its empty hands whipped around and hammered the ground before it, the shockwave scattering several of the players from the MT group with varying amounts of damage and prompting them to rotate out for healing while one of the off-tank groups picked up the slack.

Once the line of defense had been established, Eugene began calling out orders. "Mage group 1, Earth attack on my mark!" That wasn't Tetsuo; he was in group 2 and Emberlock hadn't given him any specific instructions yet. He couldn't clearly hear the incantation over the cacophony of battle, but a barrage of stone spikes shot out from the other mage group, rapidly closing the distance and homing in on their target.

When they struck Hrungnir, they did so with a horrific din and an actinic crimson flash where the projectiles hit. As if someone had flipped an invisible switch, the rock shards reversed direction in an instant and sought out their point of origin. Before anyone could react, they shredded through the mage group on their way to converging on the hapless caster who'd unloaded the high-level spell. His HP went straight to red from his own critical hit, and panic threatened that corner of the raid as that group's healer hastened to restore them all.

"What the fuck?" Eugene yelled, very clearly. "What just happened?"

"It bounced his spell!" Came a shout from the group that had taken the hit.

"Red flash!" yelled someone else; Tetsuo thought it might've been Pyrin's voice. "The sequence changed; we need to use Fire instead this time!"

With the other mage group still focused on healing up, it fell to Emberlock's group to try their hands at the puzzle this time. The fireball that Tetsuo's temporary group leader cast did not get reflected back at them, much to everyone's relief. That relief was short-lived, however; the spell was absorbed with a flash of green, and almost immediately the Jotunn boss ignored the off-tank group holding its attention in favor of aggroing someone else. With horror, Tetsuo watched as the giant plowed through the raid, kicking aside any players who didn't evade quickly enough as it raged its way towards his group of mages.

Tetsuo wasn't specced as a hate tank, but he was the only person in the group geared for tanking at all—there was no one else to intercept the boss. With a shriek that was half-terror, half-defiance, he interposed himself between Hrungnir and Emberlock, planting himself and raising his shield. The force transferred when it met the mob's ethereal axe blade was enough to send Tetsuo sprawling backwards despite bracing for it, nearly a quarter of his HP gone just from blocking the attack head-on.

Before he could recover and get back to his feet, Tetsuo saw a sheath of rock form around one of the Jotunn's empty hands as it swung overhand. Emberlock had barely a moment to throw his hands up and scream before the fist completely crushed him, stoneware tiles spraying in every direction and the flames of the mage's Remain Light erupting from the shallow crater left by the blow.

While Tetsuo tried to gather himself back up to present a defense, one of the other mages panicked and blasted at the Jotunn with a bolt of flame. Again the shield flashed a bright forest-green color,
and again the Jotunn sought out its assailant and focused solely on them until they were gone, ignoring anyone else.

Only moments had passed since the mob had torn into Tetsuo’s group; he caught a glimpse of one of the off-tank groups maneuvering to try to regain aggro. But as soon as the second attacking mage expired, Hrungnir’s vendetta against his group seemed to be done and it returned its attention to the tank groups that had already built up so much hate.

There was nothing he could do for the two who had fallen other than protect their healer while he tried to rez them. Considering the long cooldown timers on revival spells, Tetsuo was grateful when Eugene ordered the healer for one of the melee DPS groups to rez the second dead player, taking no chances on whether their own group’s healer would have more than one rez spell to use.

The lesson of this near-disaster was clear even to Tetsuo: whoever landed an attack with the correct element would become the focus of the mob’s hate. How the hell were they supposed to keep it from killing their mages? He felt bad for Emberlock and the others even as he saw their Remain Lights coalesce back into living avatars and their HP begin climbing back towards the green—those deaths were going to be costly for them in terms of progress.

As their group recovered, Tetsuo watched the first mage group take another shot at the puzzle mechanics. This time Eugene had positioned the main tank group directly in between the boss and the mage group, and as soon as a fireball rocketed out towards Hrungnir, the Salamander General bellowed, "Now Wind!"

Fire splashed across the boss, once again prompting a flare of green across the magic shield protecting it. And again, as expected, it immediately refocused its ire on the caster who’d struck it with the correct element, footsteps thundering across the open floor of its chambers as it covered ground with deceptive speed for something so gargantuan. Before it could get there, Tetsuo heard a word from a spell he thought he recognized, and several greenish-yellow arcs of energy slashed out from the mage group.

The shield didn't drop, and it didn't flash a new color. Instead it flashed red again, and the spinning blades of wind shot back towards the mage group, focused with narrow intensity on the mage who'd cast them. Only the timely intervention of one of the tanks saved him as the tank put himself in the path of the spell, being far more capable of taking that damage than the squishier caster. That didn't stop the boss, which sent the plate tank flying through the air as it kicked through him on its way to the mage group; he burst into flames as he struck the wall with overwhelming force.

Thankfully, the hate change didn't seem to be permanent—the combined efforts of the two groups' healers and the other mages in the group barely kept the mages alive long enough for the MT group to regain aggro and drag the boss away from the that group.

From the orders that came down next, Tetsuo could guess at what the problem had been—it wasn't just a matter of hitting the elements in the correct sequence, it was doing so in rapid succession. The colored flash from the shield when struck seemed to last for around half a second, and Eugene wanted the second attack to hit during the flash from the first one.

The mind reeled. Tetsuo couldn't imagine getting off a spell in under half a second after casting the last one—it would have to be two different casters, one starting their incantation immediately after the other did, trying to get the staggered timing just right.

It was insane. But that was what Eugene wanted them to do.

And it went about as well as Tetsuo expected. On the first several attempts, either the spells landed
out of order, causing the effects to rebound on their casters, or they stumbled over the words as they tried to synchronize their timing, failing the spell. More players fell to the reflected damage and sudden shifts in aggro, and not all of them could be rezzed in time.

Tetsuo finally managed to land a Wind spell at exactly the right time, reasoning that if it didn’t matter what spell he used, he’d use one with the shortest incantation he could think of, that would hurt the least if he got the timing wrong: his basic Wind Blast starter spell. When it struck, it produced a bright yellow flash and the boss immediately rushed him, making him extremely glad that he was a plate user who just happened to have some magic.

"Yellow!" That shout came from Eugene as OT 2 rushed in to try to help Tetsuo survive the short-term aggro from the boss. "Mage Group 1, Fire-Wind-Earth! Don't wait for the hate reset!"

In a stroke of luck, the timing of that barrage was nearly spot-on. Tetsuo's HP was very close to red when the boss suddenly lunged away from him and towards the other group, the third and last magic attack producing a blue flash from the shield. With a sinking feeling, Tetsuo realized what that had to mean.

Four arms… one hand that throws fire, one that uses a wind-based axe, a fist encased in stone for melee, and one that hasn’t done anything yet… probably because it's Water, and we haven't hurt this thing yet.

There were times when you could almost smell doom in the air—when impending disaster created a stink that penetrated everything, sinking into every pore and filling you with dread certainty. Tetsuo had felt that the night before Kibaou's invasion of Everdark, and he'd felt it on more than one occasion when a raid went bad.

This one was going bad in a hurry. The main tank group was rotated out, low on HP and MP and waiting for potions and healers to do their work. Each off-tank group was assigned to a mage group, and both were barely keeping themselves in the green. Hrungnir plowed straight through the OT group guarding the other mage group, barely slowed by their attacks, and began laying waste to every mage who’d landed a successfully-timed hit, eliminating them one by one and dealing out damage too quickly for the healers to keep up, even with the help of the healers from the DPS groups standing by.

The groups began to fragment, as one by one players turned into purple or red Remain Lights and healers started running out of MP and more and more of their spells went on cooldown.

What began as a failure was rapidly turning into a total wipe. Eugene could see it as well as anyone, and before absolute chaos could break out, he made the call that Tetsuo thought he should’ve made half an hour ago: "Fall back to the entrance! No more attack spells of any kind, let the tank groups get aggro back and hold off the boss while we retreat!"

But the tank groups were having their own problems. OT 1’s healer had died, and one of the healers in the MT group had exhausted all of their MP and potions, which left them with two healers to fend for three groups as everyone else began to flee. Several of the tanks were already in the red, and no one had HP anywhere near the comforting green zone that lay above 75% health.

It took every bit of courage Tetsuo possessed to not run as fast as his legs would carry him like the rest of the raid. The healer from Emberlock's group was right beside him, and before the man could run Tetsuo grabbed him by the collar of his robes and bodily whirled him around, propelling both of them towards the ailing tank groups. "Come on!"

"The hell with you!" yelled the Salamander healer, twisting loose and giving Tetsuo a shove that
didn't budge him but made their positions clear. Too shocked and disgusted to waste time putting forth an effort to stop someone that he couldn't make cast his healing spells anyway, Tetsuo ran headlong towards the tank groups and the certain death that he was trying very hard not to think about. It wasn't until he was halfway there that he heard footsteps beside him, and saw Heathcliff rushing in the same direction with his shield held out before him. Both of them were in the yellow, but the look on Heathcliff's face was resolute and unwavering.

An indescribable emotion filled Tetsuo then—something that wasn't worship, but could've easily passed for it. He'd always trusted and respected his group leader, but never so much as he did in that moment as the two of them threw themselves into the fray, weapons and shields stopping blows that would've ended more than one of their comrades. The stakes fueled him with desperate energy and speed, but even that didn't even come close to matching the performance that Heathcliff put on. His shield was almost a blur at times, and although the attacks from the massive Jotunn pushed his HP lower and lower by slivers, virtually nothing moved him, and eventually the boss began focusing all of its attention on the player who had become its biggest aggravation.

"Go," his group leader urged, silver ponytail whipping around when he swung his arm to deflect Hrungnir's axe, the metal of his enchanted kite shield giving off an agonized whine as the blow turned with a flash of dispersed green energy. "Get them to safety, Tetsuo. Go now!"

It was a measure of his loyalty to his group leader that he didn't immediately obey. Instead, he hesitated for a moment, and in that moment a flurry of conflicting thoughts and motivations went through his head: his trust in Heathcliff, his desire to save his friends, despair at the thought of leaving his group leader to carry out what was almost certainly a sacrifice play, and a shamefully-felt urge to get his own self to safety.

Loyalty won out with an assist from self-preservation. "Come on, everyone!" Tetsuo called out, pulling one of the surviving healers to his feet and shoving an MP potion into his hand. "Heathcliff's going to keep it held off here; don't waste this chance!"

As he turned with the last survivors of the tank groups and began their retreat, Tetsuo spared one last glance back over his shoulder. Heathcliff stood alone against the giant, turning the axe-blade with his sword and triggering one of his shield bash techniques to redirect a crushing blow from the Jotunn's stone-clad fist.

The last thing Tetsuo saw before disappearing around the corner was Heathcliff's HP bar flashing once before turning red.

As she swept closed the window of the latest message from one of her contacts, Argo reflected that this was shaping up to be One of Those Days. She was rightfully proud of her vocabulary—which was considerably deeper than shown by the slangy speech habits she affected, and far beyond most people her age—and in the past several hours she was fairly certain she could have run the board at playing bingo with every word even remotely synonymous with "catastrophe". The word "massacre" had been thrown around by more than one player, and from what she was hearing it was no hyperbole.

To put it mildly, the Salamanders had taken a devastating defeat, losing more than a third of their front-line clearers in what had only narrowly avoided being a total wipe. Their clearers were being infuriatingly tight-lipped about the details of the boss guarding the 25th warp gateway; Corvatz wasn't even returning her PMs. Until this last message, the most Argo had been able to pin down was that there was some sort of timing puzzle that was impossibly hard in some undefined way. She was highly skeptical by habit of anything that vague; it had a high probability of being horseshit.
If she'd had her way, she would've been spending all of her time in the various taverns that she knew were frequented by Salamander clearers, reasoning that this was her best chance of picking up something that she wasn't supposed to hear. Unfortunately, this had happened while she was in Freelia meeting with Alicia and the lead Cait Sith clearers—it would've taken most of the day at best just to get back to Arun, and that kind of pace would require her to more or less completely ignore her incoming messages; there was no way she could afford to do that even if there hadn't been a major news event sending waves of panic, uncertainty and excitement through the nine races.

All there had been to work with was a list of survivors, drawn from a source who'd been at the warpgate in Arun when the remnants of the Salamander raid force took a roll call after porting back and regrouping. The list of names was phonetic, making the romanization of many of the more fantastic names of questionable accuracy to begin with, and the vast majority of them had been worthless to her—they were no one she knew, and no one known to her network of contacts.

With one exception. But that exception had paid off.

"Tell me you have «Moonlight Mirror»," Argo said as she abruptly pushed open the doors to Alicia's office with a bang, striding up to her desk.

Alicia stopped in mid-sentence, mouth slightly ajar. It said something about how long they'd been dealing with each other that it only took her a moment to adjust to the sudden interruption. "Um, Thelvin, 'scuse me just a sec, Argowhatthehell...doyouwant."

"I need to know if you've leveled up your Dark Magic skill enough to use the Moonlight Mirror spell," Argo elaborated, speaking only a little more slowly than before. "And yes, this has everything to do with the clusterfuck you're currently dealing with."

"How d—?" Alicia started to speak, then changed tracks when she saw the serious look on Argo's face as the latter pushed back her hood. "Yes, I can cast it. Barely. But depending on how far away they are, at this time of day I could only maintain it for maybe four or five minutes. I think; I won't know for sure until I cast it and see the timer, but it's about that. Why?"

"If you're gonna try hitting that boss, there's someone you need to talk to. You know that casual with the water drake pet?"

"I think I know the one," Thelvin said, settling back into his seat; he'd been far more startled by Argo's entrance than his leader had. "That grade school girl?"

Alicia made a noise of recognition. "The one who did a quest to rez her pet? Didn't you have something to do with that, Argo?"

"Yep, and yep."

Alicia shrugged, one ear flicking towards the doors as their return momentum from Argo's sudden entry finally brought them shut. "Well that's great, except I don't have her on my friends list, and you can only open Moonlight Mirror to a friend."

"I know," Argo said, sliding into the seat beside Thelvin and putting her feet up on Alicia's desk. "When Alicia smacked her heels off the edge, she migrated them to Thelvin's lap instead. "You're not opening it to her."

When Kirito finished reading the latest message, he left it hanging there in the air and tapped an icon in the corner of the window to turn it visible. Silica leaned in and read over his shoulder, lips moving
silently. After she too had taken her turn reading it, she sat back and flexed her hands on the leather skirt of her armor, the feline tail poking out from the back of it periodically thumping against the quilt that covered the inn room bed on which they sat.

"It'll be fine," Kirito said encouragingly, "Just tell them what you told me."

"But they really should be talking to Tetsuo," Silica protested, something in her tone or demeanor drawing a nuzzle from Pina, who was curled up on the bed beside her. "He's the one who was there. He has all the details they want."

"He isn't here now, though," Kirito pointed out. "He's on his way back to Gattan."

"What about Sasamaru?" she said next. "I don't really know Tetsuo all that well, not like he does. They've known each other for years."

Kirito couldn't exactly remember who Sasamaru was—he wasn't on extremely familiar terms with the group Silica sometimes ventured out with now, a group he'd heard refer to themselves as "The Black Cats" for reasons he didn't quite understand. But whichever one he was, all that was beside the point. "He wasn't at the church when Tetsuo came by after the raid," Kirito said patiently, ruffling the top of Silica's hair between her broad, mobile ears; they twitched at the contact. "You were the one he talked to. There's nothing to worry about—these are nice people from your own faction. They just want to know what you know."

Once Silica had calmed the last of her nerves, Kirito stood up and began following the instructions he'd been given, facing a blank wall and then sending a terse confirmation in reply. A little less than a minute later there was a ripple in the air in front of the wall, as if something was scurrying just under the surface of reality, and the light level in the room seemed to dim as a swirling violet-black portal opened before Kirito. At first its depths resolved only into a reflection of their surroundings, but those quickly faded and were replaced by what appeared to be a window into a torchlit room where several Cait Sith were standing, most of them familiar to Kirito.

They were apparently familiar to Silica as well; she made a slight squeaking sound. "Lady Alicia."

Argo broke in before Alicia could speak. "Listen, I dunno exactly how long this spell will last but it's probably only a few minutes, so let's skip the introductions. You know someone who survived the Sallie raid. What did he tell you about the boss?" Kirito almost had to hide a grin; from the look on Alicia’s face, she was caught between being chafed at Argo’s behavior and knowing that her subordinate was probably the person best-suited to draw out the essential information quickly.

It wasn't the approach Kirito would've taken with Silica—or for that matter, the approach he had taken when he'd sought her out at Argo's behest—but if this communication spell was limited in duration, then considering the gravity of the information being exchanged it was understandable. He stood beside Silica as she tried to recall everything that her friend had said when he vented all of his the frustrations and shock at the failed raid, occasionally putting a comforting hand on her shoulder when Argo repeatedly interrupted with clarifying or redirecting questions.

"So lemme see if I got this," Argo said finally, glancing at Alicia as if trying to get a feel for how much time was left. When Alicia held up two fingers, she quickly turned back to the portal. "Boss is immune to damage until you solve a timed sequence puzzle. You have to hit it with four elements in the right sequence within about a second of each other, but every person who hits it with the right element gets instant aggro. And we don't know if he does anything different after that because the Sallies never got further than that."

Silica nodded.
"Well that sucks out loud," Alicia said succinctly. Kirito was inclined to agree. In the last few areas of Yggdrasil they'd begun to encounter mobs with strong elemental affinities, requiring more tactical thinking in terms of what kinds of magic to use; one of the reasons the Undines had beaten the Salamanders to taking down the last boss was that it had been resistant to fire.

But this was a huge leap in complexity beyond any boss mechanics they'd encountered thus far. There had to be something obvious that they were missing, some hidden strategy that would allow them to more easily bypass the damage immunity or mitigate the aggro spikes when working through the puzzle. It was hard for him to say for sure; Kirito wasn't specced for de-hate—there wasn't much point to trying to manage aggro as a solo player, and as a longsword user he didn't typically have to worry about drawing aggro with burst DPS during raids. And he didn't really understand the magic system intimately enough to think outside the box on this one; not the way Sasha did.

But from a game design standpoint, it stood to reason. The obvious solution bordered on Nintendo Hard in Kirito's opinion—on outright unfair, really. A common complaint in the beta had been that the magic system was just too difficult, that the words in even some of the lower-level spells were impossible to pronounce because they used sounds that weren't in the Japanese language—particularly consonants at the ends of words, or consonant clusters that were common to languages like English or Russian. Kirito had found otherwise; it took practice, but it was doable. Especially since there was even an icon beside each spell in your spellbook that demonstrated the pronunciation for you, complete with a karaoke-like feature that highlighted the romanized letters spelling out each syllable as the sound played.

He'd read a lot of forum posts complaining about this language-based difficulty and expressing skepticism that a system like this would be commercially viable in a subscription game. In retrospect, the bitter truth was obvious: Kayaba had always known that this was going to become a death game, and those stakes made it more akin to being dropped in a foreign country where you had to learn the local language in order to survive. People had learned quickly by necessity; matters of life and death were highly motivational. But that still didn't mean it was easy, and some people were simply only able to progress so far. Kirito himself had almost been one of them; it had taken him most of a month to be able to correctly pronounce the word jenagul for his basic «Static Decoy» spell.

It was, in a way, the tradeoff for how insanely powerful a really good mage could be. Weapon techniques were far more limited than most spells, but all you had to be able to do was learn to move your body into the starting position for the technique. Once you triggered the art that way, the System Assist would automatically move your body. It meant that virtually anyone could learn to use a melee weapon, no matter what their level of martial training or the limitations of their body had been in the real world.

But fair or not, some people were just better with languages than others, and that went a long way towards determining whether or not someone could play an effective mage. Kirito worried about what it meant, if boss strategies were now beginning to turn not only on whether or not your mages could learn to pronounce a soft th by rote memorization, but on whether or not there was anyone in your raid who could speak the language of magic.

Kirito realized he'd gotten lost in his thoughts when he felt Silica tugging at his sleeve and heard Argo raise her voice. "Sorry," he said quickly. "What did you say?"

"One minute," Alicia put in. "If either of you have anything to add, now's the time."

"I was just thinking about the boss strategy," Kirito said. "There are three parts to the puzzle: you have to figure out the sequence, because it changes every time. You have to hit the boss with four elements in the right order. And you have to keep the boss from killing the players who've hit it with
"That's right," Thelvin said. "And that last part is the real sticking point. I think you could train people to pull off the spell timing, with enough practice. And if it were just protecting one person, that'd be one thing—but splitting the defense between four different casters, that's tough. To say nothing of getting the four of them coordinated enough to cast the right spells in the right sequence. I —"

"What if you only had to protect one person?" Kirito asked suddenly, interrupting.

"Impossible," Argo said. "One person can't cast four spells in a row that fast. You're talking about a window of maybe a second or less between hits."

"Not four spells," Kirito said. "One spell."

The pause after he said this was only a few beats, but given the limited time they had remaining and the urgency everyone felt, it seemed far longer. "There is no such spell," Argo said firmly. "Trust me on this: I talked to someone recently who knows more about the magic system than anyone else in this game, and there was no—"

"I know," Kirito said, breaking in again. "I told you about her work, but you're missing my point anyway. Maybe there isn't any spell that would let a single caster solve the puzzle. But if you knew enough about the language of magic, you might be able to create one. And then anyone with the right magic skills ought to be able to use it."

A few more precious seconds of the spell's duration ticked away in stunned silence.

"Find out what this woman knows," Alicia said crisply, sitting up a little straighter and seeming to unleash some reserve of pent-up energy as she reached a decision. "Thelvin, round up every clearer who isn't assigned to patrol duty for the next 48 hours and get them headed to Arun ASAP." Her eyes went back to Kirito and Silica, and she smiled at them. "Thanks, Kirito. Sorry about all that drama the last time you were here—I blame Klein. Silica, could you please stay in Arun for the time being? I want you to be able to brief Thelvin in person once everyone gets there. We may only get one shot at this, and you're the closest thing we have to secondhand information on how this boss works."

"You stick around too, Ki-bou," Argo said rapidly, leaning in front of Alicia so that she could still be seen around the shrinking event horizon of the viewing aperture between the two locations right up until the point where it closed. "I got a new job for you."

When the last of the shimmering portal thinned to an ultraviolet ribbon and collapsed into void with a sound like a cymbal played in reverse, Silica cocked her head at Kirito with confusion written on her young features. "Why does she call you Ki-bou?"

"You can't choose your coworkers, Sakuya thought, a reminder she'd had to give herself more than once over the years. But you don't have to like them, just work with them."

It was the way she'd chosen to think about her role in the Sylph "Militia", as Skarrip liked to call the organized groups who performed both clearing duty and border security patrols. Like any other job she'd had in her short life, there were people she could see herself being friends with, and people she had to tolerate. She sometimes had to remind herself to let go of the latter—to just focus on her job and write off the people who weren't worth the time and drama to deal with them.
If only she could do that with Sigurd. In her opinion, it was the influence of the Sylph clearer that had encouraged Skarrip to become more and more of a larper in the months since the game began, to allow himself to be drawn into the role until there were days when she wondered whether or not they really believed they were ruling over a realm of faries instead of just dancing bits of data on some madman's puppet strings.

"You still haven't answered the question I posed to you, my dear."

Every fiber of Sakuya's body and soul wished fervently at that moment that they weren't standing in the antechamber outside of Skarrip's study, well within the Safe Zone of Sylvain. Her fingers itched to bring her nodachi from its sheath and turn Sigurd into a spiral-cut ham, or at least the closest approximation that an ALO avatar could become. She pushed away the tempting but self-destructive urge with an effort of will and allowed her eyes to slide sideways just long enough to barely meet his gaze. "Yes I did, Sigurd," she said with deceptive calm. "Don't confuse an answer you don't like for one that hasn't been given." There was a calculated pause, and then just as he opened his mouth to speak she went on. "And I am not your 'dear'. I have a name."

"You told me, and I quote—"

"That I'm quite content leading my own clearing group," Sakuya put in, cutting him off before he could put his own spin on her words. "Shall I be plainer, then? I will follow your orders during raids. I will take your suggestions under advisement while we are clearing. I will listen to what advice you see fit to give as leader of the Militia. But I will not join your group, and I have no interest in being one of your fawning fangirls." She faced him directly now, tilting her head just a little as she raised her thin green eyebrows. "Is that answer sufficient for you?"

From Sigurd's expression, he didn't like that answer either—that, or something he'd eaten was disagreeable to him. "You needn't be so curt, milady. I was merely—"

She was spared whatever he was going to say when the intricately-carved cherrywood door panels slid to the side, drawn open by their leader's administrative assistant. "Lord Skarrip will see you now."

How generous of the man, Sakuya thought wryly as she stepped through the door, irrationally annoyed at Sigurd for falling into step beside her. She was well aware of what he was doing, whether he realized it or not; he was making it look as if she was there with him, as if they hadn't in fact been called there separately. Sigurd played little psychological games like that all the time with the people around him, which was a large part of why she found him so distasteful.

That, and his habit of talking to her yukata.

She buried all of this deep within her as their footsteps echoed across the hardwood floor, bringing them to face Skarrip across a desk which was littered with chess pieces that had been repurposed as markers for planning the makeup of their raid groups. "You have news for me, Sigurd?" Skarrip asked without looking up.

"As you expected, milord, there is unrest in Gattan. A Leprechaun merchant who just arrived from there says that there is great tension in the streets, and that he overheard many conversations amongst their clearers expressing skepticism that their leaders could defeat this Jotunn." He placed his palms on the edge of the desk and leaned over it; Skarrip's gaze lifted to meet his as his voice hissed with urgency. "The time is now. We must strike this boss while the Salamanders are demoralized, before they can regroup. It will be humiliating for Mortimer and Eugene, to have this prize taken from them right on the heels of their embarrassing failure on their first attempt."
"You will be unsurprised to find that I agree, Sigurd," Skarrip said as he straightened, smoothing back his dark bangs where they'd fallen forward. "As it so happens, I was delayed in receiving you because I was communicating with Lady Alicia. She has expressed to me an interesting proposition."

That got Sakuya's attention. As she herself straightened a little, Skarrip glanced her direction and nodded as he gestured towards the western-style chairs in front of the desk. "Which, yes, is part of the reason you are here, Sakuya. Please, both of you, have a seat."

Sakuya would've preferred to stand, or even sit in seiza, but it wasn't a battle worth fighting. A few deft finger motions at her menu unequipped her weapon, which disappeared from her back as she settled into a chair.

"I am informed that this boss requires a strategy revolving around specific spells. Since the Cait Sith are, as a whole, less magically-inclined than those of us with a direct elemental affinity, they seek a cooperative raid with our clearing group. In exchange for the participation of our mage groups, the Cait Sith propose to share all that they have learned about this boss."

Sakuya nodded thoughtfully. "A fair bargain, assuming they keep their end of it and have something worth knowing."

"That was precisely the question I wished to ask you, Sakuya," Skarrip said as he laced his fingers together on the desk before him. "You know this girl who leads the Cait Sith, far better than from my limited interactions with her. Can she be trusted? I have heard nothing of any Cait Sith attempt at attacking this boss, not even a scouting party. I am skeptical of what could she know that could justify sharing the spoils of this raid with them."

"It's not so much what she knows," Sakuya said after a few moments with her thoughts. "It's what The Rat knows."

"Ahh," Skarrip said with a sly smile. "How foolish of me to overlook their friendship. The Rat returns my messages, but she has ventured to know nothing of this raid thus far. Of course she would lie for her friend and her own race."

"I doubt it," Sakuya said, daring to contradict her leader. "I think you'll find that if you read whatever she wrote to you, it is literally true. Argo lives by her reputation. I have not known her to traffic in bullshit."

"And you know her so well?" Sigurd asked, voice suspicious.

Sakuya sighed. Was there no end to the man's unpleasantness? "No, I don't. But like most veteran players with sense, I've bought information from her or from one of her proxies. And unlike you, I'm a decent judge of character.

"As have I," Skarrip said. It was the first time he'd ever admitted that outright, but it was entirely unsurprising—like her, he'd been in the beta, and she would've thought less of his competence if she'd learned that he had never once sought out Argo out for intel. "In any event, I'm inclined to agree with Sakuya's assessment. The fact that Argo is withholding information I take as a sign that the offer is backed by substance. The Cait Sith have their own interests in mind, and that is as it should be; self-interest is a reliable motivation. I see no gain for them in pretending to have information they do not—it would risk losses for their race as surely as ours. Wouldn't you agree, Sigurd?"

"With reservations," he said, sounding as if it was an enormous concession.
"If you'd care to sit this one out," Sakuya said with carefully-calibrated sweetness, "I will be happy to lead this raid."

Thunderclouds gathered on Sigurd's face. "That's quite all right."

"You sure? If you have reservations, you may wish to make your peace with them. A cooperative raid like this is no place for misgivings about your allies."

"I lead the Militia, Sakuya," he said coldly, "If I want your counsel, be assured that I will ask for it."

It was a phenomenon that never ceased to amaze her—the way some men stopped pretending to be nice when you made it clear you weren't interested in them. You could learn a lot about who they really were then. She returned her attention to Skarrip without acknowledging Sigurd's dismissive reply, wondering for a moment why their leader allowed the bickering to continue at all when he could shut it down with a word. "I assume we'll be departing for Arun at once, then?"

Skarrip nodded. "Go and gather your group; leave as soon as you're ready. Sigurd, stay a moment."

As the door slid shut behind Sakuya, she entertained herself with various explanations for what business Skarrip might have to discuss with Sigurd behind closed doors. Particularly cheerful were the fantasies about Sigurd getting a large piece chewed out of his ass for his attitude. Preferably in a way that was impossible to heal and took a long time to regenerate, all the while leaving him ass-deficient in a way that would be impossible to hide. His fangirls would probably love it.

She knew such a thing was unlikely; he and Skarrip were too close. But a girl could dream. She was still enjoying those daydreams when the courier stopped her in the grand hall just before leaving the building.

The Imp tapped her shoulder briefly to bring her out of her reverie, and wordlessly held out a scroll. Sakuya rolled her eyes, but accepted it with thanks; the man was just doing what he'd been paid to do by some larper. Why they didn't just send a PM, she didn't know—she allowed messages from people who weren't on her friends list, figuring that it wasn't hard to block someone if they annoyed her. She unrolled the parchment and scanned the short message written there.

「Watch S. He's up to something.」

It was unsigned. When she looked up, the Imp was gone. She grimaced, turning the message over to see if there was anything written on the reverse side; there wasn't. She tapped the sheet of parchment once, but there was no "creator" listed the way there would have been on any other player-crafted item like armor or weapons. That meant it was either a quest reward, an item drop, or purchased at significant expense from an NPC; non-crafted writing materials weren't cheap.

Sakuya was both impressed and annoyed at the pretentiousness of it all. Who the hell wastes that kind of money on a useless message like this, just to be completely untraceable?

She wondered who "S" was in this case. Skarrip? Sigurd? It wouldn't surprise her if either of them had plans that she wasn't aware of, or that said plans were shady in some way. What would surprise her was if the person behind this message had any actual knowledge of them. More likely it was one of Skarrip's political rivals trying to stir up noise—or maybe just someone trolling her.

Still, she was about to head out on a dangerous raid with Sigurd, and she trusted him about as far as... well no, not really at all. And there was always the chance that whoever sent this message—despite having money to burn and seeing too many spy movies as a kid—was actually on the level. So it wasn't really out of her way to keep an eye on him while on this mission. In fact, it might almost
be called prudent.

Sakuya crumpled up the parchment and dropped it on the ground, a faint tinkle of glass playing as the item's durability expired and it dispersed into blue-green particles. "Tell me something I don't know," she said to nobody in particular as she headed towards the tavern where her clearers were gathered.
"A new player begins with two empty «skill slots», which are used to equip the skills that allow them to wield weapons, use magic, and employ other useful abilities. This does not include any skills granted to them as racial bonuses, which are considered «extra skills» that do not consume a skill slot. A player receives their third skill slot at Level 10, and another at every tenth level thereafter. Choosing a skill to equip is done by tapping the icon of the empty slot and choosing from a list of known skills. Such choices are not permanent—a player is not locked into the use of a skill they find does not suit their playstyle, and they are free to experiment. But unequipped skills suffer a gradual decay in their accumulated progress towards the next tier, making a 'jack of all trades' approach impractical..."
—Alfheim Online manual, «Skill Slots»

4 May 2023
Day 180 - Late Evening

Tetsuo couldn't keep it in anymore. The question had been eating him alive all day, and it was one he'd never gotten the chance to ask. At least, there had never been anyone to whom he felt close enough to be able to ask. It wasn't the sort of thing you hoped for, not unless you were a complete sociopathic jerk—but now that it had happened, it was right there, and not knowing was driving him to distraction.

As he sat down to join a collection of other Salamander clearers who were having dinner at the same inn, he glanced over the table nervously, then dropped his eyes again. He reached up and opened his game menu, drilling down into his inventory and looking for a particular food item. There were times when he wished ALO's UI would let you filter your inventory to only look at particular kinds of items. You could sort by item type or name, but that sometimes still left him spinning the vertically-scrolling list of items like a roulette wheel, eyes glazing over as he tried to find the particular potion or crafting component he was looking for.

He looked up again, taking courage from the fact that the inventory menu still hung there in the air before him like a veil. He knew that no one else could see his UI, which meant that it wasn't as if it was blocking anyone from seeing him or his expression—but it blocked his view, and that at least meant he could pretend otherwise.

"What was it like?" he finally blurted out, leaning over the table.

Heathcliff raised his eyes from the plate of kebabs loaded with grilled vegetables and drake meat which he was beginning to attack, a look of confusion briefly flickering across his features. "What?"

There was a pause as Tetsuo raggedly swept his menu closed, meeting Heathcliff's gaze for only a moment. "Being a Remain Light," he said before his nerve could leave him.

There wasn't a whole lot of conversation at the tables around them, but what little there was ground to a halt. Tetsuo was keenly aware of the uncomfortable looks from some of the clearers from other groups, a number of whom he didn't know very well.

"What?" he said, in an entirely different tone than Heathcliff had moments before, but no less confused. Perhaps even a touch defensive.

"You're not supposed to ask," said Denkao, an older Salamander from their group whose receding red hairline reminded Tetsuo a lot of a car salesman that he had once seen on a TV commercial. A
few other clearers at a nearby table got up and left, as if their appetites had fled them as quickly as they’d fled the boss that had owned them earlier.

"Huh?" Tetsuo said, heat rising to his cheeks in a sudden wave. "How am I supposed to know these things?"

"You just do, okay?" Denkao pressed, giving him a long sidewise look down the table until his view was blocked by Heathcliff leaning back over his plate and sampling some of the well-peppered drake meat. It occurred to Tetsuo suddenly that while he didn’t know some of these guys very well, what he did know was that they—like him—all knew people who had died that morning. He abruptly felt like a complete ass.

Their group leader paused before resuming his previous activity: bringing his food to his mouth. "I don’t mind," he said, then used his teeth to pull the last of the greens off of the end. The wooden skewer, bare now, burst into blue-green particles.

Those words sucked all of the wind out of the argument. There was an awkward silence for a little under a minute as Heathcliff slowly chewed and finished the bite he’d taken, chewing contentedly as if they weren’t all discussing his near-death experience. When he finished he glanced across the table at Tetsuo. "There’s a message in the notification area at the top of your HUD that says «You are Dead», and in the center of your vision in large numbers is a one-minute countdown to the expiration of your Remain Light, surrounded by a circular progress indicator. Your avatar disappears, but you can still see and hear what’s going on around you, and look around in all directions. You’re inside the light, at the center of it, but it’s not blinding."

Tetsuo didn’t understand how Heathcliff could describe it so technically. That one-minute countdown wasn’t just to the expiration of his Remain Light—it was the expiration of his life! When that countdown reached zero, you wouldn’t need a system message telling you that you were dead, you would be dead as the Nerve Gear—

He was fascinated and repulsed at the same time.

"Good thing I got to you in time," Denkao said, grinning and punching Heathcliff in the shoulder. The silver-haired Salamander gave their healer a look that managed to be both grateful and tolerant, no doubt through his long exposure to the other man’s rough humor.

"Which you will no doubt never allow me to forget," Heathcliff remarked graciously, provoking a solemn nod from Denkao. The solemnity was somewhat marred by the wink that followed.

"Was it scary?" Tetsuo asked, emboldened by Heathcliff’s willingness to discuss the matter and unable to rein in his curiosity.

Heathcliff seemed to have to stop and think about it, brow furrowing a little. "Not really," he said calmly. "I just remember thinking that it was ironic."

Tetsuo must have looked as confused as he felt. Heathcliff waved a hand at the air. "Not important," he said. "Anyway, I believe that before dinner was served we were brainstorming strategies for this boss."

"Why bother?" Denkao asked. "You don’t really think we’re taking another go at it, do you? After pulling us back to Gattan for the night? After the losses we took?" He waved a hand at the rest of the group, who wore the bearing and expressions of those who had seen the elephant—who’d had a taste of war and seen death, albeit death sanitized by the use of glowing red particle effects rather than explicit gore. "Do we look like we’re in any shape to go back there?"
"Not tonight, no," Heathcliff said mildly. "But once we've had time to restructure our raid group from reserves and rethink our approach, the time may come. We've done remarkably well at keeping the details from getting out, and while another race may make the attempt, they are no more certain to succeed than we were." Tetsuo could see nodding heads around the inn room as a few more clearers trickled in, and this didn't surprise him despite how weary they must all be—Heathcliff had been prepared to give his own life to save the fragmenting remains of the raid, and there was more than person in the room whose look of fervent agreement as much as declared that they'd follow him right back in there if he asked.

"He's right," Corvatz said gruffly as he dropped stiffly into a seat on the other side of Heathcliff, the shifting plates of his articulated plate armor rattling against the chair back. "We need this victory. We've sacrificed too much to this boss; it belongs to us. And one way or another, we'll do whatever it takes to put it down. Anyone who thinks we ought to just roll over and let someone else have a turn is a fool and a coward."

"I'm sure Eugene's got something in the works," said an unfamiliar clearer from a nearby table. The expression on Corvatz's face as he twisted around to regard the speaker was measured contempt. "Have you heard anything? Because I haven't. I'll wager Heathcliff hasn't either. None of the group leaders have."

The target of his ire frowned. "Well they're trying to keep a lid on what happened there. Maybe this is just another part of that secrecy."

"Don't be so credulous. Why would we be called back to Gattan if they were planning on going at the boss again right away?" Corvatz snorted, picking up a steaming kebab skewer of his own that looked hot enough to cause HP loss. "We could've just as easily rested in Arun for as long as necessary, so that we could set out immediately. Instead we're here with our thumbs up our asses."

As Tetsuo listened to the murmurs of assent rippling through the clearers, the smell of lamb slow-cooked with some kind of garlic and herb gravy wafted over to him from the table where a few of the surviving mages sat. The savory aroma pulled his attention in that direction just in time for one of their number to arrive. "If your thumb's up your ass, Corvatz, you might want to wash your hands before dinner," said Pyrin as he seated himself, pushing the sleeves of his embroidered crimson robes back so as not to marinate them in the stew that he was about to eat. "Now let's review what we know about the boss."

Tetsuo sighed. It was going to be a long night. He sought distraction in his inventory menu once more.

As Kirito and Silica touched down outside of Sasha's church and trod up the path, he reflected that deja vu was a funny thing. Most players found that to be part of adjusting to being trapped in Alfheim Online; the fact that so many of the NPCs, techniques and other mechanics in the world had precisely-defined animations and appearances meant that it was inevitable to feel some sense of a repeated experience on a regular basis. The artificial, procedural nature of the world and its inexorably consistent logic resulted in a pattern of coincidences that could make you swear you'd seen or heard something before, especially in the midst of battle. It was because you had. You learned to tune it out.

But this time was different in its sameness to the past. This was the real thing; Kirito was struck that it was only about two and a half weeks prior that he and Silica had been on a quest of sorts to this
place to see this person—albeit under very different circumstances. The last had been a time of conflict and grief, a race against time to revive her pet water drake.

This time was pure business. After the Moonlight Mirror spell was over, he'd ended up in an exchange of PMs with Argo that resulted in a new contract: being where Argo couldn't be, talking to someone she didn't have the time to deal with firsthand, since he was already in Arun. An up-front payment, with more offered if Sasha created the spell needed for the boss.

It was easy money, and Kirito was perfectly fine with that; he had been farming mats for an expensive upgrade and could use a sudden infusion of cash. The sense of deja vu began to flake away as differences continued to present themselves—this time they walked right in rather than knocking, Kirito announcing himself with *gomen kudasai* while Silica's loud *tadaima* rang out; the orphanage had become a second home for her.

They found Sasha in her study, hands moving in the air in the familiar swoops and taps of someone manipulating ALO's menu system. As the two of them paused just outside the open door, she made a final gesture with her index finger and the wireframe outline of a ceiling-high bookshelf began to trace in front of her. The glowing frame filled in rapidly with texture and volume, and a moment later the piece of furniture became fully manifested in the world, settling a few millimeters to the floor with a faint thump.

"Welcome back, Silica," Sasha said as she leaned against the new bookshelf and shimmied it to and fro in an effort to move it snugly flush with the wall. "And you as well, Kirito; I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. How are the two of you this evening?" Pina, Silica's water drake, made a petulant trill as he glided into the room and took perch at the top of the unoccupied, high-backed chair at her desk. She laughed. "And you too, Pina."

Kirito returned her friendliness in kind. "I'm good, Sasha, thanks. Need a hand with that?"

As he said this, Sasha put her heel against the edge of the bookshelf and shoved it into the corner with finality. The sudden movement and loud noise caused Pina to startle briefly; he launched himself and made as if to land on Silica's head or shoulder the way Kirito had seen him do shortly after his revival, but then reconsidered and returned to his previous spot. Kirito couldn't imagine how the pet did that; he didn't look like he'd fit on her head.

"Got it, thanks," Sasha said, smiling and dusting her hands for effect. The smile wavered just a little then, as if something had occurred to her, and she asked, "Is there something I can help you with, Kirito?"

She probably just had the same sense of deja vu that I did, Kirito thought to himself. He smiled disarmingly and held up both hands palms-out, as if trying to reassure a wary opponent that he wasn't waving around anything sharp or heavy. "I hope there is. I've got a client who needs to have a custom spell crafted in order to take down a tough boss, and they're willing to pay. Does that qualify as something you can help with?"

The sudden tension seemed to fade from Sasha's face; her smile had no effort in it now. He was, essentially, offering to pay her for indulging in her favorite hobby. She might have done it for free just to have an excuse to explain it to someone.

"Oh, I imagine I can try," Sasha said with a mix of pride and amusement. She stroked her menu again; a book materialized in her hand. One by one she continued doing this, occasionally stopping to rearrange them. The spines of these books each bore a single three-character word—*majutsugo*; literally, "magic-using-language"—followed by distinctions of number or topic. Kirito could take a stab at how much it had cost her to have those printed; he was glad it was her hobby and not his.
"What kind of effect are you trying to produce?"

At this, Silica stepped forward and began to repeat a story that she’d probably told quite a few times now, the efficiency and clarity of it helped by the paring-down it had gotten when Argo focused in on the most essential details. Kirito helped out a few times when there were words for game mechanics or strategies that Silica didn’t know, but in essence it wasn’t a very difficult strategy to explain—just a pain to execute.

After Sasha slid the last of these books into their new home, she flicked her hand at the air to dismiss her menu and tapped at her lower lip while she thought. "So as far as you know," she began slowly, "There are only the four elements, and it doesn't matter what kind of spell you attack it with—as long as that spell is of the correct element?"

"Only the four elements," Kirito confirmed. Then he looked at Silica.

"I don't know if the kind of spell matters, or how strong it is," the girl said, amber tail beginning to lash nervously until she hugged it around herself. "He didn't really say. I could PM him and ask."

Sasha made a thoughtful sound. "Please do that. Well, if it doesn't matter which spell you use—I'm assuming it would have to be a Malign spell in order to target a mob—that shouldn't be so terribly difficult. You just need to know the order in which you want to apply the effects…and I think in order to get them to apply consecutively rather than simultaneously, you'd have to inflect them to the Sequential form."

Kirito stepped in before she could turn the discussion into a grammar lesson. "The sequence is different each time," he said as Silica drew open her menu and began typing a message that Kirito assumed was aimed at Tetsuo.

"Is that so?" Sasha said, sounding quite a bit less confident. "Well that's different. You'd have to know the sequence first in order to construct the incantation."

"Could you just prepare a spell for each possible sequence?" Kirito asked.

Sasha gave him a look. "Do you know how many permutations you're talking about? Even assuming the best case, which is that all four elements are always represented in the sequence, and that they never repeat."

Kirito paused to do the math in his head; it didn't take but a moment to realize how foolish the question had been. "Oh." He hadn't thought about that other possibility, either—he'd been operating on the assumption that the sequence would always be those four elements, just shuffled.

"And your mages will have to learn all of them. Or whoever is going to be casting it will, anyway."

"Yeah, I'm not sure if that would work," Kirito said, thinking it through and beginning to see the scope of the problem. "Especially since they're already on their way—they should get to Arun later tonight, and are probably planning on hitting the boss first thing in the morning. I don't know if you can get their mages to memorize twenty-odd new spells on that kind of short notice—at least, not well enough to count on it in the heat of combat."

"I could teach them enough of the language to construct the incantations themselves," Sasha began. "But then… no. Not under pressure like that, I see now." Kirito knew that she did—he'd seen her create spells under fire before, and he could get some idea of how well you'd have to know the language before you could do that without a lot of practice.

They both seemed to take this to its logical conclusion at the same time. "I can't," she said as Kirito
began to open his mouth. "Even if I was high enough level, which I'm almost certainly not, I have a prior obligation. I've been promising the children that I'll take them on a field trip into one of the newbie areas below Arun as an incentive for their studies, and we have that planned for tomorrow after breakfast. We're bringing lunches and everything." When Sasha saw Kirito's smile, she laughed a little. "Yes, they're doing well. Really well, in fact. I'm amazed at how quickly they're picking it up, although I really shouldn't be."

Kirito almost laughed, too—but not for the same reason. "The newbie area, you mean the Upper Sewers?" The memory that floated up wasn't what little time he'd spent there in the beta, but rather flashes of the launch day, when he and Klein had spent a few hours questing and grinding in that area as he showed the Salamander man the ropes.

Sasha nodded. "Sachi is going, but although she's old enough and quite overleveled for the area, I'm not sure she's ready to take on the responsibility of leading them outside the Safe Zone."

"Maybe I can help," Kirito said. "I need to go to the Lower Sewers in order to farm components for an upgrade anyway. I was planning on doing that tonight, but I wasn't hired to go on the raid, so I could just as easily do it tomorrow morning instead. I can check in on Sachi and the kids periodically, make sure everything's alright. There aren't any monsters above level 5, and you'd have to go where I'm going in the Lower Sewers to find those."

"And I can go with her," Silica said, speaking up finally and to Kirito's surprise. "We've partied together a lot now, and my level's a little higher than hers. I know she won't be scared if we're out together." Pina chirped affirmatively from his perch on the back of Sasha's chair, lifting his head and spreading his wings in a way that made the chair sway from the shifting center of gravity.

Sasha's eyes widened. Another time, he supposed she might've been skeptical of Kirito's fitness to protect anyone simply because of his age, but she had to know by now how much stronger he was. "You would do that?" she asked. "I mean, I'd want them to check in—or for you to check in on them—about every fifteen minutes or so. They can't get into much trouble down there at their levels, but they still need supervision, and I'd feel a lot better if it was someone who's been there before."

Kirito weighed the matter. A raid of two to four groups—even newbie children—would encounter nothing in that area that posed any threat to them, especially with comparatively higher-level players like Sachi and Silica there. Argo hadn't said how to get Sasha to help them, and up to this point Kirito had assumed it just boiled down to getting her to make the kind of custom spell he'd been speculating about. Now he was proposing to get her to possibly participate in the raid itself. It hadn't been said explicitly, but really, there weren't a whole lot of other options with a high likelihood of success. All they'd have to do is protect her.

And wasn't that the trick. Argo had implied that Alicia had some solution already in mind for protecting the caster, but even a level-appropriate player wouldn't be able to take too many direct blows from a gateway boss. Kirito didn't know what level Sasha was, but he doubted she'd survive more than one hit, or even splash damage from an AOE. They really had no way of knowing the full scope of the boss's abilities yet.

This line of thought seemed to have occurred to her as well. While Kirito was still thinking it over, Sasha added, "What exactly would you be asking me to do, anyway? I can't imagine my level is high enough to fight this boss, even if I knew how."

"You don't have to fight it," Kirito said. "I need to send a message to the Cait Sith and ask if they're prepared to do it this way. But if you know how to make the necessary spell on the fly, then all you have to do is wait for the raid leader to figure out the sequence, then cast your spell to break the damage shield protecting the boss. The clearers should be able to take it from there, and they'd
Sasha stepped back from the new bookcase and regarded the collection of books she'd just placed there, rubbing her chin and tracing a finger around her lower lip in a series of gestures that Kirito knew meant she was deep in thought. He could guess at some of those thoughts—she had a huge responsibility on her shoulders, and it was one he was considering sharing for a short time.

"Are you sure it's safe?" Sasha asked. There was no quaver in her voice, but he knew what had to be weighing on her.

"It's a raid on a gateway boss," Kirito said in perfect honesty. "I'm sure it's not safe. What I'm sure of, though, is that if you agreed to do this, Alicia would do everything in her power to protect you. I know her—she's a good person." Indeed, she'd treated him remarkably decently despite his being a Spriggan, in part because Argo vouched for him. He was at liberty to come and go in Freelia just like any other player, and most of the Caits didn't harbor much resentment or bias towards Spriggans—or at least, most of them he'd run into were fair-minded enough to give him a chance. That kind of attitude came in part, he knew, from the top down.

"I'll need to talk to Sachi," Sasha said at last. "Make sure she's willing to go to the Sewers without me. And I'd need certain assurances, in case things go wrong… in case something happens to me." Kirito winced. "It could happen," she said. "If I do this, I'm going to ask your client to make sure that we don't have to worry about keeping the orphanage going."

The mercenary smile she donned then as she delivered her terms unnerved Kirito, if only because it was the first time he'd ever seen any expression like that on her face. "Since I first moved here, I've been renting this property from the city, so the game automatically deducts a certain amount of Yuld from my bank account every week to pay for it—and it's not cheap. If Sachi and I don't have to go out hunting for drops to sell and coin to pay our rent, that's more time I can spend with the children and my research."

Kirito nodded, relaxing. It was a fair request, and one of which he entirely approved. And he knew that Alicia could afford it; her treasury was ample and growing, what with the commerce taxes she brought in from her own people. Beast Taming was a lucrative skill—tamed pets like mounts could be sold and their loyalty transferred to another player, allowing them to be used in a limited fashion, although only a Cait Sith with their native skill could develop Rapport with a pet and use them to their full potential.

"All right," he said, having mulled it over. "How many weeks of rent should I ask for from Alicia, and how much per week?"

"I think you misunderstood me," Sasha said, hands set on her hips. "I want her to provide the money needed to buy the property outright."

In Klein's opinion, the world was unfair and possessed of a reliable desire to thwart him in the same way that a grain of sand under the waistband conspired to ruin your day at the beach. He and his guild had just, after a long journey with few breaks other than the resting of wings, finally arrived at Freelia for a little bit of R&R—and now they were being asked to turn right back around and go do exactly what he least wanted to do in all the world right now.

"It'll be fun," Alicia promised. "This boss has a really interesting trick to it, and I just know how much you love a good challenge."
"No, I already know the trick to the boss," Klein said. "We scouted it for Eugene this morning. It sucks."

Alicia's eyes narrowed at him. "You what?"

Klein narrowly restrained himself from a full-on facepalm. "It was just a job," he argued. "We were already in Arun, and I got a message from Eugene this morning asking me if my group was free."

"You could've told me," she said in a suddenly frosty tone. "You know we've been after a win. Argo and I have been busting our asses today trying to get intel on this boss, and now you're here telling me that you were the scouting party? For the Salamanders?"

Now Klein did draw his hand over his face. "I got the PM right before the job, okay? What was I supposed to do, turn it down?" He had another unvoiced, uncomfortable thought: that if he had tipped off Alicia and they'd made a play for the boss, it might've been her people going in blind and getting wiped.

When he got no immediate reply, he went on. "After that we were busting ass to try to get here as quickly as possible, and I didn't want to warn you I was coming. I wanted it to be a surprise."

Alicia exchanged a look with Argo, and rolled her eyes dramatically, ears back. She marched up to him and stood on her tiptoes, pecking a small kiss on his lips and then poking him in the ribs with one outstretched finger. "You're sweet. And exasperating. Now come on; it's going to take you hours to get back to Arun, and you need to get there in time to get some sleep before the raid tomorrow."

"I haven't agreed to go," Klein protested manfully. "And I'd still have to talk it over with the rest of the group."

Alicia folded her arms looking from Klein to his friends and back. They all shuffled in place as if waiting in line at the doctor's office. "Please? I really need you guys there. Especially now that I know the first-hand experience you have! We've got a strategy that will work, really it will."

Klein looked over his shoulder at the others from his guild, seeking backup. He knew all of them had to be as worn out as he was, and couldn't be looking forward to facing that boss again. Maybe Alicia was right, and that with the right strategy it was doable—but that didn't mean it sounded fun.

Issin wasn't there; he was off to track down some of the friends he made when he'd been a part of Thelvin's clearing group in the early days of the game. None of the rest said anything, but they looked vaguely uncomfortable. Klein could guess at why.

"Look, Alicia," Klein said, "we just finished a really long haul after a rough morning and we're all beat… I don't know if I could ask my guys to go through—"

He stopped as Alicia stepped in and stood on her toes again, this time as she leaned up and cupped a hand, beginning to whisper in his ear. Being somewhere in the neighborhood of dinnertime, it was a little loud in the central market, and he had to ask her to repeat more than a few things before he was certain that he'd heard correctly.

"Leader?" said Dynamm from behind him. "Just so you know, your ears match your hair."

Klein barely heard him. He looked down at Alicia, wide-eyed as his jaw worked. "Promise?" he asked.

"Promise," she said with a look that was made of pure elemental flame.
Before the word finished passing her lips, Klein turned around and clapped his hands, stepping towards his group and snaking his arms around the shoulders of Dynamm and Harry. "We're buddies, right?"

"Klein," Harry said, "what did she—?"

"Don't ask," Klein said. "We're buddies, right? All of us? And you know if you guys really needed something, like a tough quest or an epic mount, I'd totally have your back?"

The sound of laughter from behind him triggered defensiveness in Klein; he let go of his guildmates and craned his head around, expecting to see the two Cait Sith girls losing it at his expense. But it was only Argo, and she was cracking up as she tried to keep her hand steady enough to set her UI visible while remaining upright on both feet; a moment after the awkward stabbing motions a series of translucent amber-colored windows appeared in front of her, and she beckoned Alicia over.

"She what?" Alicia's voice shot into a high soprano range at the end of the second word as she finished reading the message over Argo's shoulder. "Oh my god, that greedy little—"

Argo's laughter continued; if anything it intensified at Alicia's own reaction. The brown-haired Cait Sith info broker shook as she tried to suffocate the laughter down to the level of snickering.

"But fifteen—that's freaking ridiculous; do you know what kind of gear I could buy for our clearing groups with that kind of money?"

"You know you can afford it," Argo said, having downgraded her snickers to grinning like an idiot. "Come on, that's good PR if nothing else, and there's an election in a few days. I can totally make sure word of your generous charity gift gets out."

"Um, Alicia," Klein said, hesitant to interrupt. "I talked to my guys, and you got a deal. We're going. On the raid." He looked back over his shoulder and mouthed please. The chorus of snickers, grins and eye-rolling from them told him two things: that they'd do it, and that he'd pay for it somehow. Totally worth it.

"Oh good," Alicia said, eyes flashing as she blew him a kiss. "Mwah. Thanks. Why are you still here?"

A few moments later, he wasn't.

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「I'm sorry,」Tetsuo wrote. 「I shouldn't even be telling you this much, and please don't tell anyone where you heard this. As far as I know the type of spell doesn't matter—I hit it with a basic Wind Blast spell once. But for all I know that could change.」

Tetsuo looked up from his message window. Most of the clearers had left; the ones who remained were largely senior and veteran members like Heathcliff and Corvatz. Tetsuo supposed he himself qualified as a veteran at this point; the notion struck him as absurd. Silica had very disconcerting timing; she'd chosen to PM him with questions about a boss far above her level. What was unnerving about the timing was that it was the same subject the clearers around him were discussing at the moment.

"I still think there's a correlation between the order of the attacks in its pattern, and the sequence," said Pyrin. "I couldn't prove it without going back there, but what I remember fits."
Heathcliff nodded. "A reasonable possibility," he said. "It's logical to assume the boss was designed in a way that allows clever players to solve the puzzle other than through trial and error."

Tetsuo's eyes dropped back to the window and the virtual keyboard hanging in the air in front of him, just above his cleared plate. 「Look, you're not going on a raid to this boss, are you? Please say you're not—you're way too low level for it.」

He hesitated, then hit Send.

It just didn't make any sense to him. What possible interest could Silica have in prying into these kinds of details? He'd ranted to her when she'd seen him and asked what happened, but he didn't really expect her to be able to answer a quiz about it—she'd just been there when he needed someone to unload on.

Now Sasha, he thought, I could understand if it'd been her. This puzzle's right up her alley, with the whole magic thing. In fact—

Tetsuo sat bolt upright in his chair, eyes wide and mouth hanging half-open as if he'd been prepared to yell. He caught himself before his epiphany could result in an embarrassing outburst; he'd already had one of those tonight.

Heathcliff noticed. He pulled his attention away from the discussion that was going back and forth between Pyrin and Corvatz—although the temperature of the "discussion" was starting to rise enough to warrant reclassification as an argument. Corvatz was the only survivor of the group he had led to the raid; Pryin had come dangerously close to touching upon that fact. Tetsuo's group leader tilted his head towards him. "Something to add?"

Flustered, Tetsuo leaned across the table and beckoned Heathcliff closer. "I was just thinking," he said quietly, trying not to draw any more attention to himself as Heathcliff leaned in. "I know someone who knows a lot about the ALO magic system. She's been studying it as if it was a real language, and all. I'd ask her if she had any ideas about how to beat this boss, but we're not supposed to talk to anyone else about it, right?"

Heathcliff looked very interested all of a sudden, and gave him a nod at the last bit. "At least for now," he said, matching Tetsuo's soft tones. "Presently our biggest advantage is that we're the only ones who have any practical experience with this boss. We have the only firsthand knowledge, and we should maintain that advantage as long as possible." A brief pause. "That said, your friend's area of study is quite interesting, you know. She might be on to something."

"So do you think I ought to send her a discreet message? I don't want to get her involved, but she might have—"

A sharp whistle tore the air and stopped conversations. Tetsuo and Heathcliff looked down the table towards where Corvatz was sitting. "I just got a message," he said. "We're going to regroup in Arun tomorrow afternoon at fourteen hundred. That means setting out first thing in the morning. What were you two talking about?"

Before Tetsuo could stop him, Heathcliff answered. "Tetsuo seems to be acquainted with someone who has a keen understanding of the magic system. It's possible that her approach might hold the key to defeating this boss."

"I don't know if I'd go that far," Tetsuo said quickly. "I mean, Sasha just studies the magic language, that's all. She's been using her notes to teach it to the kids at the orphanage lately. She's not raid material—her level's way too low, and she doesn't take sides in the faction battles."
If he'd expected that to dampen Corvatz's uncomfortable sudden interest, it did anything but. "If she can give us an edge in this fight," he said fiercely, "then we require her cooperation. You'll talk to her when we get to Arun, Tetsuo. In fact, you're going to take me to her so I can find out for myself if she knows anything of value."

Panic flared in Tetsuo, giving him the sensation of goosebumps he knew his avatar didn't actually have. "I can't do that," he insisted, cursing himself for ever saying anything at all. "You don't understand, she's not a combat mage or anything, she's just a teacher. And she's my friend, I can't ask her to get involved."

"Heathcliff, tell your boy to play ball with us," Corvatz said, eyes flickering towards the silver-haired group leader. "I don't think he understands what's at stake here."

"I think he understands just fine," Heathcliff said smoothly. "Which is why I think he'll understand that there's no harm in simply asking her a few polite questions, since we're going to be there anyway. I'll go with you—I might like to meet this person myself."

Tetsuo squeezed his eyes shut, willing the world to rewind about two minutes so that he could redo it without the part where he started running his big mouth. "I'll ask her," he said miserably. "But I can't guarantee she'll be willing or able to help."

Heathcliff nodded as he rose from the table, a wan smile playing at his lips. "Then we'll make sure to leave a little early tomorrow morning, so that we have time to stop and visit your friend on our way. Get some rest, now."

As Heathcliff turned and departed the inn, Tetsuo felt a large presence standing over him where he sat. He turned and looked as Corvatz leaned over and spoke to him quietly, each word a blow despite the soft delivery.

"If she doesn't know anything, then she doesn't know anything," Corvatz said, hand falling heavily on Tetsuo's shoulder. His voice dropped to a deadly whisper as his grip tightened. "But if she does, you'd better make sure she's not helping anyone but us."

By the time Tetsuo recovered enough composure to stop trembling and look up from the table, he was alone in the inn. There'd been no need for older Salamander to finish the thought that lay at the end of his warning.

Or I will.

His business concluded, Kirito stopped at the door to say his goodbyes before leaving the church. "You're staying here tonight, right?"

Silica nodded. "Sachi-neesan and I have a field trip in the morning, remember?" she saidbrightly. "We have a room to share here now, so I don't even have to pay for an inn when I'm in Arun!"

"You two enjoy that," Kirito said with a smile, imagining the chaos and girlishness that the two of them were going to get up to that night. "I'm on your friends list, so if you guys need anything tomorrow, I'll be in the next zone over—you should be able to see my location and find me in a matter of minutes. I'll check in once in a while, make sure you aren't having too much fun."

Silica giggled and pitched her hand in a vigorous wave. "Good night, Kirito. See you in the morning!"
One of the things Kirito liked most about being a solo player in Alfheim was that most of the time, he was free to do whatever he wanted. He didn't have a duty to any faction or group, and it wasn't hard for him to grind money fighting high-level mobs, so there wasn't any real pressure for him to need to do anything for day-to-day living expenses. It meant that once he'd finished whatever quest or job he'd chosen to take on, he had the freedom to do whatever he wanted with the time left.

It occurred to him that now that he'd finished the work he'd contracted to do for Argo, he was left with a night of unexpected leisure time. The farming with which he'd been planning to fill the evening was going to happen tomorrow instead, and with the location of the boss room known now, there wasn't any progression-related questing or clearing that needed to be done.

He decided to wander the streets of Arun.

The first time he'd returned to Arun after launch day, it had felt strangely empty to him. During the beta, the fact that only two thousand players were participating meant that most of the population focused itself around the World Tree. And on that first day, the entire starting player base of the game was in the city. By comparison, it took time for people to make the journey and begin to trickle into the neutral capital of Alfheim; he had been one of the trail blazers.

Now, though... the streets teemed with life, in some places around the clock. It was hard to take any kind of accurate measure, but Kirito would've sworn that it wasn't just the player population—the population of NPCs seemed to grow as more of the player base once again began to aggregate around Yggdrasil; more shops were open and the number of white cursors he saw as he focused from avatar to avatar seemed greater than they had been. The game seemed to generate new quest content dynamically as it went; he knew for a fact that he'd done some quests that hadn't been in the beta for NPCs which hadn't existed before.

It made him wonder, sometimes, what Kayaba was doing. Was he, as so many suspected, sitting at the top of the World Tree and watching in amusement, waiting for as long as it took for someone to fight their way through Yggdrasil and reach him? Was he still working on the game, developing new quests and fixing bugs? Or was he a player himself?

He could be anyone. It made many players reluctant to discuss the subject openly, for fear of retribution from a captor who could be watching or listening at any time.

But Kirito had to admit he didn't think it was likely that Kayaba would interfere in that way. He thought back to all the interviews he'd watched or read, the time he'd devoted to consuming anything that Akihiko Kayaba had written over the years. He'd read everything there was to know about the development of Alfheim Online—everything accessible to the public, anyway. The system was designed so that it could run indefinitely without human intervention, generating dynamic content and adjusting drop rates or other balance issues procedurally.

It had been touted as a win for stability before launch, but Kirito was certain now that it had been designed that way so that Kayaba could lose himself in this world, leaving it to run itself.

It was hard to say what might have been planned in advance, and what might be evidence of some active hand in the game. New crafting recipes unlocked all the time, and the inventories of merchants seemed to be influenced by the variety of materials vendored off by players; things like that could've simply been part of the vast hierarchy of unlocks designed into the game in the first place.

Whatever the reason, he was glad that it meant better food. His stomach rumbled noticeably when he caught a whiff of some kind of hot meat pastries being sold at a corner cafe, reminding him that he hadn't had a proper meal in hours. As he veered closer to the source of the enticing smell, he felt a tingling at the back of his neck, a faint sense of wrongness just before something struck him in the
He staggered forward, reaching for his sword, but his arms were pinned by a grip that was deceptively strong considering the tiny hands that he could see. A weight had attached itself to him like a leech, and loud feminine laughter stayed his hand almost as effectively as having his arms restrained by that iron grip. His suspicions were confirmed when he heard the voice that belonged to the laughter. "Gotcha!"

He could've easily lifted the girl's weight as she hugged him from behind, but he pretended to stagger under the load, going to one knee. "Ooof. Yep, you got me, Yuuki. Totally… got me. Um. Can I have me back now?"

Yuuki laughed as she did a flip off of Kirito's back, landing in front of him and moving smoothly into a bow.

"Show-off," he said with a grin as he pushed himself upright and swept tan dust from the knees of his black pants.

"Like you're one to talk," said Asuna as she approached from the same direction Yuuki had. "When was the last time you sheathed your sword without doing some fancy twirl with it?"

It was a dig, but Asuna was smiling as she delivered it; Kirito laughed. Asuna stopped near Yuuki, forming the corner of an L between the two of them. "Have you tried this place yet?" she asked as she gestured economically to the cafe Kirito had smelled.

"Not yet," he admitted. "But I've been meaning to, and I'm pretty hungry."

"You should join us, then!" Yuuki said as she scooted herself quickly into one of the chairs at the outside tables. "Asuna and I used to come here all the time, before she started leveling up Cooking."

Kirito automatically looked at Asuna; Yuuki was prone to extending these invitations at times when they weren't always convenient for everyone. But she was already seating herself beside the younger girl, and when she looked up and caught his eye, she nodded towards the empty seat across from them. "My treat," she said with what to Kirito seemed like uncharacteristic generosity.

"You're leveling up Cooking?" Kirito asked as he took the indicated seat, leaning forward so that his equipped sword wouldn't press uncomfortably against his back.

A familiar wariness settled over Asuna's face. "I just started. Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, no, nothing like that. It just surprised me is all. You always seemed so…" A parade of descriptives each presented themselves in turn so that Kirito could discard them as likely to be the Wrong Thing to Say, and he was a little surprised to find that her reaction actually mattered to him. "Serious. You always seemed so serious. It doesn't seem like you, to use a skill slot on something that isn't related to clearing." He could almost feel the specter of Argo's laughter as he said this.

Asuna frowned a little, looking to the side as if embarrassed. "There's more to me than you think," she said quietly as the NPC waiter approached. Her utterance was so low that Kirito almost didn't catch the words. But the moment of awkward silence passed, and she seemed to recover some of her former cheer as she placed her order.

"Are you two here with the Undine clearers?" Kirito asked once they had all ordered. It was more than small talk; he liked the company of the two girls, but not the company they kept.
"Some of them are around," Asuna said. "But we're not going anywhere without Jahala, and last I heard he'd gone back to Parasel for a conference with Diavel."

"Let me guess: what to do about the 25th gateway boss?"

Neither of them seemed surprised by Kirito's reasoned guess. It was the topic of discussion now, even amongst many players not directly connected with the clearing groups. "Everyone's in a tizzy about it," Yuuki said.

Asuna nodded. "Not much information is getting out, but everyone knows it was really, really bad. Bad enough that even though everyone knows where the boss room is now…"

"...Nobody likes the idea of being the next guinea pig to lose half their clearers on a shot in the dark," Kirito finished.

"Which means we've got some time to ourselves," Yuuki said, bobbing in her chair as if she was possessed of too much energy to hold a conversation while sitting still. "What're you up to, Kirito? Waiting around for someone to hire you for the raid?"

"Something like that," Kirito said unhelpfully, deciding not to let on what he knew about the Cait Sith raid plans. He tried to divert the subject. "Tomorrow morning I'm going out to farm mats in the Sewers, and I promised a friend that I'd check in on a group of young kids who're going to be there."

He found both Asuna and Yuuki giving him looks that he'd never before seen on them, both girls wearing disconcerting smiles that made him feel like the subject of someone else's joke. "What?" he said, not understanding their reaction.

The two exchanged looks, their expressions bordering on grins. "Nothing," Asuna said. "I was just thinking that sometimes there's more to you, too." Since that response did nothing to alleviate his confusion, she shook her head. "Sounds boring, though."

"It is," he admitted. "I need a stack of blue slime essences." The spawn rate of that particular color was annoyingly low; it involved a lot of clearing and waiting for repops.

"Want some help?" Asuna asked.

"Um," Kirito said eloquently.

Their orders arrived then, which occupied their mouths and gave Kirito the space to think it through for a minute. He was keenly conscious of Asuna's attention as she ate her meat bun; the arrival of food may have given him a reprieve, but she was obviously not going to let him off the hook.

They'd worked together before in clearing groups and raids. They'd fought by each other's sides. They got along well, when she wasn't being over-sensitive and taking the things he said in the worst possible way. And Yuuki reminded him of his younger sister in more than a few ways; he recognized in himself a protective impulse that he'd felt before. Above all, from a strictly practical standpoint Asuna was an outstanding healer and played her role in a group well. She could handle herself; his problems were his own, not hers.

So why did he always feel this automatic sense of resistance to the idea of partying up with her?

He didn't know. It came from somewhere he didn't recognize, from a motivation or fear that he couldn't pin down. It bothered him, not being able to figure that out. The lack of a reasonable explanation for his feelings left him dissatisfied with the reasons he ended up giving when asked; they felt like rationalizations rather than the truth.
"Come on," Asuna said eventually, winding up as if preparing for a grand argument with half of a pork bun as her weapon of choice. "You know farming goes much quicker when you have company to—"

"I'd like that," Kirito said.

Asuna's argument came to a screeching halt in midsentence. "You would?" She sounded almost shocked.

"Yeah," Kirito said, tasting the idea and finding that it was true. "I would. Like you said, company makes a boring task go by much quicker."

Yuuki, surprisingly, raised an objection; the irony of this role reversal was not lost on Kirito. "I was figuring tomorrow we'd go adventure outside somewhere, Asuna. What happens if they need us for the raid? They won't be able to message us if we're in a dungeon."

"Jahala's still in Parasel," Asuna said dismissively; the kick she delivered to the other girl under the table was probably supposed to be discreet, and failed at that. "I'll send him a PM tomorrow morning and let him know where we'll be, though, just in case. If we stick to the newbie areas right below Arun, we'll be easy to find."

Finishing her meal, Asuna's delicate fingers did a staccato dance in the air, the coda of which ended with a window that opened up in front of Kirito. It was one he'd seen many times before, a simple translucent prompt requesting his confirmation of a routine action.

『Asuna has invited you to join her party. Accept? Yes/No』

His eyes met hers just over the top edge of the window. This time, there was no hesitation before he touched the tip of his finger to the Yes button. The dialog box collapsed and disappeared, and in the upper left corner of his peripheral vision he could see two smaller status gauges appear below his own, labeled with the names of the two girls across the table from him—who were now members of his party. Or more precisely, he was a member of theirs.

"Yay!" said Yuuki, looking happy enough to launch herself across the table in order to hug Kirito. "Welcome!"

Asuna was practically glowing as she put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands. Her smile could have lit up Yggdrasil from the inside. "That settles what we're doing tomorrow morning," she said. "What about tonight?"

It was a good question; Kirito considered it. There were any number of quests he currently had in progress that they could've gone and worked on, but there weren't any in the area around Arun that were at a point where he could benefit from a party. More than anything, really, he'd just been thinking that he'd spend the evening—

"I know. Why don't we just wander around the city and see what we can see?" Asuna suggested, slipping free of the chair and holding out a hand to him as if to help him up.

Kirito smiled, starting to reach out to take the proffered hand, but changing his mind and instead pushing himself to his feet. The party of three roamed off into the nightlife of Arun, setting aside for a few hours the pressure of the death game and the need to progress through the World Tree.

Nobody was raiding the boss tonight, and the quests could wait.
"Of all the consumable items that can come from mob drops, few are rarer—or more useful—than the category of single-use items known generally as «Crystals». Activated by short voice commands, they have no level requirement for their use, and allow any player possessing one to perform feats that can only be accomplished by high-level or race-exclusive magic, such as healing a player to full in an instant. Some of the rarest varieties have effects which even the most potent fae magic cannot duplicate..."

—Alfheim Online Manual, «Crystal Artifacts»

5 May 2023: Day 181

Argo was deeply troubled, and she wasn't quite sure why.

Everything was going according to plan so far. Kirito had secured Sasha's cooperation, the Sylphs were on board with Alicia's plan, and all the clearers had trickled into Arun over the course of the night and settled in to get as much sleep as possible. They were ready to move on very short notice.

Perhaps it was just the dreams. She never remembered much from her dreams, but this morning she'd awakened with an unfocused restlessness, the kind of nagging feeling that a person got when they'd forgotten to do something important. It had put her in a low mood as she dealt with the private messages that had accumulated overnight, and it meant that she'd already been out of sorts when she got to the news about the Salamanders taking a second shot at the boss—

That tidbit, right there, had to be part of it. She knew that she should probably tell Alicia—it certainly qualified as the kind of information that was part of their standing arrangement. But she'd been dragging her feet on that for most of the last half-hour while she followed up on other queries and transactions awaiting her attention, and even those had only been getting about half of her full attention.

The other half brooded. And tried to pin down exactly why she felt driven to do so.

Argo had learned to trust these feelings. While it was, as far as she'd been able to tell, impossible for her to forget words, that didn't mean that she had perfect recall of everything—like anyone else, things slipped her mind, and she couldn't very well be consciously thinking about everything her memories held all at once. This kind of hunch, this feeling of intuition about something as-yet undefined, was a sensation she attributed to her subconscious trying to give her hints about something that she hadn't consciously pieced together yet on her own.

So let's run down what I know that's relevant. This feeling's got something to do with the Sals taking another swipe at the boss. No surprises there—they need a win, badly, especially after the black eye they just got. I can't be worried about them beating us to it, 'cause according to my sources they didn't even leave Gattan until a little less than an hour ago.

She ran that part over in her mind again, breaking it down. Even if they had groups clearing the way for them, it would take them at least a few hours to make the trip. Alicia had actually sent a group ahead the night before and bound an insanely expensive Corridor Crystal to the area just outside of the boss room, so that once everyone was ready they could simply teleport directly there. If the Salamanders had done anything like that, they'd already be there—which strongly argued they were going to have to clear a path up there the hard way.

Which meant that even if the Cait Sith-Sylph raid party didn't leave until the moment the
Salamanders arrived in Arun, they didn't have to worry about being beaten to it. So that couldn't be what was nagging at her.

She set the matter aside for a moment as she moved on to the next message in her queue—one of the last ones. It was from one of her agents in Parasel, which was unusual; not a whole lot of drama or interesting things happened in the Undine home city.

« Thought you'd want to know—a whole mess of players just rallied in front of the gates and headed west, including Jahala. Scuttlebutt from everyone who was there says they're enroute to Arun to rendezvous with their other clearers—they're making a play for the gateway boss. »

Argo could've closed her eyes and simply read the message against the slate background of her memory. Indeed, she often did this with messages, glancing at each one just long enough to imprint it and then reviewing the words in her mind; it kept her from having to leave her menus open all the time. But something kept her eyes fixed on the message window and her hands still. Something was moving in her thoughts; something clicked.

This isn't significant to us either, she thought. If the Salamanders can't beat us there, damn sure the Undines can't if they just left. And they might even slow each other down as both groups try to clear their way to the boss.

She grinned suddenly. Wouldn't that just chafe the Sallies, if the Undines beat them to it for the second time in a row. With all the bitching I've been hearing from Corvatz's crowd about Mortimer's incompetence and inaction, it might just—

Argo's smile disappeared. Her thoughts shifted into overdrive.

A minute later, she was running down the hallways of the castle as quickly as she could, calling out for Alicia. She found the Cait Sith leader poking her head out of her office, bemused by all the yelling echoing down the halls. "Someone pull your tail, Argo?"

Argo skidded to a stop by the doorway, holding up a hand in a plea for a moment to gather herself. Avatars didn't breathe or require oxygen, but the system did a fair job of simulating the effects of sudden, unexpected exertion. "We need to talk."

Alicia snorted, ears twitching with what Argo recognized as amusement. "Don't we always." She waved a hand. "Come on, walk with me. I need something to eat before I give Thelvin the go-ahead for this morning's raid and settle in to wait for word."

"That's what I wanted to talk about," Argo said as she fell into step. "I just got news that the Salamanders left Gattan this morning. They're going to take another shot at the boss."

"What? When?" Alicia almost stumbled as one foot tried to keep walking while the other tried to bring her to a sudden halt. "Oh hell, I need to tell Thelvin to go now—"

"Let them," Argo said insistently, stepping in front of Alicia. "Don't do this."

Alicia stared at her, expression incredulous. "Don't what? Take advantage of the Sallies stepping on their junk so we can beat them to this boss? Hon, do I have to remind you when we last had a chance like this?"

"March 1st, 2023, 8:17 PM. Gateway boss 15."

Alicia's stare continued unabated. Argo was unmoved.
"Look, you know I wouldn't ask this if I didn't have a damn good reason. Do you trust me?"

She should've known that particular approach wouldn't work with Alicia here. The other girl's tail gave an errant twitch every few moments as she crossed her arms and replied. "You know I do. And I trust that you have damn good reasons. The problem is that there are over 2400 people in this faction other than you, and they are expecting me to lead them to clear the game."

"Yeah, but does it really matter who clears which gateway?" Argo asked.

"Yes, it does—because boss fights mean rare item drops and huge amounts of EXP, and they don't respawn."

"Maybe," Argo said. "But when it comes to getting out of this death game, only one thing matters: who gets the LA on the end boss."

Alicia sighed and gestured for Argo to follow as she stepped around her and started walking quickly down the hall. "If it doesn't matter who clears what, then why are you so worked up over this?"

Argo wrestled with the reflexive urge to charge for the information. Longstanding friendship or not, Alicia was a customer, Argo had a business to run—and this background was worth a small fortune. But Alicia was already paying her quite a lot for her help with the 25th gateway boss, and there was a strong argument to be made that this fell under the umbrella of information relevant to that work. "I've been hearing noise from my Sal contacts for a while now," she began carefully. "There's a large minority within the faction that was very loyal to Kibaou, and they still resent Mort and Eugene for their coup. Some of them are senior clearers."

"No surprises there."

"No, but after the Undines beat them to clearing the 24th boss right on the heels of the NCC beating them to Gateway 23, they've been making a lot of noise—especially in the last few hours. There's been unrest. The Sals had a good run from 20 to 22, but before that they'd only taken two of the last eight bosses."

"Which still puts them way ahead of us or the NCC," Alicia pointed out. "To say nothing of the Sylphs or Undines."

"You're missing the point, Allie," Argo said insistently, stepping quickly ahead of her again and putting her hand against the wall as a barrier. "To us, that looks really good. To the Sals, who got used to riding high on one success after another once they cleared the Valley of Dragons and got to the World Tree, it looks like Mortimer's ability to keep feeding them wins is weakening."

"Good!" Alicia said, ducking under the arm with her ears laid flat against her head. "If the Salamanders are weakening, that's good for everyone else in this game!"

"No, not good!" Argo shot back as she tried to keep up while walking sideways and gesturing wildly. "These guys got used to being on top of the world because they were bigger and got a head start. That doesn't count for so much anymore, and the rest of the factions are catching up. It's not the Sals that are weakening, it's Mort's hold on them. And after the wipe they just suffered on their first try against the 25th boss, if another faction beats them to it you can pretty much guarantee someone else is taking his place when the election rolls around tomorrow."

"And why should I care about Mortimer's political career?"

"Because he's the main thing keeping the Salamanders united under the Treaty. When was the last time there was open warfare between the factions? How many months has it been the last time there
was an actual serious battle between the clearing groups?"

Alicia stopped and faced Argo, quiet while she digested this information. She'd never had much of a poker face—another reason she usually used Argo as her envoy—and her conflict was plain.

"I'm not talking about forever, Allie," Argo said a bit more quietly when no reply was immediately forthcoming. "Just not for right now. Let Mort get some political capital back until after the leadership vote. He's not a bad guy, he's just got the same agenda you and all the other faction leaders have: getting his people out of here. The main guy in line to replace him is one of their lead clearers, name of Corvatz—a Kibaou loyalist. Things could be a lot worse."

"And what about the next time?" Alicia said after a moment. "What happens the next time anyone starts pulling ahead of the Salamanders? Isn't this setting a… what do you call it…"

"A precedent?"

"That's it," Alicia said with a snap of her fingers. "Isn't this a bad precedent to set? I mean, you're basically telling me that the Sals can't be defeated—because if they start falling behind again, they're gonna want a new leader, and whoever ends up with the leadership won't be as reasonable. You're telling me we'll always have to be second place at best."

Argo had no response to that. Alicia had a point, and she didn't like it one bit.

"Besides," Alicia said. "It's not up to just me. This is a joint raid between us and the Sylphs, and if I don't move… that's not gonna stop Skarrrip. There's still a lot of bad blood between the Sylphs and the Sallies, and he's not gonna pass up a chance to kick them while they're down."

Argo was not a person normally inclined towards despair or hopelessness. There was always a solution—always—even if she couldn't necessarily see it. But as Alicia spoke, she felt the first twinges of an unfamiliar feeling. A feeling that the situation was not within her ability to influence.

She didn't like that much either.

"This is gonna be bad, Alicia," Argo finally said, voice soft. "I can see it coming. A lot of people are gonna die."

To her surprise, Alicia simply leaned in and hugged her—long enough and tightly enough to trigger the annoying harassment pop-up. When she withdrew, the older girl's smile was bitter, her expression laced with regret.

"Welcome to Alfheim."


In Sakuya's opinion, Sigurd had a great many faults. He was sexist, arrogant, egotistical, and seemed to have little tact or kindness to spare for people who weren't useful to him. What was that popular English word which seemed to describe him so aptly? He was a *douchebag*.

But there was at least one area in which he could not be fairly criticized: he was an early riser, and as prompt as a system message when he had a schedule to keep. Sakuya knew he set his HUD alarm for exactly 7 in the morning—a fact of which he'd boasted more than once, as if missing sleep was something to be admired. Today she'd made sure that she was awake before he was—and that she was well-hidden behind a hedge across the street from the inn where he was staying, her concealment in the deep shadow of early morning on Yggdrasil's western side helped by the use of a Transparency spell from her race's native wind magic.
Listen to me, she chided herself. *Thinking of us as a race. Now I'm starting to sound like a dyed-in-the-wool larper like Sigurd or Skarrip.*

She looked around, grateful that the few players passing through couldn't see her skulking in the bushes like some pervert. NPCs didn't seem to care. *This whole thing is silly; I'm probably wasting my time here on account of nothing more reliable than an anonymous tip.*

But if she was honest with herself, Sakuya was sure it had to be more than just that. The tip had been a catalyst, yes, but she'd been growing more and more bothered by Skarrip's descent into some kind of deep-immersion roleplaying of his position as leader—enough that she was planning on putting in her name for the leadership vote on the next cycle. And Sigurd just oozed shadiness in ways that she felt went beyond her visceral dislike of the man.

And since she wasn't really in a position to check in on her faction leader… at the moment, that left her with only one alternative for indulging her suspicions.

*Which to be fair, so far amount to a bit less than nothing—other than vague unease, and intolerance for an unrepentant pig of a man.* She glanced at her HUD, eyes drawn by motion in her peripheral vision to her status gauge, where one of her buff icons was flashing. Her Transparency spell was about to expire; she had to recast it about once every three minutes, and had had to do so twice now since 7:00 AM.

"*Futto mezal kevayezul dweren,*" she whispered, watching the blue bar beneath her green HP gauge tick down. The cost of the spell wasn't even a sixth of her mana pool, but even with a player's slow natural MP regeneration that meant she was only going to be able to maintain this for so much longer before she'd have to use an MP pot that would be better saved for the raid. Not that they were all that expensive; still, she had to hope that Sigurd was—

The door of the inn opened, and the object of her thoughts emerged as if summoned. Sakuya immediately cut off her mental wanderings and focused.

He was alone, and cast his gaze up and down the street as if expecting to see someone. The almost furtive nature of it piqued her curiosity further, especially once he turned and headed north along the wide street as it gradually curved towards the east around the World Tree. It was the opposite direction of the arboretum, the rally point where the two raid groups would soon be gathering—or anything else of interest as far as she was concerned.

*There's nothing that way,* she thought. *No major vendors, anyway, nothing useful to a clearer.* At least, that was the limit of what she knew was within reasonable walking distance; anything further and it would've been more efficient to fly.

She considered. There was almost an hour until the plan to rendezvous with the Cait Sith in the arboretum; she had plenty of time to pass before she'd need to start gathering up her party. But so did Sigurd. He could simply be killing that time with an idle stroll.

Sakuya didn't buy it. At all.

Once Sigurd was almost out of sight, she emerged from her hiding spot and took to the air momentarily, landing on the street level above and to the east. Even if she'd been fully visible, nobody would've batted an eye; in a city largely designed as concentric terraces irregularly climbing their way up the roots and base of Yggdrasil, a few moments of flight could often save half an hour of walking around to the next radial street.

Wings still made noise, though, and while the rising and ebbing thrum from the mingled flight
sounds of all nine races were part of the background city noise of Arun, she'd just attract attention if she tried to follow him from the air. This was the next-best thing; the westward edge of the street was lined by a railing that bounded the interspersed benches and bushes overlooking the roofs of the buildings in the next terrace down. From her vantage point, she could just barely catch a glimpse of Sigurd's long hair and dark green cloak below, picking him out from the crowd of NPCs by his green cursor. Both streets followed the gentle curve of Yggdrasil's trunk all the way to Hervor's Arch, a tunnel through one of the lesser roots that led to what was colloquially referred to by the clearers as "Noobtown"—a part of Arun frequented by lower-level players due to the simple quests, cheap inns and services, and proximity to the easier areas of the city sewers.

As the minutes dragged on and Sakuya fought off a feeling of absurd foolishness for engaging in this little charade, she nonetheless couldn't help wondering what could possibly interest someone like Sigurd in this part of town, picking away at the thought like a hard piece of rice caught in her teeth. The man was a larper, she knew, but not the sort who took any particular joy in pretending to interact with NPCs or immersing himself in the lore of the world—he got off on the feeling of power that came with being an important person in a pretend world.

So what is he getting out of this? The question wouldn't go away, and it kept her moving and paying attention to her quarry when she was otherwise tempted to give up and go do something useful—something other than skulking around playing at espionage.

Breakfast at the orphanage was a scene of scarcely-moderated chaos. Kirito hadn't spent very many mornings there—in fact, this would be his second—but he was fairly certain that the last time he'd been here, the children had been much quieter. There was an atmosphere of celebration in the air, and Kirito supposed that he could understand: after weeks of diligent study, the kids were finally being allowed to go on a real raid, to actually leave the Safe Zone and go adventuring by themselves.

Well, perhaps not entirely by themselves. Kirito glanced over at the older kids' table where Sachi and Silica were sitting; the two girls were both looking at him and seemed to be laughing over some kind of shared joke. He smiled in benevolent confusion, and his half-puzzled expression seemed to make the two of them giggle even harder.

Sachi had indeed come a long way from the scared teenager she'd been when Kirito had first met her—the time she'd been spending partying with her friends and Silica had obviously done some good. The bold young Cait Sith girl's example seemed to be rubbing off on her a bit, and she seemed to be gradually accepting her role as the "elder sister" of the orphanage. The fact that the two of them could laugh the way they were right now meant that she wasn't dwelling on the weight of the responsibility she bore; it was a good sign.

"You look like a young man with heavy thoughts."

Kirito looked up as Sasha swept her robes out from under her and settled into the seat next to him with her own plate and a glass of orange juice. "Nothing all that heavy," he said. "Just thinking that everyone seems to be in such good spirits."

"It's true," Sasha said before tapping a butter knife against a small jar; the tip of the knife glowed with a soft amber light and when she swept it across her toast, it left a trail of melted butter. "It's thanks to you, you know."

Kirito blinked in surprise, looking over at Sasha through a thin shock of messy black hair. "Me?"
Sasha nodded. "You had some hard words for me the last time we met. About the way I'd been trying to shelter the kids here." She hesitated. "And you were right."

Kirito wasn't sure what to say to that. He sipped thoughtfully at his water, using it as a stalling tactic. "Thanks?"

Sasha revealed a pained smile as she gazed at her charges. "Look at them. Some of them are so young... they shouldn't be trapped in a world like this. It's unjust that they should have to worry about fighting for their lives at their ages. Part of me just wants to keep them here and never let them leave." She glanced at Kirito. "But... what you said that day wouldn't leave me. And when I stopped to think about it, I realized that we don't really know how long we're going to be trapped here, or what's going to happen. And I'd be doing them a disservice if I didn't try to teach them everything I know, and give them a fighting chance at survival, if..."

Kirito sensed the lull in her words, and prompted her. "If?"

Sasha was quiet for a minute, her eyes distant. "Well, there's a reason why I insisted that Alicia Rue provide the money to buy this property before I leave to go on this raid. And why I made Sachi the beneficiary if... if anything happens to me." She looked from child to child once more; Kirito could only guess at her thoughts. "All I've ever wanted to do, for as long as I could remember, was teach. Some people struggle to find their calling, but mine was—" She stopped suddenly and stood straight up, her chair skidding backward slightly. "Crunch! Masaki! If I see one more piece of food in the air—"

"But it's not like it makes a mess!" protested one of the named children, a stocky Gnome boy with short reddish-blond hair. "It just bursts into blue lights!"

"Particles," said a Salamander boy near him.

"Polygons!" said the Sylph girl at whom the slice of bread had been aimed, as if the distinction was the most relevant thing in the world to the dispute at hand.

"She's right," Kirito pointed out. "They're technically—"

"It doesn't matter!" Sasha said firmly, tone hard. "The next person I see throwing food doesn't go on the field trip today!"

That produced obedience in a way that no other threat might have. Kirito wondered how long it would be before some of these kids started realizing that if they really wanted to, they could just choose to leave and make their own way in this world; even fighting newbie mobs in the sewers would make enough money to provide them an inn room and simple food. Most of them were too young to be on their own even by Alfheim standards, but what authority would stop them if they made that choice?

He had never asked Sasha whether or not any of her kids had ever gone missing, and she'd never volunteered the information. But between Yuuki and Silica, he knew of at least two elementary school-age girls who regularly ventured into the World Tree in parties—and Yuuki was even a clearer. While most of the kids here were at least a year or two younger than that, it wouldn't have surprised him in the least if a few had already decided to find their own adventures.

Sasha pulled her chair back in and sat down heavily, letting loose a long sigh accompanied by a wistful smile. "Well, anyway. You know what my calling in life is. These children aren't truly mine, Kirito. I know that. Most of them have parents out there somewhere, probably in the real world. My hope is that when this game is cleared, I'll be able to meet those parents and look them in the eyes..."
without shame, knowing that I did everything I could to keep their children safe and teach them well."

She hadn't said anything about Kirito's role in this, not directly. But he knew that in less than an hour they'd all be leaving on their big adventure—and that at that point, they'd be his responsibility, too. He met Sasha's eyes. "We'll check in on them frequently," he promised again. "But Sachi and Silica are growing up a lot, and they'll do a great job out there. Believe in them, too."

A pounding at the entrance to the church drowned out whatever the beginning of Sasha's response might have been, and froze a mouthful of scrambled eggs in place halfway towards Kirito's mouth. An uncomfortable feeling flooded through him at the sound—someone was hammering on the door, someone who apparently wasn't keyed by the system to open it. He wasn't expecting Asuna or Yuuki for another ten or fifteen minutes, and the World Tree raid wouldn't be starting for a little while after that.

Unexpected visitors tended to be the harbingers of bad news.

"Sasha!" called the boy who'd gone to get the door. "There's a man—"

The sounds of metal armor filled the hallway, and a Cait Sith tank that Kirito recognized from the previous day's negotiations jogged into the room, trailed by a few others of his kind and a poor boy who was desperately trying to pretend that he was guiding them here rather than trying to keep up with them. "I'm sorry to interrupt your meal, ma'am," said the armored Cait Sith, "but we have to move."

Sasha's eyebrows raised. "You must be Thelvin. Alicia told me to expect you, but not until—"

Thelvin bowed respectfully and kept his gaze lowered as he interrupted her. "Please forgive my rudeness, but we don't have a lot of time. There's been a change in the situation and we need to depart for Yggdrasil immediately."

"What's happened?" Kirito asked, breakfast forgotten as he came to his feet.

Thelvin lifted his head and gave him a look brushed with a hint of skepticism that relented after a moment. "Salamanders are coming," he said tersely. "I'm very sorry, but—"

"I understand," Sasha said, decision filling her voice. She rose almost as quickly as she had in reaction to the budding food fight, wringing her hands on a napkin and setting it aside. "Sachi, please take over getting everyone to clean up and prepare for the field trip."

Sachi nodded, teal eyes a little wide at the sudden drama. "Yes, ma'am."

"Also—" Sasha sounded as if she was winding up to give some further advice or reminders to the two girls about the day to come. She glanced at Kirito momentarily, and then beckoned to Silica and Sachi. "Come here."

When the two younger girls did, she swept them both into a sudden hug. They startled briefly, and then returned it with enthusiasm, wrapping their arms around her. "I believe in you both," she said, voice a little choked. "You're the grownups down there, today. You'll do a wonderful job, and I can't wait to hear all about it when you get back."

"We love you, Miss Sasha," Silica said as more of the kids got up from their tables and gathered around for the impromptu group hug. Pina, who'd been perched on a table at the edge of the room, circled the growing group as if looking in vain for a place to join in.
"Go kick some butt!" said one of the boys, a comment which set nearly everyone to laughter and broke some of the tension.

Thelvin was smiling, and he was too polite to break into the moment, but he subtly cleared his throat. Sasha gave one last squeeze to the group, and began to detach herself. "I love you all. Be smart, be safe, and have fun!"

Sakuya tailed Sigurd for some time after that, periodically refreshing her Transparency spell and ignoring the odd looks from the few players around her in the street when it lapsed. The spell was to reduce the chances of him spotting her if he should happen to glance up at the next terrace, not to conceal her from the entire world—although she had to admit that she didn't really care to explain herself to anyone in her raid group, either. Her MP was running low, and it was a relief when he finally seemed to find the place he was searching for, stopping and looking around as if someone had called his name.

She blinked, then again to be sure she'd seen what she thought she had, squinting. Briefly, she thought she'd caught sight of someone else with a Transparency spell. The effect wasn't true invisibility; it was imperfect even at high levels, and if you were looking directly at someone when they moved, you might catch a glimpse of a faint shimmer in the air where the edges of their avatar distorted the light. As she watched more closely, she could tell there was a figure in the alley between the two buildings below her, and it had moved when Sigurd had stopped in the street just outside. She thought she could see the outline of a hand, beckoning. Too far to hear anything...

Before she could talk herself out of what she was about to do, she found herself stepping away from the railing in order to get some distance, then muttering the words to a spell as low as she could, one she didn't often have a reason to use. "Futto tsutakke nusha—" She almost swore under her breath as she fumbled the words, losing a bit of MP, then tried again. "Futto tsutakke nushlaju dweren!"

The world around her vanished from her ears, rendering her nearly completely deaf—an effect that had been panic-inducing the first time she'd tried the spell. Even now it was still slightly disconcerting, and only the knowledge that it was helping conceal her presence made it tolerable. Sakuya had incanted the effect at the lowest magnitude she could; she didn't want to use up the last of her MP and didn't need much duration—just long enough for her to take a running jump at the railing, leaping over it headfirst and manifesting her wings. She was fairly certain the Muffle spell would suppress her wing noise as well, if she understood how it worked, but she nevertheless used them as little as possible—enough to slow her fall to the flat roof of the building below her. She tucked her shoulder and dismissed her wings, flowing into a breakfall roll that absorbed the impact but made her ample bust jounce uncomfortably despite the bindings she wore, drawing a wince from her.

As soon as she came to a stop, she glanced at her HUD and dismissed the buff icon, sighing quietly in relief when the noise of the city rushed back into her ears as if she'd just surfaced from a long stint underwater. Off to the left, she could see her MP was now well below the 10% mark, far too low to cast her Transparency again—and that had about a minute left on the active effect. She crawled to the edge of the rooftop and listened, trying not to be distracted by the fact that she could see the surface of the roof through her hands and forearms.

"—don't care. I didn't come here to exchange pleasantries with you."

That had been Sigurd's voice and charming way with words for certain, but the faintly-accented baritone that spoke next was entirely unfamiliar to her. "No surprise. I didn't think you had it in you to be pleasant."
Whoever it was, Sakuya had the sudden urge to buy them a drink despite the lack of affect in their tone. She could almost hear the blood vessels in Sigurd's forehead popping in contrast to the stranger's cold, calm words.

"You dare? I could easily give this job to someone else, you know."

A loud snort. "We both know you can't. Want to play it this way? Fine. I was told you had a task for me. Quit wasting my time and get to the point, messenger boy."

There was a pause, during which Sakuya assumed Sigurd was making faces that she dearly wished she could risk looking to see. She almost jumped when into that pause came a tone sounding in her ear and a flashing in her peripheral vision—an incoming private message, and quite possibly the most inconveniently-timed one she'd ever received. She couldn't even afford to ignore it, especially not when she saw who it was from. Grimacing, she rolled onto her back and poked at the air, sending her party's healer a terse response that managed not to admit exactly where she was and what she was doing—although she supposed Natsuo could just as easily look her up on his area map if he wanted to.

She shook her head quickly, as if to negate the train of thought. *Distractions!*

「Busy now—I'll get back to you in five.」

Her Transparency spell was still running, so the exchange couldn't have taken more than a few moments, but it had drawn her attention away from whatever Sigurd was discussing with the person he'd been meeting with. She'd caught maybe one word in ten, and her finger had barely touched the *Send* button in her interface before she'd rolled back towards the edge of the building, staying low and trying to pick up the thread again.

"—should be simple enough for you, Prophet. Don't your people live in the Lower—?"

Sigurd was brusquely interrupted by the voice of the stranger he'd called *Prophet*. "You're not as well-informed as you think." A pause. "And I'm not an errand boy like you. I don't do fetch quests."

"Look," snapped Sigurd finally. "This banter is pointless. You're already on retainer. We don't care how you get the stuff—just get it and tie up any loose ends however you like. I promise it'll be worth your time."

There was quiet for long enough that Sakuya couldn't be certain whether the two of them were even still there in the alley below, or whether they'd wordlessly parted ways after that last exchange. Just when she was tempted to leave while she still had time left on her concealment spell, she heard Prophet's deep, accented voice speak up one last time.

"You beg like a scorned pet, Sigurd. But don't worry—we'll do this. It ought to be entertaining."

This time she could *hear* the snarl as Sigurd sputtered. Sakuya was torn: this Prophet person sounded like a roleplayer, and one even shadier than Sigurd—not the sort of person she wanted to, well, meet in a dark alley. But hearing him serve Sigurd with a dose of his own medicine was delicious. She felt like a sports fan rooting for injuries.

"Go to hell, Spriggan," Sigurd spat.

Cold laughter bounced off the walls of the alley and trickled up to Sakuya's ears. There was no humor in it, no warmth, and scarcely a trace of humanity—just pure mockery. "We all meet her sooner or later, boy," Prophet said.
"Sakuya!"

Lances of ice shot through Sakuya's body at the sound of her name echoing down the street. She rolled quickly onto her back, and when she looked up at the overhang from which she'd been tailing Sigurd, she saw a young Sylph boy with wide-set downcast ears and a distraught expression leaning over the railing and waving at her. Her gaze immediately shot up to the status gauge in her HUD; the Transparency effect had worn off. Wide-eyed, she waved frantically up at the boy while shaking her head and making chopping motions at her throat.

_Idiot kid! What's he doing here—he's not even a clearer!_ She felt bad for chastising him so cruelly even in her own thoughts; Recon had a good heart and meant well. But he was hopeless at Voluntary Flight, and not particularly quick on the uptake; he would never be a part of the Sylph clearing groups, no matter how much he wanted to be.

And he was blowing her cover.

She didn't know whether or not Sigurd or Prophet had figured out that she was up here, or if they thought Recon was waving at her out in the street proper. For that matter, she wasn't even sure they could see him from where they were standing. But she wasn't taking any more chances. She log-rolled herself rapidly to the front edge of the building, and kept rolling until she went over the side, landing on the burlap awning of an NPC vegetable stand and bouncing off of it to land in a heap in the street. By the time Sigurd lunged out of the alleyway, looking as if he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, Sakuya had composed herself and was leaning over the NPC vendor's table, examining his wares.

She briefly considered giving Sigurd a wave and a smile, but rejected the thought immediately—he'd _know_ something was up. Instead she shot him a momentary glance filled with the kind of disdain that was customary for him, and went back to her browsing.

She heard Sylph wings in flight, and there was a shimmer of motion and green light from her other side as Recon slowly lowered himself down next to her using his flight controller. "Sakuya!" he said. "Where have you been?"

A number of answers sprang immediately to mind, beginning with the urge to ask him why her doings were his business. But he was a nice enough kid, and it hadn't really been his fault that he'd caught her doing something embarrassing. "Shopping," she said vaguely. Then she stopped and thought about it for a moment, recalling the message she'd received from Natsuo not long ago, and asked, "is something the matter?"

Recon nodded vigorously, the perpetually-worried look never leaving his face. "They're trying to get everyone together at the arboretum early," he said. "I don't know why, but it must be importa—"

"I'll tell you why," Sigurd said sternly as he drew near the both of them, grabbing Sakuya's arm and starting to usher her southwards.

She jerked her arm out of his grasp and slapped his hand away, glaring at him. "Do that again, and raid or no raid I'll send the harassment report. Now tell me what's so important that they've got children running around looking for stray clearers."

"The Salamanders left Gattan over an hour ago, and they're on their way here to steal our boss kill," Sigurd said with a scowl while he materialized his wings, turning them into a sparkling green blur and beginning to rise into the air. "We go _now._"
Sasha spared one last look back in the direction she'd come. Even though the surrounding buildings blocked her view and kept her from seeing the church in the distance, it had been her home for long enough that she could orient herself even without the visual aid. And now that she owned the church, it would be her home—and the orphanage's—for a long time to come.

She wanted to go back already. The new robes that the Cait Sith had procured for her itched; the stat boosts on them were essential for the raid to come, but she wished she could've worn a set of her usual street clothes, which were player-crafted for comfort. The discomfort only served to remind her that she didn't truly belong here, with this group of veteran clearers almost ten levels higher than her, vying to clear the World Tree.

The black-haired Cait Sith man in plate armor who'd come to pick her up—Thelvin, he'd called himself—jogged up to her, steel boots thudding sharply against the cobblestone. "Ma'am, I'd like to introduce you to someone," he said, gesturing to a massive Gnome behind him. He was even larger than Thelvin himself—no mean feat; the man was one of the largest Cait Sith she'd ever met—and the shoulder-length hair and beard framing his craggy face was the deep reddish-brown color of rich soil. He was clad in loose-fitting robes that were only a few shades darker than his hair, and she could see a light leather breastplate peeking out beneath the neckline. He had piercing blue eyes and a serious expression, and looked like he could've snapped her in half with one hand.

"This is Bourne, a battlemage we've hired from the NCC," said Thelvin. "He's going to be your guardian for this raid."

Sasha bowed politely to the large Gnome man, who did the same as he knelt, placing a hand over the warhammer hanging at his side to keep it from swinging as he did. Even kneeling he was still taller than her. "Milady. I understand you're going to be pulling a lot of aggro in this fight."

"I believe the technical term is trying not to get killed," she replied with a slightly nervous smile.

Bourne laughed heartily, rising once more. "You're in the wrong line of work for that here, but I'll be doing my best to see you stay on your feet. So from what I'm told, you've got some kind of high-end spell that's key to this battle, but it's going to put all the mob's hate on you for a time when it lands. That about the size of it?"

Sasha nodded hesitantly. "I wouldn't say that it's really high-end, per se," she began. "It's only Fourth Magnitude. But it has… very steep requirements."

Bourne lifted both bushy eyebrows.

"I'm being an idiot, she thought to herself. They need to know. "I asked the Cait Sith to procure gear for me with very specific stat bonuses—to be exact, a huge boost to HP and VIT. There's a reason for that beyond just wanting to stay alive. The kind of spell that I'm casting combines four different elements, which dramatically increases the cost. To the point where, when I finally did the numbers on it, I realized that I simply didn't have the MP to cast it."

Thelvin looked confused. "And? In that case, why not get gear with MP and INT boosts instead?"

"How much MP are we talking about?" Bourne asked.

"A little over 8300," Sasha said instantly. "That might vary some, depending on the order in which I need to incant the elements and if I need to switch up the effects to ensure they apply in the correct order. But the difference won't be meaningful."

There was a moment of absolute stunned silence from the two when she finished her explanation.
"That's impossible," Thelvin said. "Our top mages are almost level 36, and they barely break 6000 base MP. There's no gear at our levels that would make up that difference… let alone at yours."

Sasha hesitated. "I'm using nibralth."

Thelvin gave her a blank look. But after a moment, Bourne's blue eyes widened. "Bloody hell," he said. "I see why you need me, then."

The Cait Sith raid leader raised his hand. "Someone mind explaining to the non-mage what a niburaarusu is?"

"Nibralth," said Bourne, his pronunciation flawless enough that it could've been played directly from the guide icon in her spellbook. "It's a word that I've only ever heard in mid-level water magic, in the very first rez spell we get. If I'm not mistaken, that spell splits the MP cost evenly between your HP and MP."

"Precisely," Sasha said, relieved to be able to talk to someone who didn't need everything about magic explained to them. "It also decreases the required skill level but doubles the cooldown timer."

"But if you're using that effect in this spell..." Bourne trailed off, absentmindedly fingering the leather-wrapped grip of his warhammer. "You're going to kill yourself casting this, milady."

Sasha shook her head. "No, I've done the math. With the robes, rings and necklace the Caits provided, I have just over 4400 HP. I can just barely cast it. But I'll need healing immediately."

"There's no spell that will recover four thousand HP that quickly," Thelvin said. "You'd need to use a Healing Crystal, and those are—"

"I know," Sasha said. "The one is all I have."

"I believe this is where I come in," Bourne said. "Thelvin tells me you're something of a magic scholar. Have you ever heard of the spell «Mountain Retreat»?"

Sasha blinked twice, excitement suddenly filling her and sweeping away her nervousness. "No. But you have my complete attention."

Bourne let loose a gruff laugh, clapping a meaty hand on her shoulder; the blow staggered her. "I'm not surprised you don't know it. It's Gnome-only and requires a skill of 895. Far's we know, I'm one of only two mages who've gotten Earth high enough to cast it, and even I can barely manage it with MP boosts."

Sasha could barely restrain herself from interrogating Bourne for everything he knew about this spell. "What's the incantation? What does it do?"

Bourne made fists and folded his hands behind his back before speaking. "Dotto nyafe jezut, keglamtavul shippura dweren."

Sasha realized at once what he'd done—by keeping his hands in a position that couldn't be used to cast a spell, it had allowed him to speak the incantation without the system trying to cast it. She kicked herself for not thinking of it before, and made a mental note as he went on.

"What it does is encase you in elemental stone for a short time and wipe out half your aggro. Nothing can hurt you, but you won't be able to see, hear, move, or do anything—so don't freak out when it happens."

Thelvin held up both hands in a "T" shape, the fingertips of one hand perpendicular to the other.
palm. "This is all good stuff and she needs to know what to expect, but we really have to get moving." He raised his voice, pitching it to carry. "Sigurd! Are all of your people ready?"

"We've been ready," Sigurd said evenly from where he stood with his people, giving Sasha an unpleasant, skeptical look that suggested he blamed her for the delay and possibly questioned her fitness to be there. The latter was fair—Sasha questioned it herself. "But if you like, we can wait here until the Salamanders show up."

Thelvin frowned, but didn't rise to the bait. "Last chance, everyone! If you've got any gear to equip, long-duration buffs to cast, any other prep to do—now's the time. As soon as we step through the portal, we'll be heading into the boss room." And so saying, he went through the motions of opening his game menu, materializing from his inventory a large rectangular crystal.

It was beautiful. The crystal had to be nearly the size of her forearm, but looked considerably smaller than that when held in Thelvin's large hands. It glowed a deep translucent azure color, and its constantly-moving refractive patterns seemed to tease the eye, drawing Sasha's gaze in and inviting her to lose herself in its depths. One end of it was framed by an elegant tracery of platinum knotwork that gathered at the edges in the shapes of various animals in flight, and it was by this end that Thelvin held it aloft as he faced a tall hedgerow that bordered the eastern edge of the arboretum, deep in the shadow of the World Tree.

"Corridor: Open!"

For a moment, it seemed as if the Corridor Crystal was drawing in all of the indirect sunlight that made it past Yggdrasill's trunk this early in the morning, but Sasha quickly realized that this was an optical illusion: it had thrown a deep blue cast over the entire scene, which made all of the green in the foliage and the Sylph outfits appear nearly black, and had a similar effect on all of the yellow tones in the Cait Sith clothing. The intensity of the blue light emitting from it in those first moments drowned out nearly everything else, and after it reached a blinding peak there was a crack that split the air like an axe blow cleaving dry firewood.

In the wake of that sound, the churning, deep blue maelstrom resolved into a stable portal that was large enough to admit even Bourne's bulk, the edges of it shimmering with lighter blue tones that scaled towards white as they whipped like flames trying to escape whatever lay on the other side of the portal. The Corridor Crystal shattered in Thelvin's hand, raining tiny particles over his outstretched arm.

A rough cheer lit up the crowd of Cait Sith, carried with only a slight delay by the three groups of Sylphs present. Thelvin drew his sword and shield and raised the former high, looking around at everyone gathered there to fight at his side.

He swept the blade down in a sharp arc towards the portal in an unmistakable signal. "Let's go kick a Jotunn in the junk!" he yelled as players swept past him in roaring waves.

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In an ideal world that likely existed somewhere in the imagination of their raid leader, the Salamander caravan would have resembled—from a distance—a flock of particularly well-organized birds, flying in a giant pyramid-shaped formation so neat that a person could pick out individual parties simply by the smaller triangles they formed.

It was a nice idea, and Tetsuo thought it looked great in his own imagination. But as he glanced back over his shoulder, trying to catch sight of the groups lagging far behind the vanguard, he was reminded that the reality was far different.
In practice, they'd learned that both character level and AGI had a significant influence on a person's maximum cruising speed in the air, even for Voluntary Flight users—which every Salamander clearer was required to be. This meant that the different stat-allocation builds and roles in the clearing groups created several distinct tiers of speed: archers and other users of predominantly AGI-based weapons could cruise at close to fifty kilometers per hour and put on brief bursts of speed that were even higher; tanks and melee DPS players with STR-based weapons like Tetsuo's mace were a bit slower. Mages tended to come in last with top speeds at the baseline for their average level; they didn't need AGI.

A tidy formation like the one Tetsuo imagined could've still been achieved with a lot of drilling and practice if Eugene had deemed it important—but it would've meant everyone traveling at the speed of their slowest members. That was how they'd covered ground early in the game, but as players leveled up and gained more stat points to allocate, the speed disparity had become significant enough that Eugene had hit upon a completely different idea.

Up until that point, long-distance travel across Alfheim or through the World Tree had required them to clear as they went—while the newbie mobs in the area immediately around Gattan were no threat, once they got further they couldn't take the risk of trying to run or fly past dozens of mobs; doing so had nearly gotten their own people killed and risked training a pack of aggro mobs onto any unfortunate traveler that happened to be in their path.

Eugene's solution had neatly dealt with both issues: he began sending the fastest melee DPS groups ahead of the raid, letting them travel at their maximum speed whenever they could and clearing a path through the mobs ahead. It had decreased the time it took them to get to their destination by almost a third; archers and melee DPS didn't have to wait for everyone else, and everyone else no longer had to frequently stop and clear trash mobs.

It also means my group averages about a level ahead of the mage groups because we're getting a bit of extra EXP, but I'm not complaining, Tetsuo thought as he soared into the opening that Heathcliff had just created for him with his shield bash. The blunt head of his mace connected solidly several times with one of small black «corrupted obsidian pixie» mobs that had just swarmed out of the treeline below them and interrupted his woolgathering. Its health was already in the yellow from the blows his group leader had delivered, and after taking Tetsuo's combo it gave an offended shriek as it burst into a shower of glittering polygons that blew past his face like cool blue snow.

Garbled chanting to his right alerted him to the incoming spell just in time; he vibrated his left set of wings extremely quickly to spin himself around, letting go of the grip of his shield and letting it hang from his arm by the straps in order to hold out an empty palm. The incantation came to his lips without conscious thought, the product of hundreds of hours of drills. "Hitto zabukke tamzul buren!"

Flames surged from his open hand; a broad, convex shield of translucent fire formed in front of him just in time for the bolt of black energy to splash harmlessly against it, consuming a small amount of Tetsuo's MP. His instinct had been correct; if he'd tried to block the spell with his shield, some of it still would've gotten through. As soon as it was clear that the debuff attack had been successfully neutralized, he clenched his fist to dismiss the maintained spell. Before the fire shield had even finished dissipating, he heard the doppler effect of loud Salamander wings approach and zip past him as Heathcliff shot through the flame barrier with his shield held out and squarely impacted the pixie caster. "Switch!"

While the pixie tumbled in the air, stunned, Heathcliff's wings bore him quickly backwards, and into that gap surged Kagemune, their lancer transfixing the mob with his weapon. He spun in the air, swinging the lance around, and gave it a jerk as he aimed it in Tetsuo's general direction. "Batter up!" he yelled in badly-accented English.
Tetsuo was already in motion. His mace trailed behind him as he rocketed forward, orange light gathering at the head and rippling up and down the shaft of the weapon as he held it in the proper opening position. As the pixie came flying off of the lancehead, Tetsuo unleashed his «Crash Upper» technique, the system assist carrying him through the diagonal uppercut motion that smashed the pixie immediately into a blue fireworks display.

Kagemune hovered over and held out the small round shield he favored; Tetsuo banged his kite shield against it. "Nice throw."

"Nice hit," Kagemune replied with a grin. His eyes shifted to something over Tetsuo's shoulder. "Good setup too, boss."

"You're all doing excellent work," Heathcliff said with a tilt of his head in acknowledgement as Tetsuo turned to face him. Behind his group leader, he could see the other vanguard group approaching, having apparently finished with their own mobs. He averted his eyes just as quickly, withering before the ugly look he got from that group's leader.

Tetsuo wasn't quite sure why Corvatz hated him. But he was certain that was the case.

It hadn't been that way the night before, even when the older Salamander clearer had cornered him at the table to drop his veiled threats. That, he was pretty sure, had simply been Corvatz being Corvatz; it was common knowledge that he'd been a JSDF veteran back in the real world, and he fit right in with the militaristic structure of the Salamander hierarchy. Even if someone hadn't told Tetsuo that, he still might've guessed—the man had always reminded him of a drill sergeant. Or at least, he reminded Tetsuo of what he thought a drill sergeant ought to act like; he'd never actually seen one outside of a movie.

Yet something had changed since they left Gattan that morning, and it had been a fairly abrupt change that he could almost pin down to a specific point: a conference in hushed tones between the clearing group leaders and Eugene around the time they all caught up and landed to rest their wings on the north end of the Valley of Dragons. *Something* had put a hornet in their pants, and from the reactions and attitudes of the leaders following that conference, it had been one of the finger-sized giant ones that occasionally plagued the area around his grandfather's farm. Corvatz in particular had been throwing him an occasional hateful, vicious glance that Tetsuo would've sworn was intended to inflict a status effect. Heathcliff wasn't saying anything about what that conference had concerned, but it had to have been significant.

As per the plan, Eugene called a walking rest once all the melee groups reached one of the main roads winding through the forested suburbs of Arun; they kept moving but let their wings recover while they waited for the slowest groups to make up ground, since the path between there and Arun was largely clear of aggro mobs. When the last of the mages had caught up, their raid leader whistled sharply and loudly, calling them all together. The Salamander raid was so large that it effectively blocked the road—it was probably just as well that there was no player foot traffic there at the moment, although Tetsuo supposed that anyone who wanted to could just fly past.

"I'm going to keep this brief," Eugene said gruffly, breaking into Tetsuo's random thoughts. "You're probably wondering why we've been pushing so hard for the last hour. We received intel that the Sylphs and Cait Sith have joined forces and mounted a raid on the boss. They're on their way there now."

*Why the hell is Corvatz glaring at me?* Tetsuo wondered as the sounds of dismay rippled through the Salamander raid; the man's eyes found him shortly after this revelation from Eugene. *I didn't have anything to do with that.*
Eugene silenced all of them with a crisp sweep of his hand. "I'm telling you this now to motivate you to push even harder—we're only one more flight away, and we *can* beat them! We're heading straight for the warpgate, and *we* already know the most efficient route to get back to the boss."

Tetsuo breathed a quiet sigh of relief, one that he doubted anyone in his group would understand. If they were going straight to the warpgate, that was a huge weight off his back—it meant that there wouldn't be time to go visit Sasha, which meant he didn't have to deal with Heathcliff or Corvatz coming with him and making unreasonable demands—

He stopped there, not really listening to Eugene any longer as the realization struck him. That *had* to be it—Corvatz was pissed off because they weren't going to have time for that side trip to try to recruit Sasha's help, and was taking it out on Tetsuo because… because reasons. He wasn't sure what those reasons were, but it was the only thing that made sense.

Tetsuo liked for things to make sense. Despite the unpleasant specifics of the news, it was strangely comforting to not have to wonder anymore.

A nudge from the edge of Heathcliff's shield brought him back to the here-and-now; the raid had started walking again as soon as Eugene finished his address. "Something on your mind?" asked the silver-haired Salamander.

Tetsuo shook his head, and then realized that he didn't really want to lie to the group leader he trusted so much. "I was just thinking about how we weren't going to have time to go see my friend before the raid."

Heathcliff nodded, a reserved expression on his face. There was something odd in his voice when he glanced sidewise at Tetsuo. "Does that bother you?"

Tetsuo gave another gesture of negation, smiling. "It's okay. I can visit her some other time.* Preferably when I'm not accompanied by that jerk Corvatz.*"

Heathcliff didn't say anything for a minute or so as the irregular rhythms of booted Salamander feet drummed their way across an ornately-decorated covered bridge, a hundred and twenty leather-and-metal-clad footsteps sounding off against the thick wood. Tetsuo felt a tingle between his shoulder blades that told him his wings were fully recharged, and when wooden planks yielded to a hard-packed dirt path, he saw others beginning to bring out their wings; the raid was preparing for their last short flight to the heart of Arun.

"Well, be careful if you do," Heathcliff finally said as his wings materialized on his back with a glowing glyph and a flare of crimson.

Tetsuo summoned his own wings, launching himself into the air alongside his group leader as he tried to puzzle out what that comment had meant; it took a moment for him to even connect it with their previous exchange. "Why?" he asked finally.

Heathcliff gave Tetsuo a look that he couldn't decipher. "Because this friend of yours who doesn't take sides appears to have chosen one," he said, his tone deadpan and unreadable. "There are some who will not look kindly upon your association with someone who is helping our enemies."

Frigid trepidation washed across Tetsuo when he heard this, a cold which had little to do with the rush of wind past his face or the shadow of Yggdrasil falling over them as they approached the neutral capital of Alfheim. Corvatz's sudden hostility to him indeed made all the sense in the world now.
And the knowledge was no longer comforting.
"While Alfheim Online is a competitive PVP game, that does not mean harassment outside of the scope of combat will be tolerated. The fact that this is a virtual environment where players can directly affect the tactile senses of others means that extra care must be taken to prevent and punish sexual harassment and the violation of another's physical space. Linger ing physical contact between one avatar and another that is not part of combat or another acceptable action (such as a Touch-based spell effect) will present the receiver of this action with a prompt asking them to confirm whether or not this contact is unwanted. Depending on the player's set preferences, accepting this prompt will either repel the initiator of the unwanted contact with system-generated physical force, or teleport them to the nearest NPC jail for 24 hours..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Anti-Harassment System»

5 May 2023
Day 181 - Midmorning

"Well, well," Sakuya said as Klein and his group materialized on the other side of the portal. "Look what the Cait Sith dragged into this raid."

Klein was aware that he was grinning stupidly, but he couldn't really help it. It seemed like it had been ages since he'd seen the tall, elegant Sylph clearer, and the last time they'd met had not precisely been under the best of circumstances. Hands at his sides, he bowed to her with what he thought was an appropriate level of respect, then yelped as Thelvin nearly collided with him from behind on his way through the Corridor Crystal's portal. The heavier man's mass almost sent him sprawling before Thelvin's hand snapped out and grabbed his belt, pulling him back upright.

"Yeah, by the way, Leader," said Issin. "Might want to not stand in front of the portal that people are stepping through."

Klein liked to think he'd managed to straighten himself quickly and smoothly enough to plausibly pretend that he'd meant to do that. He glanced over his shoulder past Thelvin—who snorted, not the least bit fooled—just in time to see the deep blue rift in space ripple and collapse behind the player who'd opened it. "That portal?" he said.

"That portal," Issin said.

"That portal," Thelvin added a moment later.

Klein scratched at the base of his neck, keenly aware that he'd beclowned himself. He turned to the pretty woman who'd first addressed him. "Sakuya," he said. "How ya been?"

"Reasonable," she said with a wry grin and a noticeable lack of commitment or detail in her answer. "I see you found your friends."

"You remember?"

Sakuya raised one dark green eyebrow. "As if I could forget." She turned to a cluster of Sylphs whom Klein assumed must be the other members of her group. "This guy," she said with a laugh and a gesture of her thumb towards him. "The day after launch, right? The Sals were kicking our asses with both feet. He shows up in the Ancient Forest with this Imp friend of his and meets up with one of ours, and of course we all think they're raiders, spies or the like. And he spins this story—"
"It wasn't a story," Klein protested, as if that weren't completely obvious in retrospect.

"—about how all of his riaru friends made different characters from different factions, and he just wants to pass through to look for them. So I took him to Skarrip—"

"At swordpoint," Klein put in.

"Long story short," Sakuya said, giving Klein an amused look, "I got Fearless Leader's blessing and gave him an escort to the Cait Sith border. Never saw him again; I figured he'd gotten himself ganked."

"Great story," Thelvin said with a clap of his gauntleted hands as he walked up to them. "Wish I'd been there."

"No you don't, Thel," Sakuya said, giving him a poke in his thickly armored side with one delicate finger; Klein wondered if he even felt it.

"But we'd better get moving," Thelvin continued without missing a beat. He glanced over to the other Sylph group; there was a tall man there with light green hair restrained by a rare-looking gold circlet inset with jewels, and the expression on the man's face radiated impatience and annoyance.

Sakuya glanced at the man as well, her own expression clouding. She twirled one finger in the air, rallying her group. "Kidding aside, Klein, I'm glad you found the people you were looking for. Those were dark days."

"For everyone," Thelvin said as they approached the door to the boss room and gave it a long look up and down. His gaze slid over to a nervous-looking Puca woman with round, thin-rimmed glasses —Klein did a double take at that; as far as he knew, physical handicaps like nearsightedness didn't translate over from the real world, which meant that she wore them because she wanted to. Then the tall Cait Sith glanced at him. "Klein, you and your people are the only ones here who have any firsthand experience with this boss. You mind if I rearrange groups real quick?"

Klein frowned. "My guys and I usually all party together; you know that. What did you have in mind?"

Thelvin's intelligent eyes darted between each of them. "I want to move Issin over to one of our Ranged DPS groups, and Harry to Melee DPS. Then I want to take Bourne and Sasha here and put them in your group."

Klein looked back at the Puca woman; from the timing of her reaction to Thelvin's naming, he assumed that she must be Sasha, and that the freaking gigantic Gnome man beside her was Bourne. The woman had long braided brown hair and he supposed she was sort of cute, if you were into those nerdy types—she was no Alicia, that was for sure. Alicia. Damn...

He forced that distracting train of thought away and mulled over Thelvin's request for a moment. Dale was their healer, while Dynamm and Kunimmittz were magic DPS with buffs and debuffs, respectively. Both Bourne and Sasha were wearing robes, which suggested he was turning the party into a mage group, with Klein tanking. "If that's what you think is best," he said finally, "Issin, Harry, you guys cool with that?"

Issin grinned, drawing an arrow from his quiver and twirling it in his hand. "Remember bro, I used to be in Thelvin's group about six thousand years ago. I trust his judgment."

Harry simply shrugged amiably and hefted his shield. "Up to you, Leader."
Klein turned and bowed to Thelvin. "They're in your hands, man. Take good care of my buddies."

"And you take good care of Sasha," Thelvin said, deadly seriousness invading his words in contrast to all the previous levity. "No matter what happens, you keep her alive. Understand? Bourne will explain what's going to happen and what you should expect."

"Don't worry," Klein said fiercely, giving the Puca woman a confident look that he hoped was reassuring. "No one dies in my party."

It was Silica's first time in the sewers below Arun. By the time she'd reached the neutral capital of Alfheim in the second wave of players following the clearing of the Valley of Butterflies, the areas that had been level-appropriate for her were either much deeper in the Lower Sewers below even the areas where Kirito and his friends were currently farming, or the outdoor areas that surrounded Arun and the World Tree in Yggdrasil Basin and the four named valleys that led to it. Given the choice between disgusting tunnels filled with slimes and rats and who-knew-what else, and fields of flowers and grass filled with animal and pixie mobs, she'd had no difficulty deciding where she wanted to spend her time partying.

But that had been five months ago; an eternity for someone her age. She'd had a lot of growing up to do in the time since, and the outdoor zones turned out to have their own fair share of gross mobs that turned her stomach and made her want to take a two-hour bath after fighting them. Now, with the benefit of all those months of experience and hardening, the reality of the Upper Sewers was far less distressing than she'd expected. Once they’d cleared their way past the first layer of claustrophobic tunnels and found a path leading down to the next level, the architecture had opened up and revealed a network of vast stonework chambers with lots of open space and high ceilings in which Pina could spread his wings and fly.

"This is a sewer?" she wondered as the raid group of children made their way through some kind of broad tunnel with a river of brackish water running through the center, the flow spilling into a cavernous nexus where arched stone bridges carried criss-crossing channels of water to various side tunnels. Pina gave a joyful cry as he flew out of the mouth of the tunnel and did loops out in the open air in a way that made Silica wish she could fly underground. Several of the children in the raid were Imps; they could fly underground and were having no end of fun teasing the others who couldn't every time an area like this opened up and let them flex their wings.

"Be nice, Jeinaa," Sachi called out as one of the Imp children reached out to swat Robert when she buzzed past the group. But Robert was laughing too, and when Jeinaa zoomed past the group again, he swung his little round shield and tried to knock her out of the air.

"Robert!" Silica squeaked. "Not cool! Remember, we're not in a Safe Zone anymore; you could actually hurt her!" Pina, picking up on her alarm, yipped his own stern admonition.

"It's not just my imagination, is it?" asked Sachi as she watched Silica's pet water drake soar happily through the open air, taking advantage of the fact that there weren't any aggro mobs to worry about in the immediate vicinity. "He's gotten bigger."

Silica nodded, keeping an eye on the kids as they picked their way down the stairs. "Especially in the last few weeks. I don't know why—I haven't fed him anything different! Maybe he's leveling up too?" Sachi giggled.

In truth, Silica had some idea—or at least a vague suspicion. When she'd gotten the Pneuma Flower that allowed Sasha to resurrect Pina, her pet had seemed no different than she'd remembered him,
and if there had been any minor differences, she'd been too overjoyed to have him back to notice them. She had noticed that her Rapport stat with him had maxed out, which didn't surprise her from what little she knew of how that system worked—saving his life had to count for quite a lot!

But she hadn't thought anything of it until about a week later, when he'd seemed to… grow.

Pina had always been about the size of a small dog—really, if not for his wings, he wouldn't have been much bigger than her pet cat back in the real world for which he'd been named. One of his favorite places to rest used to be on top of her head, nested between her large triangular ears—something she found impossibly cute and really missed having him do. But gradually, over a period of weeks, he'd put on more and more mass until now he was almost half her size. He couldn't perch on her shoulder or her head anymore, although he still loved to curl up next to her when she slept.

"Silica?" Sachi's voice came from far below her.

"Hmm? Oh! Sorry!" Silica silently berated herself for not paying attention; she was supposed to be one of the grownups here! The others had finished carefully making their way down the stone stairs that zig-zagged down the side of the wall towards the next walkway, and she was the only one still standing at the mouth of the tunnel. Pina flew up and chirped at her, butting her face with his; she laughed and hop-stepped down the stairs to catch up with her friend.

Silica liked Sachi quite a lot. Despite being several years older than her, there were times when she almost seemed like Silica's imouto—Sachi's level was lower than her own, and from what she understood the older girl's fear and social anxiety had once been far more crippling than it was now. She felt protective of Sachi the way she might've if she'd actually had a younger sister of her own, and she wondered if the time they'd been spending together had had anything to do with the way the Undine girl had started to come out of her shell and shed her fears.

As she watched Pina fly over to Sachi and give her a similar head-bump, she recalled that he seemed to like her, too. Silica wondered if that was carried over from her in some way through the bond they shared as pet and tamer, or if it was his own volition. A part of her knew, deep down, that Pina was just a collection of coded behaviors the way mobs were, but there were times when he seemed so real, so alive—like he had a personality of his own, very different from the feral water drakes in the Valley of Rainbows where she'd first found him.

"C'mere, Pina!" she called out. The drake swooped obediently over with a high-pitched kyuuui sound, hovering in front of her. "Lemme show you something cool," she told Sachi with a grin. She opened her menu and navigated to her inventory, set it visible so that Sachi could see what she was doing, and switched over to a new inventory tab that had appeared a week ago. "Pina's got his own inventory now!" she said, pointing at the header at the top of the tab.

"Cool!" said one of the children who'd gathered around to watch whatever it was the "older kids" were doing. "So you can give him all your heavy stuff!"

Silica laughed, tossing her head in a way that made the twin sidetails of her hair bob. "Naaaah. His weight limit isn't very high, but it does let me do this." She dragged several items from her own inventory onto Pina's, and when she was done, swept her menu closed. "Pina, Home!"

The water drake gave off a loud trill of acknowledgement, then spiraled up through the air until he reached the level from which they'd just come, chirping one last time before zooming back down the long tunnel to the entry level.

"What did that do?" Sachi asked.
"Pina's gonna take a bunch of stuff and drop it off back at the church," she said proudly. "Someone'll let him in, and he'll take it right up to our room! Then he'll come back and find me wherever I am."

"I want one!" said Jellica with a pout, the Sylph girl's head tilted upwards with a look of longing until Pina was no longer visible.

Silica patted the slightly younger girl on the shoulder with a smile. "I'd show you how to tame one if I could," she said. "But only Cait Sith can tame mobs."

"That's not fair!" Jellica said insistently. "Who made that rule?"

"It's just the way things are," Sachi said. "Just like you get the Wind Magic skill for free and are better at it. Same with me and Water Magic."

The young blond girl's expression remained mildly sullen. "It's still not fair," she said. "Everyone should be able to have pets."

"Anyone can," Silica said. "But a Cait Sith has to tame it first. I tell you what—when we get back, I'll talk to Miss Sasha. Once you guys get to level 10, I'll take you to the Valley of Rainbows where I found Pina, and I'll see if I can tame a water drake for anyone who wants one. Okay?"

There was a chorus of enthusiastic acceptance from more than a few of the kids, which made Silica wonder if she'd just made a promise she couldn't keep. She hoped not. "Come on," she said, seeing some of the others begin to fidget in boredom; half of the raid group had already started making their way across the bridge to an unexplored branch tunnel waiting on the other side.

Silica carefully stepped along the meter-wide strip at the edge where the water wasn't running—it was risky; the stone was slippery from all the dampness and the drop to the deeper channel below looked like it was a long, long way. But from the few tentative steps she'd taken, the surface of the concave depression in the middle of the bridge where the ankle-deep water flowed was even more slippery, coated with a layer of some kind of algae or other nasty, unnamed substance. The running water had tugged at her feet as she went, and she'd nearly lost her footing more than once before deciding to take her chances along the rim.

When she looked up, she saw Sachi ahead of her taking the same cautious steps, and the cluster of younger kids still making their way across the bridge were imitating them. Sachi's hands were trembling where she held them out to her sides for balance, and she stopped for a few beats to look back, giving Silica a nervous smile.

"It's okay, Sachi, we're almost there," Silica reassured her. "Just a few more—"

It was the sound as much as the sudden motion that cut her short. There was a loud, echoing thunk, as of solid metal machinery falling into place within thick stone, and a heavy lattice of ornate iron bars slid down along a recessed track in the wall of the tunnel entrance with a groan and rattle, the spiked ends slotting neatly into holes in the stonework of the floor. Jellica narrowly avoided being crushed by the closing of the gate, leaping away with a yell and falling on her back into the dank stream running across the bridge. Her momentum caused her to nearly slide into the line of children still on the bridge site of the gate, stopping just short of disaster. The air filled with the squeals and cries of frightened kids who had no idea what was happening.

Sachi waved her arms, then seemed to think better of the gesture as she herself nearly lost her balance. "Quiet, everyone, quiet! Let's stop and figure this out."

That had taken the words right out of Silica's mouth. She stopped and did a mental count of who was
on this site of the gate. Robert, Jellica, Makiko, Jeinaa, a Cait Sith boy with brown-and-silver striped hair named Yewta… she kept counting; including herself and Sachi, there were nine in total, amounting to not quite half of the raid.

"Kai," Sachi said, addressing a long-haired Spriggan boy trapped on the other side with the others, who at eleven was one of the oldest besides her and Silica. "Cast your Light spell and keep everyone together; don't let anyone wander off." The boy nodded, chest swelling at being nominated to be "in charge", and spoke the incantation for the aforementioned spell, aiming his hand at the ceiling of the tunnel to place a stationary light source there.

Silica spoke up. "She's right, everyone. No running off and trying to find a way around—we don't know what's down those tunnels yet, or why that gate closed. All of you over there, look around on the floor and walls, see if there's a switch or anything."

"Maybe somebody stepped on a pressure plate, or broke a tripwire," Robert suggested, scratching at the scraggly red hair that covered his head. "That always happens in movies."

"This isn't a movie," Jellica pointed out, looking at all of the muck staining her forest-green robes with a twist to her face that seemed as if she despaired of having to wear them like that for the rest of her life.

"Nah," replied the Salamander boy as he wiped one of his own soiled hands on her shoulder under the guise of patting her reassuringly. "But it is a video game, and that stuff happens in those too. Plus the guy who made all this prolly watched a whole lotta movies."

"There was that loud sound right before it came down," said Makiko. Everyone around Silica started slightly in surprise; the little pink-haired Leprechaun girl rarely spoke, and when she did it was usually terse banalities like asking someone to pass the salt. "It didn't come from the gate." She looked down at her feet suddenly, embarrassed, as if that had exceeded her allowed quota of words for the day.

"Makiko's right," Silica said, realizing it was true as soon as the girl pointed it out. She turned and looked up in the direction of the tunnel from which they'd came, which poked out from the tall angled wall that rose twenty meters above and behind them, water spilling out in a thin fall that rained down onto and continued across the bridge. "It came from somewhere up there."

"Delayed trap?" asked Yewta brightly, his tabby-striped tail twitching with excitement. Silica frowned; he obviously thought this was the coolest thing to happen to them all morning.

"Let's not start talking about traps," Sachi said, clearly trying to keep the growing nervousness out of her voice. "There's probably just a puzzle here we don't know about."

We should just wait for Kirito, Silica thought. We just saw him a few minutes before we headed down to this level, so he'll probably check in on us sometime in the next fifteen minutes or so. He'll know what to do!

It was a tempting thought, but she didn't voice it. Some of the younger kids trapped on the other side of the gate were already starting to cry, although the more resilient among them were trying to be reassuring. They could be waiting down here for a while, and in the meantime plenty of them would be getting more and more nervous and scared—including Sachi, she suspected.

Besides, wasn't the entire point of this adventure to show that they could handle themselves out in the world? What would Sasha think if they had to go back and tell her that they got trapped until Kirito came to bail them out? It wouldn't matter so much to Silica and Sachi, who could come and go as
they pleased, but Sasha might never let the younger ones out of her sight again.

They had to solve this themselves. What's more, she knew, it had to be solvable—something like that didn't happen by accident; it was designed that way by someone at Argus. Sachi was right: there was a puzzle here that they weren't seeing. They just had to settle down, use their brains, and figure it out.

"Jeinaa," Silica said. "You can fly; come with me. The rest of you stay here. Sachi, can you stay and watch everyone while we look for a switch or something?" When Sachi nodded in relief, giving her a nervous smile, Silica turned and started carefully picking her way up the stairs to the top. Jeinaa simply flew straight up, long violet ponytail streaking behind her; she rose slowly so as not to get too far ahead of Silica.

But when Silica was only a few meters below the summit of the last switchback in the narrow staircase, Jeinaa gave a loud squeak and zoomed back away from the mouth of the tunnel. "Silica, watch—"

The warning came just as Silica had reached up to grab the lower lip of the pipe egress, pulling herself up onto one of the drier banks to one side of the channel. The motion brought her face to face with something shiny and alarmingly sharp, startling her enough that she lurched backwards and lost her footing. Her arms flailed for purchase, and only the timely intervention of someone grabbing her wrist saved her from a long fall to the bridge below—or, worse, a longer fall to the water if she'd missed it.

"Thanks!" she said, trying to calm herself as she managed to catch the edge with her other hand and allowed herself to be hauled up into the tunnel. "I thought I was—"

Her words caught in her throat and turned into a choked sound and a glare as she got a good look at her savior.

"What's wrong, dear Silica-chan?" said Rosalia as she let go of Silica's arm, taking a step back and leaning on the shaft of her pike. "Here I thought you'd be so happy to see me."

The cavern was uncomfortably dark. Sasha suspected that if they didn't have a handful of mages leading the way with Light spells, they wouldn't have been able to see anything at all. She recalled that many subterranean zones were lit by orelight—the deposits of naturally luminescent crystalline metals that laced the ground beneath Alfheim; they were used for a vast number of purposes by crafters of all sorts.

But this zone wasn't subterranean—it was buried somewhere in the heart of the World Tree. She idly wondered what the correct term for that would be. Sub-arboreal? No, that would imply it was beneath the tree. Intra-arboreal? She nodded to herself, accepting it for the moment. That would do until she got home; she resolved to visit the Library of Arun and find a book on setsuji—affixes—that would satisfy her curiosity.

"As soon as the young miss here casts," rumbled the voice of the large Gnome man beside her, drawing her attention back to the explanation in progress, "her health is going to drop to almost nothing. When that happens—" He reached out and put his hand on the shoulder of the other Gnome in the party, whom the Salamander of the group had named as Dale. "You touch her like this and cast your basic HOT."

"Heal Over Time?" Dale asked. "That's twice as expensive as my M5 heal—even more than my M6. If she'll be that low, why not start running the mags for all my heals, Base to Sixth? And why not the
"Touch has a shorter cooldown than Focus," Bourne said, stepping around a pillar that loomed out of the darkness like a monument. "And the incantation is quicker. The boss will be coming for her the moment her spell hits. I have a spell that will protect her, but you won't be able to heal her while she's inside of it, and you'll only have time to get off one spell before it takes effect."

"Okay," said Dale. "And? That means it's important to make that one spell count."

"Aye," Bourne said. "So listen carefully. My «Mountain Retreat» has a base duration of twelve seconds—one third the duration of your HOT—and in that time, your HOT will heal the same amount as your M3 direct heal, and it'll keep healing for another 24 seconds after that. But your M3 heal has a cooldown of 15 seconds, and if you cast it instead of the HOT, it means all of your direct heals from Base to Third Magnitude would still be on cooldown for three more seconds when my spell drops."

"Vuchaz is on a different cooldown than chaz," Sasha said.

Bourne nodded, giving her a very curious look. "Quite correct, milady. By using the HOT up front, it'll keep healing you while you're protected and all of Dale's direct heals will still be available when my spell drops." He looked over his shoulder at Dale; she could faintly see the larger man's bearded face silhouetted by Dynamm's magelight. "Then you start running the mags, lowest to highest. I'll be doing the same as soon as I get my own regen on her; between the two of us we should have her back up to full quickly. Don't forget to refresh your HOT right before it runs its duration."

Sasha apparently wasn't the only person who was awestruck into speechlessness at the conclusion of Bourne's advice. It wasn't as though she didn't know all of that herself, but up until this point she'd never met anyone else with such a strong grasp of spellcasting mechanics and tactical healing. While she had plenty of experience healing for a small party, she could tell she was in the presence of someone who not only knew his magic—possibly as well as or better than she did—but had practical experience putting it to work in a raid group. She was itching to pull him aside and talk to him about the language of magic, to see if he understood its potential the way she did.

It also drove home another lesson for her—Undines might have a huge racial advantage with healing spells, and exclusive access to some of the most potent healing and resurrection magic, but that didn't mean you had to be an Undine to be an effective healer.

The only sound for a time was the shuffling and thumping of the raid group's footsteps, which Sasha could hear all around her despite only being able to see a handful of people outside of her own group. She could pick out the light sources of the other mages, which followed them like fireflies and created islands of light in the darkness, islands occluded intermittently by the obelisks that jutted toothlike from the broken tiled floor.

"Klein, old buddy," Dale said finally. "I get the feeling I been healing us all wrong for the last six months."

Klein reached over and punched Dale in the shoulder. "No complaints here, man; you've kept us all alive this long. But you better be taking notes."

After what felt like an eternity and a half of carefully picking their way through the obstacle-strewn dark passage, Sasha saw the lead groups come to a halt and extinguish their magelights. There was actual ambient light now, and it came from a dimly-lit chamber that widened, arena-like, from the cavernous hallway and turned into what seemed to be a dead end. Here and there in the room there were what appeared to be giant-sized versions of furniture and litter; gnawed, car-sized animal bones
and other discarded detritus were scattered irregularly throughout.

At the other end of this chamber, far out of spellcasting range, was the boss.

It had to be. Sasha hadn’t seen a Jotunn mob since passing through the Valley of Giants, but the creature sitting at the stone slab bench and table that rose from the floor looked a lot like every other Frost Giant she’d seen: massive, with extremely pale skin and the blue lips of someone who’d been out in the cold for far too long, covered with brownish-blue hair everywhere a human might grow it.

Except this one was bigger. Much, much bigger. And just as it had been described to her, it seemed to boast an extra pair of arms beyond the two granted to most living creatures, the bottom pair of which were folded in its lap. These arms were supremely muscled, and one of them was lifting a drink of some kind to its mouth.

It paused there just as the rim of the barrel-sized tankard touched its blue lips, yellow eyes sliding slowly to the side as it tilted its head at an uncanny angle and regarded the newcomers to its realm. A rumbling began to echo through the chamber, as if an earthquake were beginning; it took Sasha a few moments to realize that it was a tiger-like growl that started in the Jotunn's chest and resonated through the chamber.

"Formation!" Thelvin called out. "OT groups with mine, establish aggro! Mage groups, no casting except for buffs and heals! Sigurd, hold your people's fire until I call for DPS!"

A familiar fear began to eke into Sasha's bones once again, and it was all she could do to not back away and flee headlong from the boss room. She didn't belong here. She wasn't supposed to be here. Even a glancing blow from this thing could probably one-shot her. What was she even thinking?

She must have been shaking. The Salamander, Klein, seemed to notice; he took a hand from his katana and reached out to squeeze her arm once. "I got you," he said. "Keep me between you and the boss until you're ready to cast."

The ground shook beneath her with every footstep of the boss; when it collided with the Cait Sith tank groups with a sound like a multi-car pileup, it took another effort of will for her not to flee despite Klein's reassurance. She caught a blur of green as the translucent blade of its axe slashed out; Thelvin planted himself and slanted his shield, which redirected the bulk of the force over his head. It reached out with one of its open hands and snatched with frozen fingers at Thelvin, who leapt out of the way of the grab, then tucked his shoulder and rolled further as another empty hand formed a sheath of stone around it and hammered the ground where he'd been. The giant roared in annoyance at the evasion of its prey, and sent a fireball surging towards Thelvin, who couldn't get his shield up in time; the projectile exploded against him and sent him and one of his group members tumbling backwards. The silver glow of a reactive heal sheeted across him to restore some of the lost HP, but he was still almost down by a quarter.

Sasha trembled, and tried to force her hands to be still; she'd never be able to cast a spell while she was shaking this badly. If this was what it was like when someone else had aggro, what was it going to be like when this thing came for her?

Don't think about it, she told herself as the din of battle rose in her ears. Don't think about it. You can't think about it. You're just scaring yourself. You have to just do it. Just wait for the signal. Wait for Thelvin. Thelvin knows what he's doing. He promised to protect you. Klein promised to protect you. Just—

"We've got its attack patterns down!" yelled Thelvin as he backed his group out of range to recover, quaffing a potion while his healer refreshed the HOT and wards on him. The OT groups converged
and closed the gap he left, buying him time. "Wind, Water, Earth, Fire! Sasha, give the OT groups ten seconds to build hate and then bring down that shield!"

**Ten.** This was it. Sasha tried to force calm into herself, tried to force herself to breathe—not because her avatar needed oxygen, but as an exercise, as a way of stilling her thoughts.

**Seven.** Her breaths began to slow, and she focused on each one, on synchronizing them with the count in her mind. She looked up, and saw Klein looking back at her. He didn't seem the least bit nervous or frightened—well of course, he must've done this a dozen times before, and he was actually high enough level to be here.

He gave her an affable smile and a thumbs up. "I got your back, lady. Do what you gotta do."

**Four.** She closed her eyes and reviewed the order in her mind one last time. *Wind, Water, Earth, Fire. The fact that fire comes at the end means that I can use zuру for that instead of tovaku without worrying about element confusion, so that'll save some MP.*

"Now!" Thelvin screamed, loudly enough to be heard all the way back in Arun.

Sasha opened her eyes, The OT groups split up from each other, flanking the boss on two opposite sides—keeping it fixed in place and leaving her a clear line of sight directly to her target. Klein had stepped aside as well, and Dale was suddenly right next to her, hand poised and ready to reach out.

"Fuppa zuppa doppa hitto yojikke," she chanted, both hands presented in front of her with the heels of her palms pressed together, thumbs aligned and her other fingers spread wide as she sighted down the tips of her thumbs. With each element she incanted, glowing runes spun around her and locked into place, and multiple colors of spell energy began to gather in her palms.

"Nushlavi plorjabи navraki zure, nibralth... chayojan!"

At the utterance of *nibralth*, the HP bar in her status gauge started glowing along with the MP bar, both pulsing along the length of them to show what the spell in progress was going to cost. The moment that she finished speaking the manifestation phrase at the end, almost the entirety of her HP and MP drained in an instant with the completion of the spell. A pulse of green energy surged down her arms and erupted from her hands as a projectile-based Silence effect; before it had even finished doing so, it was followed by the blue pulse of the Delay. The Earth-bound Stumble effect was next in a flash of yellow, and at the end came a flaming Direct Damage fire bolt.

The four effects shot away from her in the staccato succession of the multi-projectile manifestation, which—as she'd predicted—assigned each effect to a separate projectile, since the number of effects matched the number of projectiles. One after another they struck the boss over the span of about a second, each producing a heartbeat-length flash of color before the next impacted and overrode it. When the final projectile hit, the shield flashed *white*. With a sound like every window in a skyscraper shattering at once, a blinding cascade of silvered polygons sprayed outwards like the shower of glass that would result from that; many of the clearers scattered themselves and flattened to the ground before realizing that this was simply an audio-visual effect.

The boss of the 25th gateway, the Jotunn Lord «Hrungnir the Impervious», turned its gaze upon the person who'd dared do this to it. Football-sized glowing yellow eyes fixed themselves upon Sasha across the fifty meters that separated them.

Sasha felt a hand on her shoulder. She barely noticed it as she locked eyes with the thing that meant to kill her.
Hrungnir roared once, and charged.

With each step that Rosalia and the Salamander archer behind her took down the stairs, Silica backed further away, until she found herself turning away from them because it was safer than trying to walk backwards across the slippery bridge. Jeinaa, hovering beside her, gave her a nudge back towards the middle when she felt like she was starting to lose her balance, and glided to a landing beside Silica once the two of them joined the others. "Pass the word," Silica hissed quietly. "Tell Kai to take the others down the tunnel and find their way out. Get away from here."

The butt of Rosalia's pike prodded her in the back, causing her to stagger and almost slip again. "No talking out of turn," admonished the Salamander woman, a sly smile spreading across her rose-colored lips. Two Imps clad in black and purple—one with a slender rapier-like dagger and one with a short bow—took up station in the air on either side of the bridge, hovering in place in a way Silica knew they could maintain for some time. She froze. The aim of the archers was indirect enough that it could've been at any of them, but she didn't want to take any chances—and apparently neither did her captors.

Rosalia looked around meaningfully. "Your pet bird is missing, dear," she observed. "And after all you went through to get that damned flower. How tragic!"

Silica bristled, hair standing slightly on end and triangular ears laid back flat against her head—a reaction that only drew mirth from Rosalia, who covered her mouth half-heartedly with her free hand. "Pina's not dead!" she said hotly. "I sent him on an important mission. And when he gets back, you'll be sorry—he's gotten a lot bigger!"

If anything, this made Rosalia laugh ever harder. "Gods save us from the fate of being cuddled to death by your pet!" The three men with her got in on the laughter at that, although the uncomfortably sharp attention of the two archers didn't waver.

"You're just a big fat bully," came Robert's loud voice from behind her as the Salamander boy stepped forward, hands poised in a way that made the archers tense. "You gotta ambush us 'cause our magic's too good for you to beat us in a fair fight, huh?"

"Robert, shut up," hissed Jellica.

None of this was staying Rosalia's amusement at all. "Yes, Robert, do listen to the little Sylph bitch and stuff a sock in it. What gave you the impression there was anything fair about fights?"

"Hey, nobody calls her that word!" Robert yelled, fists balling.

"Except you," Jellica said to him with a newly-puzzled sidewise look, delicate straw-yellow eyebrows arched.

"Enough!" Rosalia snarled, slamming the metal-shod butt of her pike into the wet stone of the bridge; everyone seemed to jump in their 3D models as the sound rang out like a bell and echoed off the distant walls and ceilings for some time after that. Both of the archers drew back on their bows, an action which drew mewling sounds from a few of the kids and put a sudden lid on Robert's defiance.

Their crimson-haired captor composed herself, looking over the small crowd of terrified children with a smirk again twisting her lips. "We're going to play a little game today, kids," she cooed with a toss of her head that shook her bangs out of her face. "And if you're good little boys and girls—" She glared pointedly in turn at Robert and Silica. "—you all get to go home when we're done and have
an exciting story to tell."

"What do you want, Rosalia?" asked Silica, summoning her courage.

"Something your little schoolmarm has stashed somewhere in that rat trap where you live," Rosalia said. "Namely, her notes about the language of magic." Sachi must have reacted in some visible way; Rosalia turned to her with a triumphant look of smug appraisal. "Ah, you know what I'm talking about, don't you? What's your name, my dear?"

Silica was about to speak up and tell Sachi not to answer; Sachi stammered out her name before she could do so. Rosalia smiled with the sweetness of a poisoned apple. "Excellent. Now here's what we're going to do, Sachi."

Everyone gasped as Rosalia suddenly swung and leveled her pike at Silica with one swift motion, the frighteningly-sharp tip just centimeters from her chin. "The lovely young catgirl Silica-chan is going to stay here and keep us company—in silence—and so is the rest of this brat pack. You, Sachi, are going to run along as quick as your little legs will carry you, and you're going to go back to the church and get those notes. You have ten minutes; plenty of time to get there and back if you run. You don't talk to anyone. You bring them back here to me, and you hand them all over."

"Do you have any gimmick other than kidnapping people and threatening them so you can steal stuff?" Silica asked, outrage rising in her again.

Rosalia's eyes narrowed. "Don't push me, girl, or we're going to have problems. If Sachi does what I tell her to, our business here is concluded—all of you go free."

"I don't believe you!" Silica said, finding a further reserve of strength despite having a blade so close to her face that it threatened to make her eyes cross every time she tried to focus on it. "You tried to kill me and Kirito and Miss Sasha back on that island!"

"I don't care what you believe, brat," Rosalia said, the mask of sickly-sweet pleasantness slipping. "That mess didn't have to go down the way it did, and it wouldn't have if your idiot schoolteacher hadn't tried that funny business with her spell." She scowled bitterly. "Maybe you've forgotten, but it was your Black Swordsman who did all the killing there, not us." The tip of the blade jerked closer, making Silica lean away nervously despite herself. "If what I wanted was to kill you, my dear, we wouldn't be having this charming little chat."

"Still amateur hour, I see," said a cold, dead voice that came echoing from above. Rosalia's head whipped around, looking for the source with sudden fear in her eyes. When Silica followed both her gaze and the sound, she could see a black-cloaked figure with the yellow cursor of a neutral race crouched at the mouth of the tunnel from which they'd come.

The figure of the newcomer himself wasn't terrifying—simply mysterious. What was terrifying to Silica was Rosalia's reaction to him; her voice actually trembled noticeably as she replied, although she was obviously trying to put up a good front. "This is a private contract," she called back defiantly, chin lifting. "I'm not using any of your people this time, so it's not your concern how I get the job done."

The figure seemed to flow as he slid from the mouth of the broken pipe, black cloak rippling as he dropped fifteen meters to the wet stone floor with barely a sound. He rose from the crouch in which he landed like a panther moving on two legs, hooded head tilted slightly forward. Every action in his predatory posture was smooth, measured—as if the slippery stone was no hindrance to him at all.

"It's not your job anymore," he said curtly as he drew closer to the middle of the bridge; she took a
step back despite the fact that she was holding a pike and he appeared to be unarmed. He glanced around, taking in the two archers; the Salamander between him and Rosalia had shifted his posture so that he wasn't quite aiming at the newcomer, but could do so quickly if needed. The Imp with the slender dagger hovered over and took up a cautious position beside that archer, eyes alert.

Silica could faintly see the ash-gray skin of a Spriggan beneath the hood the stranger wore. The Spriggan's head turned to regard the Imp archer hovering to his left, and while she still couldn't see the man's face, the Imp must have known him—he blanched, short bow dangling loosely in his grip.

"Begone," said the Spriggan man. The single word produced immediate results.

"Shadewalker!" Rosalia sputtered. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I'm not fucking with the Prophet," the Imp called back as he soared towards the tunnel back to the surface. "If you have any sense, you won't either."

"Fifteen," sang Yuuki as the blue slime erupted into a tiny cloud of angular blue particles, dragging out the final syllable as if it was the coda to a song. She grinned as she swept her free hand to the side to get rid of the pop-up window, looking around for a new target.

"Now you're just showing off," said Kirito with an answering grin.

"Was that a complaint?" Asuna asked half-rhetorically, sheathing her rapier. She glanced over at Yuuki. "I was pretty sure I heard him complaining."

Yuuki nodded with mock-solemnity. "That's what it sounded like to me," she said, barely able to keep a straight face and betrayed by the humor in her tone.

"Almost as if we weren't here helping him farm mats."

Another answering bob of the head from the Imp girl, her violet bangs swaying with the motion. "Ungrateful."

"Scandalous," Asuna agreed without turning to look at Kirito—because, he strongly suspected, she was having just as much of a hard time keeping her expression serious. "We should sell the drops."

"Do I get to say anything in my own defense?" Kirito asked, luminescent green sheeting across his eyes as he activated his Searching skill and looked for any sign of red cursors nearby.

"No," said both of the girls, before their attempts at maintaining the ruse collapsed and sent them both into fits of giggles.

When Kirito gave a dramatic, long-suffering sigh that fell short of being heartfelt, Yuuki stifled her laughter and skipped over to him long enough to wrap her arms around his midsection in a brief hug. "Just teasing," she said. "I won't sell your slimy… essencey-things." She made an appalled face, sticking out her tongue and looking up at him.

Kirito couldn't help but laugh—it seemed impossible to take offense to Yuuki; she was simply so earnest in her affections and open friendliness that even her teasing lacked bite. He reached out and gave her hair a quick tousle, which displaced the striped hairband she wore to keep her bangs under control and made her squeak as she detached herself from him and tried to put her hair back in order.

"I don't see any mobs within my Searching radius," Kirito said as he gave another look around, the
green aurorae flickering a few times in his eyes before dying out. "I think we cleared this area."

"Again," Asuna said; they'd been down here for a while. "I'm up to eleven Blue Slime Essences."

"A hundred to a stack," Kirito pointed out unnecessarily. "I already had around twenty, but we've got a ways to go."

"You want me to take a look?" Yuuki asked, bringing out her wings and vibrating them into a violet blur as she rose half a meter off the ground, feet dangling as if searching for something solid beneath her. "I can make a quick loop around this level, see if anything's popped. It'll only take a few minutes, be quicker than all of us walking."

Asuna smiled. "That's a good idea, Yuuki. You don't mind?"

Yuuki shook her head; her entire body twisted to and fro in the air when she did. She did a little backflip and swoop in the air and ended up right back in the same position she'd been. "Nah. I love flying! I wish both of you could fly with me down here."

"Sure," Asuna said, kicking a pebble so that it skittered across the wet gray stone of the floor and careened off into the canal beside it with a splash. "Rub it in."

Kirito laughed. "Thanks, Yuuki. Be careful!"

Yuuki made a raspberry sound as she hovered in the air. "Puh-leeze. The monsters are like what, level 6? All three of us could take a nap down here and not be in danger." She brightened suddenly. "Hey, maybe if we took a nap the slimes would get curious and repop!"

That made Asuna laugh as well. "Okay then, you go have fun snuggling with the slimes."

The retort drew a lengthy noise of disgust from the Imp girl, who flew off down the canal in a flash and left a trail of "ew ew ew" sounds in her wake.

Kirito watched her go with fondness. There was something about her that was just so… alive. So vibrant. It was as if she treated each day as a gift, something to cherish and make the most out of—even though she was trapped in this virtual world, impossibly far from whatever family was waiting for her on the outside.

It was a mindset that Kirito himself could appreciate. Back in the beta, long before this had become a death game, the virtual world of Alfheim had felt like a second reality to him—and there were times when it felt more real than the world of flesh and blood, the world to which they were all fighting to return. And now, despite being a prison for all of Kayaba's hostages, he was determined—

"Coin for your thoughts," Asuna said, seating herself on the edge of the canal and drawing her rapier, tapping it to bring up the status window.

"How many?" Kirito asked teasingly.

Asuna covered her mouth; he was fairly sure she was smiling. "Name your price, Argo."

Kirito's laughter echoed off the walls of the Lower Sewers as he seated himself to her left, legs dangling over the side and the soles of his boots centimeters above the surface of the water. He glanced off in the direction that Yuuki had gone. "She's really happy here, isn't she?"

Asuna nodded thoughtfully, following Kirito's gaze. "I think she'd find a way to be happy anywhere," she said after a beat. "I guess her first few days in the game were pretty rough, but ever
since then she's been…” She paused, thinking, then flicked the status window of her rapier to close it. "A ray of sunshine," she said after consideration. "Nothing keeps her down."

"Those first days were pretty rough for everyone. Did she login alone?"

There was silence from Asuna for long enough that Kirito wondered if he hadn't said something wrong; he prepared himself for one of the Undine girl's defensive outbursts, "I think she had someone," Asuna said quietly, lowering her voice to the point where it didn't echo despite the fact that neither of them could see or hear Yuuki anywhere nearby. "But whoever it was didn't survive the Salamander invasion. She never talks about her family, either. Not even to me."

Kirito gave this the benefit of his own silence, turning it over in his head and contrasting it with the joy she took in the simple everyday life in Alfheim. "It sounds like maybe she has a pretty unhappy home life," he said. "If that's the case, I can understand why she'd like it in here so much."

"What about you, Kirito?" Asuna turned her head and tilted it up slightly to meet his eyes. "You're a lot like her in some ways, you know. You don't really act like you're trapped here… more like you live here. I keep thinking back to that day, a month into the game, and what you said about Alfheim's weather. You'd spent all day dealing with the faction representatives for the Treaty of Arun, only to get shut out of it because of your stupid leader. But there you were, just enjoying the sun as if you were at a cherry blossom festival."

Kirito again didn't speak for a time—long enough without an answer that Asuna reached over and gave him a light poke. He cleared his throat a little. "I guess if you think about it, don't we all live here? I mean, yeah, we're prisoners. And yeah, we need to fight to get out. But I've talked to some people who feel like Kayaba's stolen their lives from them. And I think that's only true if you let it be true."

It was a curious place to have a conversation like this—deep underground in the sewers below Arun, a zone that twisted and curled around the roots of the World Tree as it sought to touch every district in the neutral capital of Alfheim. "Every day we spend in this world… we haven't lost those days in the real world. We've gained those days in Alfheim. We might be trapped here, but we're still alive, and we still have the ability to make our own choices about how we live those lives. That's something Kayaba can never take away from us—not unless we let him."

Asuna was quiet, too. They remained like that for a time, listening to the metronome of dripping water and the steady susurratation of the flow through the canal below their feet; every now and then they caught distant echoes of Yuuki's wings somewhere as she patrolled the zone.

He couldn't have said when exactly it happened; he was lost in his own thoughts. But at some point, he noticed that there was a subtle warmth and pressure on his hand, and when he realized it was there, he glanced down and saw that Asuna had lain her hand across his. Without really thinking about it, he slowly turned his hand over, palm up, and she wordlessly closed hers around it.

They couldn't have stayed like that for long—Kirito wasn't checking his clock, but it seemed like only moments had passed before the sound of Yuuki's wings grew louder once more. As the sound drew near, Asuna's hand slipped away from his, and he came to his feet when she did. Not long after, Yuuki came zipping around the bend in the canal that led to their north, leaving a purple flight trail in her wake. The Imp girl pulled up in front of them, hovering a few meters away from them and several above the canal. "There's a whole bunch of slimes that just popped down thataway, in that big bowl-like room with all the waterfalls," she said excitedly. "I tried to train them here, but they all tethered before I could get them very far."

"The Spillway," Kirito said with a nod of acknowledgement. "That's not too far—just a couple
minutes' walk." Now he did check the time, setting his lips in a line. "It's in the opposite direction of
the tunnel back to the Upper Sewers, though, and we should check in on the kids in a few minutes."

Asuna made a sound of assent. "Let's do that first," she said. "Then we can come back down and
clear all the repops."

"Sounds good," Kirito said. "Let's get—"

"Asuna?" Yuuki said. There was something odd in her tone, a quality that Kirito had never heard
before, and it drew his gaze sharply.

Asuna seemed to pick up on it too, turning quickly with a look of concern. "Yuuki?"

The Imp girl's face was slightly slack, her eyes distant. She drifted unsteadily instead of hovering in
place. "Asuna, I… I don't feel…"

"Yuuki?" There was alarm now in Asuna's voice, and she took a step towards the edge. "Yuuki, come back here—"

Yuuki's eyes rolled back in her head. She went limp, as if every muscle in her body at once had lost
its tone, and her wings abruptly disappeared from her back. She dropped like a stone.

"Yuuki!" Asuna shrieked as the younger girl hit the water with a splash and a spray of muck. Kirito
had already been in motion when she fell, but his hands just barely grazed her arm as he dove too
late, and he struck the water shortly after she did, the current carrying both of them north towards the
Spillway.

His head broke the surface again a moment later, just in time to hear Asuna casting a spell. "—
tsutakke rozobul shippura tepnaga dweren!" A Water Breathing icon appeared beside the gauge in
his HUD, and he could see the same thing beside Yuuki's smaller gauge below his. He didn't see any
other status effects on her besides the buffs they were carrying, and she hadn't lost any HP.

There was another splash, and he caught a glimpse of Asuna's legs disappearing beneath the surface
as she dove into the water after them. Kirito swam as hard as he could, fighting to catch up with
where he could see Yuuki's cursor bobbing in the water, but the Undine girl was literally in her
element, and didn't suffer the same movement and encumbrance penalties that he did. As soon as he
saw Asuna catch up to Yuuki and begin dragging her towards the nearest set of stairs rising narrowly
along the edge of the canal, he aimed that direction as well.

Despite the fact that Asuna got there first, she was having trouble pulling Yuuki's weight out of the
water; Kirito quickly climbed up onto the stairs and grabbed Yuuki's collar with one hand, heaving
her out. She draped limply across the stairs, unmoving.

"Yuuki!" Asuna yelled again, reaching down and shaking her. "Yuuki, wake up! Yuuki!"

Despite the fact that she didn't appear to have any status effects or HP loss, Kirito still pulled an
Antidote Crystal from his belt pouches. "Cure!" he said, holding it over the Imp girl. The bright
green crystal shattered, but there was no change in Yuuki's condition. Asuna rapidly chanted the
words to a curative spell that ought to have had the same effect, and when that did nothing she cast a
powerful heal that seemed to do no more good.

"Yuuki!" Asuna sobbed, leaning over and clinging to her friend. "Kirito, nothing's working! Why
won't she wake up?"

"Try rezzing her," Kirito suggested despite the fact that she hadn't turned into a Remain Light, his
own voice filled with the same helpless grief. Asuna did so immediately, failing the spell twice as she tried to control her choked sobs before finally getting it right. "It's not working!"

"Please, Yuuki," Asuna said, wet blue hair plastered across her cheek as she cried against the Imp girl's chest. "Please come back, I love you, please, please…"

It was then that Kirito saw one of the strangest things he'd seen yet in Alfheim. As he watched, he saw Yuuki's status ribbon flicker once and then disappear, followed a heartbeat later by her cursor. They both then reappeared—so quickly that even later, in retrospect, Kirito couldn't be absolutely sure whether it had happened or if his own tears had simply blurred his vision.

Blinking his eyes clear, he rubbed at them and knelt beside Yuuki, reaching out and putting his hand on Asuna's. She clung to it as if it were a life preserver and she were drowning, sobbing even harder. As she did, Kirito saw Yuuki's eyelids flutter a few times. "Asuna!" he said sharply.

Yuuki must have stirred beneath her, because Asuna was already lifting her head; as the younger girl began to come to, she let go of Kirito's hand and scooped Yuuki into her arms, rocking her and crying out her name repeatedly. Yuuki's arms flew weakly up around Asuna. "Neesan!"

"Don't you ever do that again," Asuna said fiercely, squeezing the younger girl tightly and then gently leaning her back against the wall, stroking her wet hair. "You scared the life out of me! What happened to you?"

Yuuki still seemed unsteady and disoriented; her eyes took a moment to start to track properly and she let her arms drop to her lap as she began to come back to herself. "I… I'm not really sure. But, um… I think…"

"You think?" Kirito said, crouching beside her and taking one of her tiny hands in both of his.

Yuuki swallowed. "I think maybe I died."

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Rosalia was utterly terrified, and hated every second of this feeling of weakness. She had never, in her life, been more scared than she was in this moment—not when her stepfather would get drunk and beat her mother into unconsciousness, not when that group of college students had cornered her in her dorm and assaulted her, not on the day that it had truly sunk in that they were all trapped in this death game, and not even when Prophet had held a knife to her throat before and mocked her fear. He'd been right: fear was her master. It owned her. It drove her.

And she hated him for it. But not as much as she feared him.

"What do you want, Prophet?" she asked, uncomfortably aware that she was echoing the same question that Silica had asked of her only a minute earlier—an exchange of roles that she did not find the least bit reassuring.

"None of your business," said the Spriggan mercenary in clipped tones and simple language as he prowled forward, stopping a few paces from her and her two remaining allies. "Now walk away."

Her grip on the pike tightened. "Damnit, what do you think Corvatz is going to do if he finds out I just handed these kids over to you?"

There was the most imperceptible motion of Prophet's shoulders; it was almost a shrug. "Don't care. That's your problem. They're mine now."
A cold, unfamiliar feeling snaked its way through her at these words. Her voice was entirely different when she spoke next, all of the snark and defiance gone—even the fear for her own life had momentarily fled her. "What…" She licked her lips nervously. "What are you planning on doing with them?"

Prophet raised his head slightly, yellow eyes glittering somewhere deep beyond the tattered hem of the hood. "What's it to you?"

She swallowed, hard, the action catching in her throat and almost making her choke. "Look, I can go, but… I'd rather you didn't kill them if they don't make it necessary. We just need the notes, right? They're…"

Motion stirred beneath Prophet's hood. She could have sworn it resembled a smile. "They're…?" he echoed mockingly.

"Do I have to spell it out?" she snapped. "They're just kids, damnit! Threatening them to get the package for a client is one thing. But I know how you operate."

There was an awful sound, then, like a sick dog trying to cough up something that was killing it. It took her a moment to realize that Prophet was laughing. The sound cut off abruptly, as if someone had put the animal out of its misery. "Start walking," he said, as if the previous exchange hadn't even happened.

The other Salamander near her tensed in a particular way, his short bow snapping up into position with a single swift movement of his arms, the limbs of the bow surging with crimson light. "Screw you—"

He didn't finish his sentence. His eyes widened and his back arched as he grunted and thrust out his chest, something long and needle-like briefly emerging from it before disappearing. The Imp hovering behind the Salamander archer laughed as he snaked an arm around his victim, driving the slender blade of the estoc up under his chin and shutting his mouth with a snapping sound. The tip and ten centimeters of its length punched out through the top of his forehead with a surge of glowing crimson particles, then again as the assassin pulled down his fist and drove it repeatedly up into the Salamander's head at haphazard angles.

He spun in the air, still laughing, and hurled the man over the side of the bridge just before he exploded into a fiery Remain Light. Rosalia could hear children screaming behind her, but at the moment it was more a distraction than anything else, adding to the surreal nature of the turn of events. "XaXa!" she screamed as she watched the Imp's betrayal in horror. "Why did you—" She aimed her left hand at him and started to chant. "Hitto—"

She didn't get to finish either. There was a flash of reflected light from steel as Prophet moved faster than she imagined it was possible for a player to move. Numb fire erupted in her arm when her open hand fell away from it, the gathering spellfire dissipating as the dismembered piece shattered into particles. There was a sudden spreading numbness in her side, too, as something punched repeatedly through the gaps in her armor around her ribs. She shrieked and dropped her pike as she struggled desperately and clutched her maimed arm to her chest, feeling fingers tangle into her hair and yank back her head. A kick crushed into the crook of her knee, forcing her down.

"You know what your problem is, Rosalia?" asked a low, familiar voice in her ear.

Rosalia opened her mouth to scream again.

"You're an amateur," Prophet said as he drew a blade across her throat and separated her head from
her body.
"The single most avoidable source of damage in Alfheim is «falling damage», which is incurred when a player's avatar strikes the ground or an intervening object after falling in an uncontrolled way. Strictly speaking, the damage is not directly linked to falling, but rather to collisions between objects in motion. The damage incurred depends on the materials involved and the force delivered by the combination of mass and velocity; the same damage calculations are used for impacts by flying solid objects. Please note that while water can soften a relatively slow fall, a player can still take fatal damage from striking the surface of a body of water at sufficient velocity, just as in the real world."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Falling Damage»

5 May 2023
Day 181 - Midmorning

Kirito knew he was staring, but even when stopping to think about it he couldn't come up with any other reaction that would've been appropriate under the circumstances. He couldn't muster anything beyond letting his jaw continue to hang agape, and it bothered him; he felt like there ought to be something supportive or even intelligent that he could say. The words just wouldn't come.

Asuna found hers first, although she only managed to awkwardly echo what Yuuki herself had said. "D-died?"

Yuuki slowly arched her back with a grimace, trying to inch herself fully upright against the wall. "Maybe. I don't know," she admitted. "I'm still kinda fuzzy. The last thing I remember was hovering in front of you. Then it's like I blinked, and the next moment I was waking up again here."

Kirito felt even more confused after this answer, and was surprised to find that that was possible. "I don't understand," he said. "What did you mean by died? Do you think someone was messing around with your NerveGear?"

She shook her head and tried stretching again, as if waking from a long night in which she'd slept fitfully at best. "It's probably..." she hesitated, seeming uncomfortable with whatever subject lay hidden behind her words. Whatever opinion she had, she was reluctant to air it, or maybe unsure of how sound it was. "Never mind. I think I'm okay now."

"Yuuki," Asuna began. "We just watched you completely black out for a minute or two. The last time anything like that happened was in the first days of the game."

Kirito nodded along. No communication had ever come from the outside world, but given what Kayaba had said during the tutorial about the NerveGear's two-hour grace period for lost connectivity, Kirito and most of the players he knew assumed that these "blackouts" had been when their real bodies were moved to hospitals. They were usually—but not always—in the middle of the night, and almost everyone had suffered at least one. Those blackouts had usually been a lot longer, which Kirito supposed made sense if they were intended to allow their bodies to be moved from their homes to an appropriate support facility. It was possible that her network connection had simply flapped.

Now that he thought about it, that would perfectly explain the way Yuuki's avatar had suddenly gone limp, and why the condition hadn't been anything that they could cure or heal. What it didn't explain was—
"I remember when it happened to me," Asuna said, continuing after a few moments of thought. "But that's just it—I remember it. There wasn't any… discontinuity. Like I remember just being in this black space, and being stuck there for what must've been half an hour. It was boring and scary at the same time. But it wasn't like… it wasn't like flipping a switch, not the way you described." Kirito nodded his head again; he remembered his own panic and fear when the game world, his avatar and even his HUD had suddenly vanished and placed him in the featureless void that a person in FullDive saw when they weren't receiving any sensory input from the server. He'd been stuck there for some time, and he'd been lucky that the area in which he'd been hunting was clear of aggro mobs.

Still, Kirito knew that he himself had blacked out during particularly intense fights, coming back to himself only after it was done and realizing that he'd done something crazy or extraordinary while he was… out. Whatever the truth of what had happened to her, Kirito had to admit that Yuuki actually was looking much better now. There was still apprehension on her face, but it was understandable under the circumstances. She was no longer shaking, and as she got back on her feet and stretched one more time, she didn't seem any different than usual—except perhaps a bit quieter, a little more subdued.

It was that lull, that quiet, which allowed Kirito to catch the faint echo of something new over the noise from further down the canal. He straightened, turning his head one way and the other to try to give his long, pointed ears a clear line to wherever the sound was.

"You heard that too?" Asuna asked.

Kirito nodded as he stood. "From the Spillway. I wasn't sure at first, but it sounded like—"

"Someone yelling," Asuna said with alarm.

The air was filled with screams. High and shrill, young and scared, they overlapped with each other and rose and fell until they blended into a cacophony of terror that defied every attempt Silica made to get the situation under control. It took her some time to realize that she, too, was contributing towards this wall of noise, and that this probably wasn't helping matters any.

And then, at the conclusion of a guttural chant that she barely even heard until the final syllable was spat out, there was dead silence.

Not silence—Silence. The spell energy washed over the group of children until it met the sealed gate against which they were trapped, the bracketed ellipsis icon of the status effect blinking into existence beside their status ribbons like white breakers in a wave. In the span of a single breath, there was no more sound—but no less fear. Eight sets of wide, terrified eyes looked back at their adult assailants unblinkingly, stunned into stillness by the loss of their voices.

"That's better," Prophet said with a grunt as he lowered his left hand from its casting position. Into the sudden near-absolute silence there was a low tone receding with a faint doppler effect which could be heard over the rushing of the water below. Beneath his hood, Prophet's yellow eyes glided to the left to follow the sound; Silica did so as well and saw a fading violet flight trail heading downstream through the major waterway that cut beneath the span of the bridge. She did a quick count—Jeinaa was missing on this side of the gate; the children on the other side had—thank goodness!—fled by the time the killing started.

Prophet glanced down and snapped his fingers once; an Imp with spiked metal gauntlets and a serrated dagger with a glowing tip flew out from beneath the bridge. He, too, was hooded; Silica couldn't clearly see his face, but she could tell he was looking at the man who'd just summoned him.
"After her," Prophet said curtly.

The noise that came from the Imp was almost petulant. "But I'll miss all the fun!"

Prophet simply stared back the hovering man. "Then you'd best stop wasting time."

As Silica watched anxiously, wanting to do something to stop this, the Imp shot off at once in the direction of his prey with a high-pitched giggle trailing behind him. Their Spriggan captor then turned back to the group of children, gaze flicking between them as if he couldn't stand to have it linger on any one of them for long. His eyes finally came to a rest on Rosalia's fiery Remain Light where it hung in the air at waist level, not far away.

"That Silence spell is going to wear off soon," he said without preamble as he stepped forward, causing the collection of kids to take a step back—only to find that there was nowhere to go; the rearmost of them were backed against the gate and it was a long drop on either side to the channel below. "The first one who speaks without permission, dies." He made a sound deep in his throat, and spat meaningfully at Rosalia's Remain Light; the effect passed straight through it and disappeared into the slow stream running through the center of the bridge. "If you have any adolescent delusions of immortality, or any doubt that I will end you before you can finish casting a spell… feel free to ask her opinion."

He crouched beside the Remain Light, staring intently at it. The way it was positioned between him and Silica put a reddish cast on his ash-hued skin, giving him a demonic appearance that she found sickeningly appropriate. He stretched out a finger and poked it into the silent red flames; they had no substance and offered no resistance to the motion. "Any moment now, Rosalia. I know you can still hear me in there." His words were clipped, simple, but delivered with a slow and steady cadence.

"Are you looking forward to meeting Her?" A pause. The Remain Light offered no reply.

"Are you wondering how it feels when the device kills you?" He traced a finger around the edges of the flames; they seemed to have no reaction, and simply wrapped around his hand until it passed.

Prophet's eyes once more darted around in a methodical way, as if he was always keeping track of his surroundings to some degree, then back down at the center of the dwindling light. "Think there'll be any pain? If you'll wake at least once before..." There was a flicker, a shimmer; Prophet's low-voiced taunts trailed off as he watched the last remaining sign that Rosalia had existed in this world begin to shrink and sputter until it went out completely. "Well, consider your curiosity satisfied."

He looked up from his crouch and met Silica's eyes; she gave an involuntary whimper and choked it off as soon as she realized the status was no longer in effect—and she wasn't the only one. "Good girl," he said. "Keep control of yourself, and you live a little longer. For now, we wait."

Slowly, with hesitation born of fear and uncertainty, Silica raised her hand, head bowed, as if seeking recognition from an extremely strict teacher. She heard a snicker from the backstabbing Imp that Rosalia had called XaXa, and a more ambiguous grunt from Prophet that preceded one bitten-off word. "What."

Silica took this as hopeful evidence that she wasn't going to get cut down by this crazy Spriggan simply for asking the question—and hoped that this didn't amount to very short-lived wishful thinking. "Um… what are we waiting for? I mean, why are you keeping us here?"

Prophet was considerably taller than her; it took no effort on his part to look down on her. But even if he hadn't loomed so, his posture still would've radiated contempt for her existence. "We're waiting for a package. In the meantime, I'm trying to decide whether or not you're worth the effort."
Silica barely managed to get out the follow-up question. "The effort for what?"

"To kill you," he said bluntly, eyeing them disinterestedly. The words provoked an immediate ripple of whispers from behind Silica, and more than a few hissed warnings of silence from the others. "The lot of you must be level 5 or 6 at most. It'd be like popping bubble wrap."

"Popping bubble wrap is fun," said XaXa earnestly, flexing his free hand and making a pinching motion. "Nothing better for relieving stress." Silica was struck suddenly by the absurd realization of how he sounded; he couldn't have been much older than Keita and his friends. It stood in stark, disturbing contrast to his words and the deadly threat that lay behind them.

"Noted," Prophet said. "You see the problem, though. They'd DOT to death in seconds from one of Black's poisons. Even a scratch from any of our weapons would pop them. I doubt we'd even get any EXP."

"Maybe," XaXa said apprehensively, sounding as if he was on the verge of having his toys taken away. "But... there's a lot of them. Quantity over quality?"

"No," Prophet said firmly. "Sometimes you have to know when to throw the little fish back. The hunt will be sweeter, the reward for delivery to the Mistress richer, after they've leveled up a lot more. And then they'll spend the rest of their lives wondering if today they're strong enough to be worth killing."

Silica couldn't be sure, but she told herself fervently that this meant they weren't going to be killed outright here. At least, she did until her mind insisted on avoiding the subject, wandering to irrelevancies. There was something about Prophet's voice that was almost mesmerizing at times. Something she couldn't place, something exotic—a hint of an accent, somewhere, lingering in his otherwise flawless Japanese. She didn't have the right words to narrow it down further than that, but every now and then it grabbed her attention in something he said, as if giving her an excuse to focus on something other than the peril they faced.

It was still taking everything she had to put on a good face for the younger kids; when she was sure the fear didn't show, she turned and briefly looked over her shoulder, trying to persuasively fake her calm and confidence. They were all looking at her as if they expected her to do something—especially Sachi. She couldn't bear that look for long.

XaXa scowled beneath his hood, folding his arms across his chest with an annoyed grunt. "We could at least play a game while we wait," he protested.

Prophet angled his head slightly over his shoulder. "You have something in mind?"

In the blink of an eye, the scowl turned to an eager grin. "I like the one where we make 'em fight each other... and the last one alive goes free."

"The last time we did that," Prophet said wearily after a pause, "Black killed the winner anyway."

XaXa made a show of looking around and shading his eyes with his hand, as if peering into the distance. "Well... I don't see him here now. Who knows how long it'll take him to get back... especially if he and the girl both run their wings dry?"

Silica heard several choked-off sounds of dismay from behind her. She could sympathize—she herself wanted to shut her eyes, curl into a ball and pretend that this wasn't happening. She felt someone squeeze her from behind, a head pressing against her back and smaller arms wrapping around her waist. Another set of arms followed the first.
Prophet made a thoughtful sound, looking back at his captives. Silica reached down and gently pried the hands from around her, and positioned herself unmistakably in the center of the bridge, between the others and their captors. She was aware she was shaking badly, but she forced herself to meet the man's bright amber eyes, swallowing and setting her jaw defiantly.

A smile slowly twisted the corner of Prophet's lips. "I have an idea."

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It was not Sasha's first time in combat. She'd experienced something like this before: the heightened sense of awareness that came with imminent danger, the moments that seemed to stretch on and the ones that flew by before she knew they've happened. The sudden spikes of fear and adrenaline that threatened to freeze her into inaction and then urged her to act now.

But none of her fights while traveling or adventuring compared with what she faced here. She could swear, in that moment when she locked eyes with Hrungnir, that there was something sentient in that look. Something gazed back at her from inside the boss of the 25th gateway, something that was horribly offended at what she'd done to it. Something which wanted her dead in a way that no other mob she'd ever faced had; she could almost sense the killing intent radiated from it, a trick of perception that she'd heard described to her by Kirito but never herself felt.

She felt it now. It terrified her.

A little over fifty meters. She knew the ranges of her spells and was used to eyeballing those ranges; she could estimate how much space separated her from the boss: a distance about half the length of a regulation football field; a distance that was maybe two or three times its own height. She'd seen it move frightfully quickly before, and she saw it again as it pivoted on its heel and shifted its great mass, kicking off with a lunge that batted aside a Cait Sith's bear-like pet as if it was an origami sculpture. That first stride covered more than ten meters of the gap between them just as Dale finished his incantation; she saw the Heal Over Time effect appear beside her status gauge and her HP began slowly ticking upwards. That seemed gradual, but she knew from timing it outside of combat that the ticks were updating every tenth-second.

**Wham.** The ground beneath her feet shook noticeably as Hrungnir's next step came down well past the halfway point, and as soon as she felt Dale's hand leave her shoulder she scrambled backwards, unable to stop herself from trying to put more space between her and the freight train that was bearing down on her.

"Don't get too far!" shouted a voice from nearby that she thought was Bourne's.

She heard the shout, and she knew her flight was pointless, but her legs weren't listening to the rational part of her. That part occupied a very tiny corner of her brain now, forced out by what she distantly recognized as a fight-or-flight reaction. Even knowing this was no real help—her avatar was doing what her brain told it to do, and her brain was telling her and anything that would listen to get the hell away from the gigantic dangerous monster now.

**Wham!** She could hear more chanting and even more shouting, but she couldn't focus on any of it, couldn't process anything except the incoming boss and the incomprehensible fact that it was after her. She'd known to expect this, she'd been told what was likely to happen when the shield broke—but it was one thing to know this intellectually, another to see what had to amount to nearly 30 tonnes of monster bearing down on her with a personal vengeance. She panicked.

**WHAM!** The next footstep was so close that the impact caused her to lose her balance and fall to the ground. It was then that Sasha knew, with appalling certainty, that she was going to die here. She'd
never belonged here to begin with, had no place being here alongside so many seasoned warriors who'd been depending on her to give them a victory. What a bitter self-deception that had been—as if she could make any kind of difference in beating a gateway boss!

Worse, it was a self-deception that had consequences for more than just her. She could, in those final moments when the boss reared back and wound up for a crushing blow, see the truth of it—how the whole scenario had appealed to her vanity, something to which she was no less susceptible than anyone else. She'd wanted to believe that her research was valuable, had wanted to prove it. That vanity had led her to this place, and it was going to leave the children without a proper adult caretaker. She cursed herself for a bitter fool.

Sasha threw her arms over her face and screamed as the Jotunn swung its massive fist towards her.

Then her world abruptly became darkness and silence.

Asuna was not far behind Kirito in coming to her feet. They looked at each other, and he could tell they were both having the same awful thought. The Spillway was a large circular basin where the canal they were in and several others collected and merged into the Grand Channel. But it got its name from the array of waterfalls that cascaded down from the endpoints of the canals in the Upper Sewers.

Where the raid party was supposed to be.

There was a sudden rise in the noise level. What had before been faint hints of raised voices and some other steady sound in the distance suddenly became the fierce thrumming of wings and a high-pitched yell as the source of the disturbance—a very young female Imp whose dark ponytailed hair streamed behind her like a windsock—flew straight down through the Spillway and cut the corner sharply, coming into view. She continued down the canal at high speed as if she was being chased by a named mob, causing Kirito to wonder if that was exactly what had happened; maybe the kids had pulled something they couldn't handle. But there shouldn't have been anything down here that dangerous!

Before anyone could react properly, the distraught Imp girl—Kirito recognized her from the raid group, but couldn't place her name—pulled up a short distance away from their group and came to a hover. She began to open her mouth as if to say something, starting to stretch out her hand.

And then she exploded.

There was no AOE blast, no damage source Kirito could've pointed at to blame for the sudden death—her avatar simply erupted into violet flames. He thought he'd caught a glimpse of something in the air, but from his perspective it was as if all of her HP had simply disappeared in the span of a moment. As the three of them stared in shock, the combustion of her avatar completed, leaving behind only the churning purple flames of her Remain Light—and a throwing pick that clattered to the wet stone with a metallic tinkle. Kirito's gaze locked onto the sound, and his eyes widened when he recognized the material of which it was made.

You need to be at least level 31 to wield anything alloyed with Dzarri Vespid Crystals. That's player-crafted, clearer-quality gear.

Behind the Remain Light hovered another Imp they hadn't seen before, both hands empty; one was poised before him in the final frame of a throwing technique. He was hooded and cloaked, only the fact that he could fly at all indicating his race; most of his face was in shadow. A triumphant grin
hung beneath those shadows, a grin that lasted only long enough for him to notice the other three players.

Barely a second had passed since the Imp girl's avatar had turned into a Remain Light.

"Oh—" he said.

Two longswords cleared their scabbards with a chorus of metallic hisses as Kirito, Asuna and Yuuki actually began to process what had just happened—and reacted. Kirito was already in motion.

"—SHIT." The Imp PKer did a flip in the air to reorient himself, and flew back the way he came in a burst of acceleration just as Kirito's sword slashed a diagonal blue arc through the fading violet of his flight trail.

"Rez her!" Kirito shouted to Asuna once he recovered from the freeze at the end of his technique, dashing down the damp walkway set into the side of the canal with his sword trailing behind him. Asuna was the only one who hadn't drawn her weapon; she had already started moving towards the Remain Light and now had her hands pressed together in the opening motions for one of her resurrection spells.

Rationally, he knew the chase was hopeless—there was no way he could catch a player in flight on foot, not even an Imp flying underground. But this girl had been under his protection, she'd been his responsibility—and whoever this other Imp was, that player had just killed her in cold blood. Right in front of him.

The fact that she was in no danger of disappearing before Asuna could rez her was irrelevant, and so were the reasons behind it. If Kirito could catch this player, one of them was going to die. A calmer part of him was shocked when he realized that was his intent; none of the players he'd killed in the past had ever been deaths he sought.

The pitch of another set of Imp wings rose and fell rapidly as Yuuki shot past Kirito in a crimson-violet blur, going faster than he'd ever seen her fly. "I've got him!" she called back, voice bouncing off the angled stone walls and receding quickly. "Go find the others!"

Kirito knew she was right, but it still took him a moment to accept letting their unknown assailant go. When he turned and started running back, he saw the purple Remain Light diffuse and reshape itself into the form of the stricken girl's avatar as Asuna completed the incantation for the rez spell. Practically as soon as she could move again, the young Imp launched herself into Asuna's arms and started sobbing, nothing coherent coming out of her except in fragments.

"Go," Asuna urged to Kirito around an armful of girl. "Back up the passage to the Upper Sewers. I'll catch up once I'm sure she's okay."

Kirito needed no further urging. The passage was actually a long maintenance shaft that led down to the Lower Sewers from a partially collapsed tunnel above; it wasn't far from here and he didn't figure it would take long to find the kids once he got back there. He just hoped he was in time.

The wet thudding of his footsteps echoed loudly in his ears as he dashed back the way they'd come, skidding as he rounded a corner and nearly going sliding off into the canal before getting his footing back. A few more bends in the channel took him out of hearing distance of Asuna and the Imp girl, nearing the side chamber that had a ladder leading up to the collapsed tunnel. He quickened his pace when he heard a commotion ahead, and further still as the commotion resolved into sounds of dismay.
Which was when he ran straight into a sizable crowd of fleeing children; nearly a dozen of them in all. It was more than half of the raid group, and they clogged the path ahead of him. He immediately realized where they had to have come from if they were here now. "You're safe now," he called out, pitching his voice to carry over their cries. "Where are the others?"

A Spriggan boy a little younger than Silica pushed his way to the fore, waving his hands to appeal for quiet. "Some griefers took them hostage," he said quickly.

"How many?" Kirito asked, feeling his whole avatar suddenly turn to ice.

"Two, I think—an Imp and a Spriggan." Which probably meant there were three, if Kirito added the one Yuuki was chasing. "But we were separated from everyone else by a gate and we couldn't find the—"

"There's a narrow bridge, right? I know where it is," Kirito said with growing anxiety, bouncing on his toes as he tried to firmly but gently push his way through the crowd, which began to part for him. "That gate blocks the path down to the Lower Sewers where you are now. I can get it open again." He pointed back the way he'd come as he finished working through the blockage of bodies and kept moving. "Around that way, take a left at the fork, follow the left side of the canal and soon you'll see Asuna, the Undine girl you met earlier. Stay with her—you'll be safe now. I'm going to go help the others!"

Kirito ran through the archway into the side room, and barely paused before leaping straight up into the shaft that led back to the level with the now-closed gate. He didn't have time for a leisurely ascent on the ladder; Kirito landed on one of the rungs, kicked away from it and then back off the opposite wall, repeating this zig-zag leaping pattern until it led him up through the floor in a partially collapsed passage. He landed in a crouch and then took off running again, planting his hands on a fallen section of wall and swinging his lower body over and past it. He didn't stop or even slow, he just willed his body to move as fast as it possibly could—to the limits of his avatar and stats.

If they were trapped by the portcullis at the end of that viaduct, then they weren't far at all—he could be there in under a minute, most of it at a dead run.

*Please, please let me be in time.*

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Time seemed to have disappeared along with the world.

Sasha's mind was still roiling with the fear and chaos that had led up to the boss attacking her, but it was doing so in a near-total absence of sensory input. She couldn't move, could barely feel anything except a steady, even pressure all around her. She had a brief, frantic thought that she really was dead… but then she remembered second-hand accounts she'd heard from players who'd had the experience of becoming a Remain Light; there was a period of a minute while you waited to be rezzed, and during that time she was pretty sure you were supposed to be able to still see and hear everything around you.

Her gaze went up and to the left; she could still see her HUD, and when she focused on her status bar it grew in her vision. There were several effect icons beside it—

*Oh.*

The brown icon with a tiny stylized picture of a mountain popped open a small dialog box when she focused on it, describing the «Mountain Retreat» spell effect and noting in tenth-second increments
what its remaining duration was: a little over six seconds and counting. A prompt appeared, asking her if she wanted to dismiss the buff; she quickly focused on the No option and the dialog disappeared.

Sasha was not accustomed to feeling stupid, and generally only allowed herself to do so when she'd made a truly elementary and avoidable mistake. She allowed it here—again she'd known what to expect, and again she had let her fear completely drive away her ability to think clearly. Of course there was darkness and silence; she was currently encased in a sheath of elemental stone. When she thought back, she could remember a split second where her body seemed to jerk to a stop as a brief but loud rippling sound covered her entirely and then left her in this state.

But the silence now was absolute; she neither heard nor felt the impacts that must have rained down on her in the moment that she was saved. It was like being imprisoned in another dimension—if she hadn't been able to check her peripheral vision for her HUD to reassure herself that it was still there, she would've been close to panicking again. As it was, she had a creeping feeling of claustrophobia that was rising up within her, and even though her avatar didn't have an automatic breathing animation, she started to feel mentally suffocated, imagining a squeezing sensation all around—

A battle blinked back into existence around her as rock crumbled away into dust.

Sasha cut off a scream of surprise with a squeak as she recovered from the shock of the buff suddenly dropping, assaulting her senses with things that were shouting, chanting, crashing, flashing, exploding, and roaring—and often more than one of these at once. Her entire body shook and her knees felt weak; she sank to the ground and watched through the dispersing dust while most of the melee groups continued to encircle the boss, giving it everything they had. Spell effects rushed past her and the others in the group like multi-color rockets, exploding against its unshielded hide and producing inhumanly loud roars of pain and rage; the mages seemed to be unloading their entire arsenals in order to make up for having to hold their fire for so long. All the while she felt the effects of healing spells repeatedly cascade over her like cool rain, intermittently tinting her vision blue when the energy sheeted over her face.

The combined effect at its peak was to produce the most insanely loud and cacophonous thing Sasha had ever… heard wasn't even the right word. It was being experienced. The sound and the light and the chaos all seemed to merge into a physical, tangible thing that rocked her back on her heels. She felt an unconscious urge to edge away from the scene, even knowing that there was nowhere to go.

Sasha felt a tap at her shoulder, and looked up. The Salamander with the garish bandana was standing there beside her, eyes frequently flicking between her and the boss as he held out a hand. "Told you," he said with a grin. "We got this."

She stared at his hand for a moment, not fully processing the fact that she was still sitting on the ground and that this was why he was making the gesture. When she looked down at her hands, they were still fiercely trembling; she reached up and he reached out to take her hand halfway, lifting her up effortlessly.

"Thanks," she said. There was more she was going to say, but the sound of her own voice startled her; she'd been screaming, then she hadn't been able to make any noise at all—and then there had been screaming again. To speak normally felt almost jarring.

He let go as soon as she was upright, although he still kept half an eye on her as if expecting that she might tip right back over. Once she was steady, he handed her two slim stoppered bottles filled with effervescent liquid. They both glowed very faintly; one was a translucent red, the other medium blue. "Here, drink these."
Sasha had brought her own HP and MP potions, but she wasn't about to turn down the offer. She thumbed the cork away from the health potion first and tipped it back, gagging a little on the slight fruitiness that was undercut with a medicinal tang; as she was drinking, she saw an effect icon appear beside her HP gauge. She was a little disappointed to find that they didn't slake her thirst at all, but when the red liquid was completely gone, she opened the blue bottle and nodded thanks to the Salamander before beginning to restore her MP.

*Klein,* she remembered; that was his name. "The shield's down," he said unnecessarily as he watched the boss and the orgy of combat surrounding it from their safe distance. "You did great. I've never seen magic like that before, but it sure did the job. Scary shit though, huh?"

Sasha barked a very shrill, nervous laugh. "Scary for whom? I thought I was dead."

"Not on my watch," Klein said. He gave Bourne a look. "Although maybe don't cut it so close next time. Dale's only got the one rez, and I'm sure Sasha'd rather not eat the death penalty."

"I had to be sure my spell didn't take effect before Dale finished his incantation," the massive Gnome mage replied. "Or else it would've blocked his regen."

Meaning Dale was the slow link here; Sasha could understand that much of the implication. "Sorry, Leader," the other Gnome said. "Now that I know what to listen for in her spell, next time I'll get the heal on her the moment she casts."

"Next time," Sasha repeated slowly. "You think we're going to have to do this again?"

Klein nodded as he continued to observe the battle. "I'd bet on it. It's—aw man, I want a pet like that!"

Sasha looked, but had no idea which of the tamed pets he meant—at least half of the Cait Sith had brought one, and they ranged from oversized forest animals to giant insects and reptilian creatures; some of them were actually being ridden as mounts. In truth, she didn't particularly care what kind of pet struck Klein's fancy, but at the moment it was helping calm her down and distract her from the last dregs of her panic attack—panic that threatened to return at the thought of having that monster charging at her again. She nodded and smiled as if she knew what he was talking about.

Klein sighed. "Guys, we gotta save up for mounts."

"You know," said the Imp in their group. "I bet Alicia'd give you a great one if you asked." He smacked his head theatrically. "Oh wait, that's why we're here!"

There was so much battle noise echoing off the walls of the vast boss room, it took Sasha a moment to realize that everyone around her had stopped talking. Kunimittz now had a completely blank look on his face, as if deliberately schooled to stony neutrality.

"What?" Sasha said, confused.

Klein was next. "Kunimittz."

"Yeah, buddy?"

"Shut up." Snickers came from Klein's other group members. Sasha felt utterly bewildered... but the feeling was helping her calm down, so she embraced it wholeheartedly.

Then Klein's attention seemed to shift, and his posture changed. "Bourne! What's the cooldown on that spell of yours?"
"If you mean Mountain Retreat, two minutes and thirty seconds," the mage said immediately. "One twenty-eight left. Why?"

"Dunno," Klein said, holding a hand up to his brow and squinting. "This just feels too easy. They're all jammied up in there whaling on that boss, and its first HP bar is almost down by half. Bosses like to do something sucky whenever they lose an HP bar; usually it's a transformation or pattern change or something." He shrugged, and looked at Sasha briefly before Bourne. "I just want to make sure that save-the-squishy spell is on tap when we need it. I was gonna maybe ask Dynamm to give his Haste to you or Dale, but I'd rather save it for when it's really needed."

"Unless Hrungnir suddenly breaks loose and comes this way for no apparent reason, don't worry about it," Bourne said with a look towards Sasha. "Cooldown on your spell, milady?"

Having to think about magic calmed her in a way that nothing else had yet. Sasha took a deep breath, and focused on the small icons along the upper-right edge of her view. Strictly speaking, there wasn't any single spell that was on cooldown now—what was unavailable were the individual effects that she'd used in the spell, which were on cooldown at Fourth Magnitude and below for a certain duration. "Also 150 seconds, with about a minute-ten left."

Bourne's eyebrows raised. "I would've expected longer. That's an efficiently-crafted spell."

Sasha nodded, trying to stay with the familiar ground of this conversation instead of letting herself be distracted and unnerved by the combat taking place; the latter seemed to yank her attention away frequently with explosions, the loud metallic din of clashing weapons or the antagonized bellows of the Jotunn the rest of the raid was fighting. She was still shaking a little, and she tried to master it before speaking again, lest it come through in her voice. "I tried to use the lowest magnitude and least expensive effects I could. It's only even that long because nibralth doubles the cooldown. The real limiter here is my MP."

Indeed, when she glanced up and to the left, she saw that the blue bar in her status gauge indicating her MP was still well below half, and the icon for the MP potion was starting to flash—indicating that it was about to run out. She slipped a hand into a pouch at her waist, and found to her relief that her on-hand potions were undamaged; her fingers found the distinctively flared bottle of an MP potion and she started in on it. She looked at Bourne, and saw that he was doing the same thing.

The Gnome met her eyes, and wiped at his mouth when he finished his potion. "My lady Puca, I don't suppose that you're proficient in Song Magic, are you?"

Sasha looked away in embarrassment, dropping the empty vial to the ground where it shattered into blue particles. "I'm sorry. I've always been terrible at rhythm games, and I can't hold a tune to save my life. It's ironic, isn't it?"

"Aye, maybe just a little," Bourne said. "I was just thinking that it would've been very helpful to have a Puca playing «Freya's Hymn» right now. We could use the MP regen."

Sasha hadn't heard of the song, but that didn't surprise her—she'd given up on leveling up Song Magic fairly quickly once she'd realized that it actually took at least a minimal degree of musical aptitude, something which she utterly lacked. This was the first time she'd ever regretted that choice; it sounded like the sort of effect you'd want to always have on in a party. It also made her wonder why more raid groups didn't hire Puca—or for that matter, why more Puca didn't try to sell their services.

Then again, she didn't have very much contact with other Puca, so for all she knew, they did, and the lack of them here was an anomaly. She considered asking Bourne; he was from the NCC, and had
probably gone out with groups that had Puca bards in them.

"Hey Leader," said Kunimittz, breaking into Sasha's thoughts. "Am I the only one who feels bad about just hanging back here like this? They're in there fighting for their lives."

"We're doing what we're supposed to, Kunimittz," Klein replied, not taking his eyes from said battle. "Which is protecting Sasha, keeping her far away from the boss, and avoiding taking any aggro ourselves."

"I know, I know," Kunimittz said with a grumble as another volley of attack spells cast by the mages on their flanks arced out and and struck the boss with flashes of colored light and explosive sound. He glanced at Sasha. "And in case I didn't mention it, oneesan, that was some nice work there with that spell. I just wish I could get in on the fun." He mimed sighting down his arm with thumb cocked and one eye closed, as if holding an imaginary pistol. "I can't miss; I've got perfect LOS on that thing's upper body, just like everyone else."

"Nope," Klein said.

"You sure?" Kunimittz flexed his hands. "They didn't say we couldn't, and it's not like we could pull aggro away from the tanks at this point—we barely have any at all compared to what the rest of the raid has to have by now. One DOT won't hurt."

"No DOTs, Kunimittz," Klein said with a sigh. "I love you, man. But seriously, no DOTs. No nukes. No debuffs. No fucking Fade Blade. No casting. Got it? At least, not until we've gotten past the first HP bar. We don't know what tricks this thing has up its sleeve, and I don't feel like finding out the hard way."

"Fine," said Kunimittz with reluctant grace.

"Hey, look on the bright side," said the Sylph member of Klein's party as he dragged his finger through the air in a way that looked as if he was scrolling through a list in his menu. "When we finally do get our turn, we can go all-out like we never get to. Tanks will have tons of hate and we'll be at full MP with nothing on cooldown."

Kunimittz grinned. "I'm starting to like this plan of yours, Dynamm. Can I have your Haste buff when we get to DPS?"

"Yo!" Klein said. "Look sharp, guys, I think the first bar is about to go."

He was right. As Sasha tried to focus on the status ribbons circling around the side of the boss's head, she could see the topmost one in the red zone. Another volley of spells lashed out from the mage groups, and when they exploded against the boss there was a shattering sound from the first HP bar as it disintegrated into particles. Immediately after that, every blow that landed on the boss produced some kind of pop-up message; Sasha couldn't read it from where she was.

"DPS out! Tank groups on me!" shouted a voice that sounded like Thelvin's. The barrages of attack spells abruptly stopped, as did the noises of clashing metal. The formation of players around the boss expanded rapidly, resettling into clearer distinctions of groups while they pulled back out of range of the boss, which—just as Klein had predicted—seemed to be doing something new.

The Jotunn's wind axe dispersed, as did the sheath of stone around its one fist. Colored energy swirled around each of its four arms—red, yellow, blue and green—gathering at the hands and churning around them as they formed into boulder-sized fists. Hrungnir threw back its head and roared as it beat at its great torso with all four fists, drumming a rhythm on its chest that wove these
energies around its body in an ever-tightening pattern of knotwork.

"State change!" Thelvin yelled. "Maintained shields up!"

There was a sudden wave of chanted incantations across the various raid groups as mages quickly cast defensive shields; they formed into an uneven array of interlocking elemental discs in several different colors, which bathed each group in hues which hinted at the individual magical talents of their mages. It took Sasha a moment to realize what was happening—that Thelvin was expecting an AOE or some other attack. When she did, she quickly manifested her own shield, not really sure if she was expected to or not, but unwilling to take the chance of being exposed to damage that she couldn't withstand. "Zutto wilnachikke tamzul buren!"

Water surged from her palm, and the disc of the shield formed rapidly about a meter in front of it. Sasha saw her MP—which was still slowly climbing from the lingering over-time effects of the potion—start to slowly tick back down as long as she maintained the effect. She grimaced at the necessity, but she really didn't want to get caught in—

Then there was a blinding flash, similar to the one from when the shield had shattered; the traumatic recent memory of that made Sasha wince and look away as much as the brightness did. No wave of anything emanated from the boss, no projectiles or flames or the like reached out to strike at the raid force, and with the release of all that built-up energy, shields around the raid began dropping as individual mages apparently decided that an attack wasn't coming after all. Unwilling to waste any more of her MP if it wasn't needed, Sasha clenched her fist to dismiss her own shield, and quickly reached for another MP potion.

When she looked up again, she could now see a faint, familiar shimmer reform itself around the boss once more. Its deep bellows were still echoing from the walls, and as they did, Sasha caught glimpses of movement from just beyond the overlapping regions of firelight and orelight illuminating the room. No matter which direction she turned her head, she seemed to get another hint of movement in her peripheral vision, or a flash of reflected light from a blade.

Klein stepped in front of Sasha with his katana held out in a defensive stance, his own head whipping around. "Anyone else notice that we seem to have—"

"Adds!" came the yell from one of the off-tank groups.

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Prophet's eyes crawled over each of his captives one by one, as if scrutinizing them more closely than before. "You," he said finally, pointing directly at Silica. "The catgirl with the mouth. Your gear is better. You're not a newbie like these others if you're wearing Lindwyrm Hide." Silica's hands self-consciously went to the belt that wrapped around her middle, as if trying to cover it. "And you," he said, yellow eyes again snapping over to Sachi, who flinched away from his attention. "I don't recognize your robes, but they're player-crafted and I'd bet they weren't cheap."

"So what?" Silica asked, hands balling helplessly into fists at her sides as she tried to divert Prophet's attention away from Sachi.

Their Spriggen captor coughed out a laugh. "So the two of you are going to entertain us while we wait."

Silica didn't know what kind of entertainment he was talking about, but she didn't think it was likely to be to her benefit or continued good health. Her hair was threatening to stand on end, and she couldn't stop her tail from lashing, but she at least tried to force herself not to tremble as she spoke.
"What do you want us to do?"

"Simple. You're going to take out your melee weapons and fight each other until one of you is dead. That should pass enough time for Wraith to get back with the package."

Silica had to reach out and steady Sachi; the other girl looked as if she was going to collapse. She desperately wanted a way out, and part of her wished that Pina would come back from his house run and save them—but she suspected that against these people, it would just be a quick way of getting her beloved pet killed again. As soon as she realized that, her hopes abruptly reversed and she reminded whatever spirits were watching over her that she'd really rather he didn't come back here after all. She was on her own.

In a way, that thought helped lend her a little bit of steel when she needed it. "If it's just the two of us you want, then let the other kids go," she said, feeling strangely proud of herself for being able to say it or even try to negotiate at all. It was like someone else was speaking the words, and she was only watching.

"No," said Prophet flatly. "You're not in a position to bargain. Here are your choices: fight each other and one of you dies, or refuse and I'll make one of your party members take your place."

Silica looked helplessly back at the others; they were largely huddled against one another as far back against the gate as they could get. A few of them were standing in front of the others trying to look defiant, but the effect was more darkly comical than anything else when put up against the mercilessness of their assailant. What power did any of them really have?

She couldn't let Prophet make any of them take her place. This was her responsibility, hers and Sachi's; she was only even here in the first place because Sachi had needed someone to be strong for her while Sasha was gone. Silica just wished that she had someone to be strong for her, like Kirito—

*Kirito!* He and the two girls he was traveling with ought to be checking back in on them soon. She wasn't sure exactly how much time had passed, but she was sure that it had been at least ten minutes since their last meetup when this whole conflict began, and the raid had been traveling deeper into the Sewers, so surely they couldn't be too far from where he was…

He'd come. He had to. She just needed to buy enough time for that to happen.

Moments passed as Silica and Sachi looked at each other. They were each standing beside one another, ankle-deep water rushing past them, and each unconsciously took a step back onto the less treacherous ground of the banks on either side of the water running across the center of the bridge.

*The water…*

"You're boring me," Prophet said with barely restrained annoyance. "Start fighting now, or I'll pick new combatants." He glanced over Silica's shoulder. "Maybe the Salamander and the Sylph. A nice classic fight. They probably hate each other anyway."

*Robert and Jellica.* She couldn't let that happen. Silica's hands tightened into fists again, and when Prophet went to open his mouth once more, she drew her dagger. Sachi's eyes widened, disbelief fighting to join fear in them. "Silica, what—"

"Please, Sachi, just get out your weapon," Silica said as she held her dagger at ready, not quite yet in the correct position to trigger a technique. "And trust me."

"Yes, trust her," goaded Prophet with a smirk as he watched. "Quickest way to get a blade in your back."
Silica bit back the response that she wanted to give to that, something along the lines of Prophet being guilty of... what was it some of the adults had called it when you accused someone of something that you yourself did? Pro-something... projection, that was it. He's just saying that because that's what he would do. She jabbed out her blade at Sachi a few times, testing the girl's reactions. Each time, Sachi jerked back in a way that was completely unlike the confidence she usually showed now when dealing with mobs—it was as if this one day had undone all the progress she'd made in recent weeks, leaving her flinching even from feints.

"Fight me!" Silica yelled. She felt bad for yelling at Sachi; the girl was already terrified out of her mind, and now she probably thought one of her close friends was angry at her and trying to kill her. Silica's anger wasn't at Sachi, it was at their captors—anger that only intensified when her outburst drew loud laughter from them.

Silica went on the attack again, nervously eyeing Prophet when their maneuvers briefly brought her to face him. The two daggers rattled against each other as much by chance as anything else; Sachi was barely getting hers up in time to deflect Silica's blows, which tended to graze her arms as a result. There was simply nowhere to dodge—the best they could do was circle each other on the bridge, which was narrow enough that she probably could've touched both edges with her hands and feet if she'd lain down across it. Any kind of abrupt movement threatened to cause them to lose their balance; Silica was surprised that Sachi hadn't yet tried to dodge without thinking and sent herself falling off the side. It would've been better if she had.

"You're not even really trying," Prophet said with boredom and disgust in his voice. "If there's no victor in ten seconds, I'm killing you both."

"Silica!" begged Sachi as she held her dagger straight out with both hands, awkwardly interposing it between them. It wasn't even a remotely useful fighting stance; it was a psychological buffer.
"Please, I don't want to do this! I can't fight another person!" Her eyes pleaded with Silica as much as her words did. "I can't fight you."

"Do it!" Silica screamed at the top of her lungs, adjusting her own stance slightly into the correct position to initiate a dagger technique. The blade began to muster a bright gleen glow.

"I can't!" Sachi screamed back, and then did.

It was a clumsy attempt, the kind of awkward slash a complete beginner would make when swinging around their weapon before they had any notion of how to activate techniques. Silica knew that Sachi could fight better than that; when she wasn't consumed by her fears, she could actually do her part in a group. But she couldn't even seem to fake fighting another person—and when she swung her dagger at Silica, it was an amateur move that left her wide open.

When she sensed the moment of rightness, Silica unleashed the dagger technique that she'd been charging, and felt the system assist take over as it carried her body into its opening animations. She closed a meter of distance in the blink of an eye, and both she and Sachi cried out when she felt the dagger plunge into the other girl's belly, and saw nearly a third of her HP disappear at once.

I'm so sorry, she wanted to say in the transient moment where she met Sachi's terrified eyes and sank her weapon into the girl's body.

But there was no time to say anything. As soon as the blade sank into its target, she felt her body spin around and execute the second part of the combo in «Scoundrel Bunt», the entire reason why she'd decided to use the technique here in the first place. The reversal ended with her driving the pommel of her dagger into Sachi's gut, and the other girl's HP dropped into the yellow zone as the blow delivered knockback force and sent Sachi over the edge of the bridge. Her eyes were wide with
betrayal.

For a moment—one single, gloriously sweet moment, as she delivered the blow and froze in place in the final frame of the attack animation—Silica took solace in the thought that her plan was actually going to work.

Then tendrils of violet-black energy lashed out from the ground in front of Silica. They coiled around Sachi's ankles, arresting her brief flight and slamming her back down to the surface of the bridge. Silica didn't understand what had happened until she looked to her left and saw XaXa's hand held out, palm-up.

It had to be some kind of root spell. Roots were debuffs that fixed an opponent in place—they were usually used for crowd control and to keep monsters from moving around or pursuing. They had a significantly reduced duration on players, and were of limited use in restraining them. Despite the gravity of the situation, Silica had a moment where she almost had to admire the innovative use to which the effect had been put here.

Almost.

"You must think I'm stupid," said Prophet as he took a step towards them. Silica shrank back from the intensity of the look he then gave her. "Undines don't take falling damage on water."

I know, Silica thought. That's what I was counting on. She could see it in Sachi's eyes as realization dawned on her; she'd been hoping that knocking Sachi off the bridge and into the water far below would count as a win and get Sachi out of Prophet's reach. She'd been trying to save Sachi's life. She knelt beside the older girl and put her arms around her; Sachi began to cry as her arms wrapped around Silica in turn and embraced her tightly.

"I dunno about you, boss," said XaXa, "but I think a ring-out counts as a violation."

Prophet nodded, eyeing Sachi and Silica with cold contempt. "Maybe the Salamander and the Sylph will put on a better show."

"No I won't!" shouted Robert as he stepped forward, making a fist and shaking it at Prophet. "I'm not fighting Jellica!"

Prophet gave him a bored look. "Okay." He nodded towards Robert, who appeared very smug at his defiant victory.

Silica didn't see where the two daggers came from, but they trailed a flare of violet light as they spun past Prophet's right shoulder, streaked just over the heads of Sachi and Silica, and struck the Salamander boy in the chest. He combusted into a fiery red Remain Light before his face even had time to register surprise.

"Robert!" shrieked several people; Silica was one of them. Shock ran through her like a physical blow from the suddenness of the violence. There had been no warnings, no arguing, just… one moment, he was there. The next, he was gone.

"See?" Prophet remarked to XaXa, glancing over his shoulder at the Imp as a renewed wall of screams rose up from the terrified group of kids by the gate. "This is what I was talking about. Those aren't even your best daggers, and they one-shotted him. No EXP, I'm guessing?"

"Nothin', boss," confirmed XaXa with a chagrined tone, wincing at the volume of the outcry. "But damn... that noise is annoying. Can I kill them anyway?"
Something in Sachi seemed to snap. She turned her back on their captors, reached towards the boy's Remain Light and held out both hands with determination. "Zutto mezal, kefle—"

The blow that struck her then was unarmed and backhanded; Prophet had simply taken another step forward as soon as she started casting and cuffed her in the head. She fumbled the spell, but her intent didn't waver; she still held out her hands with her palms pressed together in the opening motions. "Please, please let me rez him! Zutto meza—"

At first it looked as if Prophet had punched her in the back, but when his hand drew back there was a glint of torchlight from the translucent edge of his blade. Her HP dropped to a sliver of red and she cried out. Silica scrambled to try to get traction and reach her dagger; she'd dropped it when she and Sachi had hugged each other, and it was so close...

"Please!" Sachi begged, sobbing as Prophet grabbed the dark blue hem of her collar and yanked her back towards him. She pressed her hands together, eyes focused on Robert's Remain Light. "Zu—"

Silica's hand closed around the grip of her dagger. Prophet's blade flashed again. Sachi's avatar erupted into blue flames.

"Sachi!" Silica screamed, sinking back to her knees with tears running down her face in hot streams. It was over now. As long as Sachi had been able to stay alive, she could've rezzed anyone else... but the Undine girl had been the only one with any rez spells. Silica could fight all she wanted now, but the only thing she'd accomplish was delaying the inevitable—anyone who was a Remain Light at this point was as good as dead in less than a minute. The small display beneath her own gauge showing Sachi's status had grayed out, and even the forgotten anti-harassment dialog that had appeared when they'd clung to each other had disappeared.

Silica's train of thought stopped there. Something clicked in the desperation of the moment, something important. As Prophet stepped towards her, she looked over at the half-dozen remaining children who were all clinging to each other the same way as they wailed their fear.

A knife thrust into her side, and there was an awful numbness inside of her where it did, along with an impact that threw her face-first into the shallow stream in the middle of the bridge. She knew her HP was disappearing rapidly as the painlessly piercing blows stabbed down into her again and again, but she couldn't spare any attention for her HUD, and knew trying to defend herself was pointless now. All she had was one last moment of clarity as she pushed herself onto her elbows to lift her face free of the water, yelling at the younger kids as loudly as possible so that her voice carried over the din.

"The harassment pop-ups! Send each other to jail!"

When the final blow fell, Silica at least had the satisfaction of seeing the flares of blue light as the other children began teleporting safely away to the NPC jail in Arun, reported by their fellow party members for violations of their physical space.
"An «End Frame» is the final frame in a sequence of animation. In the context of a system-assisted technique, it is the position in which a player's avatar stops at the conclusion of that technique, and the point after which the system assist returns full control of the player's avatar to them. Most techniques have a «Freeze Time» associated with their End Frame, which is a period of time during which the player's avatar is frozen in place and they are prevented from moving themselves in any way. The Freeze Time for most techniques is measured in tenths of seconds, but the more powerful techniques can have a Freeze Time of a second or more, during which time the player is completely vulnerable to counterattack...”

—Alfheim Online manual, «Techniques: Freeze Time»

Chapter 25

5 May 2023
Day 181 - Midmorning

"N-no, no, wait!" urged Jeinaa, trying to squirm free of Asuna's arms as soon as Kirito sprinted away and disappeared around the corner. "You have to go after him!"

Asuna glanced off to the right, over to where the Spriggan's echoing footsteps had been just a few moments before. These were the first coherent words she'd gotten out of the scared young Imp girl other than her name, and at first she didn't really understand—she'd been expecting to hear some explanation of how the girl had ended up down here, and who her attacker had been. Asuna allowed herself to be pulled to her feet as she struggled with confusion.

"Please," Jeinaa said, her grip on Asuna's arm firm as she tugged like a pet straining at a leash. "He doesn't know what he's running into; they'll kill him!"

"They?" Asuna said, alarm growing within her once again. The entire ordeal had blown through them so fast, she hadn't had time to think about what might actually be happening on the upper floor where the children were—or perhaps she hadn't wanted to think about it, not when there was someone right here in front of her who needed help.

"Come on!" said the younger girl, wide-eyed, voice almost breaking as it rose in pitch.

Asuna didn't need any further urging. It was almost unheard-of for PKers to enter the newbie areas; there was no benefit for them to hunt there. But if that was what had happened, and if there was a full group of them...

The kids were in serious trouble. And Kirito wouldn't think twice before trying to protect them from PKers. He'd take them all on, regardless of the risk to himself.

He'd need a healer. And if he didn't, there was a good chance that someone else would.

Asuna ran.

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Kirito kept running. Precious seconds passed like hours.

The screams that echoed hollowly down the passageway lent speed and dire purpose to his strides. Every distant, high-pitched cry forced him to push himself faster and faster, fighting to overcome even the system-imposed limits on how quickly he could move. Logically, he knew that these things
were hard caps encoded within the game engine—he could no more exceed the maximum running speed based on his AGI and character level than he could refuse to turn into a Remain Light when his HP reached zero.

But Kirito couldn't accept that, and still he fought to go ever faster; he'd even sheathed his sword to have one less thing slowing him down. His awareness of the world tightened, and while it felt at times like he was actually getting slower, he knew it to be a trick of perception—a side effect of the state of hyper-awareness in which he found himself, giving him more time to react but making everything feel slower.

A mob respawned in his path as he was running; a rat the size of a sheep appeared in a flare of blue light, the pink of its cursor almost white with the difference in levels between them. At the speed he was going, Kirito didn't have time to waste drawing his sword—instead, he twisted slightly at the waist and tucked his shoulder. He struck the mob at something close to thirty kilometers per hour without stopping, a portion of his own HP ticking down with the sheer force of the impact.

The «Arun Sewer Rat», on the other hand, exploded. Kirito caught streaks of blue in his peripheral vision as the mob's death effect particles streamed in his wake, and then noticed another already-respawned mob not far ahead of him. He considered just dodging around it, but the piercing cries of fear that drove him forward were painfully close now, and he knew he'd be needing his sword anyway. His torso twisted again as he reached up to his right shoulder without slowing, and Phantasmal Dirge came free of its scabbard again with a smooth metallic sound. He turned the motion of drawing into a diagonal downward slash that knocked the rat aside like a ragdoll while it burst from the one-hit kill.

That was when he drew close enough to hear Silica's raised voice, the latter end of her shout clearly audible once the rat finished its loud death shatter. "Send each other to jail!"

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Klein echoed the cry that went up, passing it along so that nobody missed the warning. "Adds!"

Sasha's first question made it clear that the English gamer jargon had been wasted on her. "What did you say?"

Klein gestured with his katana at the wave of demi-human forms that burst from the shadows at the edges of the boss room, dropping into a combat stance. "Those are adds." He raised his voice again, calling out loudly to his team. "VIP triangle formation—Sasha, that means you get in the middle with Dale! Dynamm, Kunimittz, you got your wish: DPS the fuck out of those things!"

Those things, from the look of them, were some flavor of dwarf or another—when Klein focused on one long enough to pop its cursor, the name «Lesser Frost Dwarf foot soldier» appeared above its head. Most of them had rushed at the mage groups on the flanks, which had met the adds with a barrage of AOE spells that punched holes in their ranks and knocked others aside. A trio of the stray mobs, however, had come from somewhere behind the raid group, and as they charged in Klein knew they were going to have to be met.

He spared a moment to glance over the group. Sasha and Dale were standing back to back—the Puca mage was looking around in apprehension, but her hands were held up in a way that would let her start casting quickly; Dale had his hands held in a similar position, but his eyes weren't always on the battlefield—they frequently went up and to the left, where he could watch the HP gauges of the party in case he needed to heal. Dynamm and Kunimittz formed two points of a triangle around the pair of them, with Bourne—demonstrating that he was as quick on the uptake as he seemed—falling into position at the third. All three of them were facing outwards.
That left Klein in the "floater" position, intercepting mobs before they could reach the core group and moving around to fill in wherever he was needed most. "Incoming!" Klein said, dashing out to the cluster of mobs with his party's spell projectiles zipping past him. Elemental earth grew from the ground beneath one of the Frost Dwarves, forming around its ankles and rooting it in place; the others cried out and thrashed wildly when Kunimittz's Blindness spell went off in the middle of them just as Klein reached them.

Blinding the mobs almost worked against Klein—rather than the skilled attack he'd been prepared to parry, he was presented with a pair of angry and confused dwarves swinging aimlessly at the air in front of them. He very nearly got clipped by one of their poleaxes out of sheer bad luck, and managed to deflect a glancing blow at the last moment by hopping to one side and slanting it off the flat of his katana blade.

Then he went to work. Work which, he had to admit, beat the hell out of his old day job.

A series of Klein's techniques cut glowing red rifts across the mobs as they flailed—Blindness didn't last long, but the seconds of disadvantage might as well have been the entire battle. One by one they burst into rapidly-evaporating blue polygons, and when the pair was dealt with he quickly looked around, checking on the group and watching for any more adds. The one that Bourne had rooted wasn't even there anymore; the others must have quickly burned it down with magic while it was unable to dodge.

"Clear!" Klein yelled. The word was echoed by Dynamm and Kunimittz, then by Bourne after a pause. He looked back at Sasha and briefly met her eyes; she gave him a nervous smile that he returned with an encouraging thumbs-up. His gaze rose to take in the boss where the tank groups had it parked—it was under control, but they were probably using up restorative items quickly. Klein wondered for a moment who was protecting the mage groups, and then saw what they were doing: the Cait Sith were using their pets to intercept the incoming adds and stall them long enough for the combined firepower of the Cait Sith and Sylph mage groups to burn the mobs down.

Two more waves followed like that first one; on the third wave, the adds actually had a few mages among them, which complicated things. Demi-human mobs that could use magic always freaked Klein out a bit—they used spell incantations to cast the same way a player had to, which meant that they could be interrupted or anticipated, but it made them a little too life-like for his peace of mind.

It also made them a lot more of a threat than a pure melee mob. Screened by their weapon-toting defenders, which kept Klein from easily closing with them, the dwarven mages repeatedly barraged Klein's group with spells that he couldn't block. He had to trust that his mages knew what they were doing and could defend against the ranged attacks that came their way; he had his own hands full avoiding their attempts at hitting him with status effects. He ducked, he dodged, he even once threw out his own fire shield when he thought he heard a homing spell incoming; the Dark-based debuff splashed across the fiery disc in front of him right before he had to drop it in order to parry a melee attack from his flank.

But once the melee defenders were gone, the mages went down quickly nonetheless. If there was one silver lining to the PvP aspect of Alfheim Online and the occasional necessity of fighting other players, it was this: once Klein got used to surviving in battle against a human being that was capable of thinking and anticipating, most mobs were nothing unless they took him by surprise or outnumbered him. Even the spellcasting types still had only rudimentary AI and a limited repertoire of programmed tactics, and were a lot more predictable than a real person; when Klein got in among them and started laying waste with his sword, they took too long to adjust to close-quarters combat and rapidly turned into expanding clouds of blue particles.
"Clear!" Klein shouted after quickly taking stock of his surroundings and finding no more mobs.

"Clear!" again came the call from his party members. The shout rang out unevenly from the other mage groups as well, turning into a brief ripple across the raid members who weren't occupied with parking the boss while everyone else dealt with the adds. One of the Sylph groups had ended up nearby in all of the confusion and desperate motion of the battle; Klein looked that way and found his eyes meeting with Sakuya's. She'd apparently been serving a similar role to his own, using the length of her weapon to clear space around the mages in her group, and her HP was slowly ticking back up into the green as one of those mages cast a spell on her.

She let the eye contact linger for a moment before quirking her lips into a smile. "And here I thought you were all heat and no burn, Klein the Salamander."

Klein fought down a defensive reaction to the comment; it seemed to be meant in good humor. He puffed out his chest and grinned, leaning his sword against his shoulder in a way that he thought looked pretty cool. "Lady, I'm the hottest thing in this room."

Sakuya took a hand off of her nodachi long enough to stick a finger down her throat, and turned back to her group with a gagging sound.

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«You Are Dead».

The words stared back at Silica, superimposed in the very center of her HUD just above the large digits that counted down her remaining time in this world. They were in English, and although the sentence was simple it still took her a moment to process it through the lingering shock from the violence she'd just had done to her. It seemed absurd to her—this was a Japanese game and probably almost all of the people in it were Japanese; why were so many pop-up messages like these in English? It wasn't as if she had no exposure to the language at all—it was everywhere in popular culture and on the Internet, especially among gamers. But she wasn't supposed to begin learning it in school for another year yet; almost every time she'd encountered one of these cryptic messages, like «Key Required» or «Immortal Object», she'd had to ask someone what they meant.

This one, though, was hard to misunderstand. You. Are. Dead. Three simple words that even she could read. Put them together, add the context of what had just happened to her, and she ended up with a single, unmistakable conclusion.

She was going to die.

Forty-eight seconds left to live. Silica tried looking around, and found to her surprise that she was able to. It was as if her viewpoint was fixed somewhere around half a meter off the ground where her Remain Light had appeared, and when she tried to look in any given direction, her field of view changed as if she was moving her head or point of focus. Except that she didn't have a head—or, as far as she could tell, a body of any kind. It was surreal, like living inside of a disembodied camera.

Prophet grunted once as he rose from the kneeling position he'd been in when he killed her, and flicked his hand in a way that looked like he was dismissing a UI window. "That's better. Not as good as taking down a clearer, but at least once her Remain Light is gone I'll get some money and items worth selling." His eyes went to the sole remaining person from the raid group who hadn't been teleported to safety—someone had had to have been the last person to confirm a harassment pop-up for someone else. Jellica bicycled her legs as she tried to get traction from her sitting position, scrambling backwards in irregular bursts of motion when her feet found purchase in the slimy stonework.
"I got this one, boss," the Imp named XaXa said, wings beginning to vibrate as he moved forward. Silica felt the urge to lunge forward and stop him as if her brain had sent the signals to her muscles, but she had no body any longer—the only thoughts the game seemed to process now were head and eye movements, which were translated into changes in her field of view. She felt the same urge to yell at him, to distract him, but she had no mouth to move and no sound emerged.

Prophet shrugged indifferently, glancing down at the glowing yellow flames of Silica's Remain Light once. "Get it over with, then. I'm done here—Wraith should have the package by now, and Black goddamn well better be done with that rabbit soon. We'll regroup at the inn and decide what to tell that Keroppi fop later."

Jellica tried to get further away, but her back was up against the portcullis, and all her struggles managed was to push herself a little more upright, her eyes wide and face drawn in fear. "Go away!" she screamed. "You murdering jerk!"

XaXa simply laughed, stilling his wings and dropping to his feet in a jog a few meters away from her. "Maybe you couldn't read the small print, girl, but this is a PvP game. Now shut up and—"

"Fujan!" Jellica shouted, throwing her hand forward. A crackle of emerald energy surged down her arm and erupted into a blast of green-tinted wind. The projectile took XaXa by surprise, impacting just under his chin and cutting off his gloating. Silica had used just enough magic herself to know that that must have been a very basic beginning spell, but she also knew the throat was a critical location and that Wind attacks tended to blow stuff around. XaXa was actually lifted a few centimeters off his feet and sent backwards at least a meter; he landed on his back and went skidding over the side with an outraged yell, regaining enough presence of mind to realize what had happened at get his wings active again. Silica could not remember the last time she was more proud of someone—at least Jellica was managing to put up a fight and stall them.

Prophet laughed as if he thought this was the funniest thing he'd ever seen, laughed so hard he had to hold his sides. "She fucking well got you, didn't she?"

"Shut up!" XaXa snarled angrily as his wings blurred back into life and shot him forward. "I'm gonna fucking kill that little bitch. Yatto kachikke juminu vethleka jan!"

Midway through XaXa's incantation, Jellica thrust out her right hand again. "Futto tsutakke tamzul dweren!" A surge of air rushed past her, blowing the locks of her hair forward in a flutter of blond curls, and formed into a churning convex disc of elemental energy. The violet-black bolt of energy homed unerringly towards her, but dispersed itself across the barrier—which remained standing.

Prophet laughed even harder. "Just knock down what's left of the shield quickly, idiot; it'll be on cooldown for at least a few more seconds."

XaXa obliged, jabbing at it with that slender rapier-like dagger of his. The defensive barrier dispersed with a breezy sound, and the Imp marched through the space it had blocked with his dagger in one hand and the other held out palm-first. He seemed to have learned his lesson about running his mouth during a fight; his lips were set in a thin, angry line as he advanced. Silica didn't doubt that he was prepared to cast a spell quickly if he had to.

Jellica screamed incomprehensibly at the PKer, cupping her hands in the brackish water in which she was sitting and hurling a handful of it at him. The pointless spray of water particles was enough to get him to laugh again, and he twirled the dagger once in his hand as his lips twisted into a smug grin. "Time for you to log out," he said.

Then Jellica's scream turned into a high-pitched squeak of surprise as the portcullis suddenly lurched
back into its ceiling recess and she tipped over backwards.

"The hell?" XaXa said.

A black blur shot out of the dark tunnel and collided with him.

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Sachi had known this much from the very beginning of the death game: if she left Parasel, if she tried
to find her friends, sooner or later it would be the end of her. Someone like her who'd spent her
starting money and the first days of the game cowering in an inn room wasn't suited to go on
adventures and fight monsters; she knew she lacked the skill and courage to survive anything like
that. The news of the Salamander war against the Imps and Sylphs, the rumors of roaming parties of
PKers, they'd filled her with silent terror every time she considered setting foot outside of the city.

Even after she'd tentatively ventured out in a large group, even after Sasha had come to her city and
found her, it had taken a lot of persuasion to overcome her fears enough to leave with the older
woman and the small group of children accompanying her, then to begin practicing her magic in
earnest.

She'd done it. Bit by bit, day by day, she'd worked on overcoming the crippling panic attacks and
paralyzing fear that trapped her inside the safe areas of the game—first by traveling with Sasha to
find other children like her, and later when she'd been reunited with her real-life friends in Arun.

And by teaching her magic, Sasha had helped Sachi discover things she hadn't known existed in her.
Power. Confidence. Usefulness. Here was something that even Sachi, the littlest Black Cat, could do.
She didn't have to get in close like Keita or Tetsuo; she could simply hang back and make sure that
everyone was healed and protected.

Her recent friendship with Silica had been a real turning point for her—here was a girl at least two
years her junior who not only wasn't afraid of adventures, but who embraced them wholeheartedly.
She was strong, she was courageous—she was everything that Sachi wasn't.

But now they'd both gotten in over their heads, and it was going to be the end of them.

The inevitability of it was… liberating, in a way. Sachi had expected becoming a Remain Light to be
terrifying, but all she could feel now about it was sadness for her friends, and a mix of satisfaction
and regret: she'd overcome her fear enough to trade her life for Robert's by trying to resurrect him,
but she hadn't been able to finish casting her spell—that man, that monster, hadn't let her. If she'd
been able to accomplish at least that much, she thought she might've been able to face her imminent
death with complete acceptance—because in the end, she'd found the courage within her to make the
right choice even knowing that it meant her end, to give her life so that another might live.

I wish it had been enough, she thought with sorrow as XaXa strode towards Jellica, turning her field
of view so that she didn't have to watch, looking to where the flaming crimson orb of Robert's
Remain Light still burned brightly. I wish it had been enough... but at least I tried when I had the
chance. She tried not to look at her own countdown, but the translucent numbers were large, and
positioned dead center in her HUD. They didn't block her view of what was happening, but they
were visible whatever direction she was looking.

Twenty-five seconds, Sachi thought. Sooner for Robert. A little longer for Silica. I'm sorry, sis.

"The hell?" came XaXa's puzzled outburst from behind where she was looking. Her view whipped
around at a thought, just in time to see a Spriggan—Kirito!—come leaping out of the darkness within
the formerly-blocked tunnel, voice raised to a wordless yell. He shoved Jellica behind him and drove his sword into XaXa's midsection with the entire mass of his body behind it, punching it through far enough to shoulder-check him. Kirito stopped abruptly when he slammed into the Imp; XaXa went flying backwards off of the blade even harder than he had from the force of Jellica's attack spell, screaming. When his lost HP finished draining a moment later, almost a third of it was gone.

Kirito launched himself into a flying lunge as the gleaming black sword in his hand flared into the characteristic light trail of a weapon technique, the system assist spinning him around in a move that sliced down at XaXa's shoulder while the Imp's wings began to drone. XaXa's long dagger flashed with a similar glow as he twisted in midair, narrowly evading the diagonal cut and slicing a thin trail of glowing red across Kirito's arm as he passed. The older Spriggan boy, unable to fly underground the way the Imp could, parried a follow-up strike and tried to twist himself around as he fell towards the bridge. Metal rang against metal with keening whines and brief actinic flashes where two techniques met, and Kirito rolled back to his feet when he hit the bridge, alert for an attack from either assailant as he stood sideways between them. The look in his eyes was wild, even more hateful than XaXa's had been when Jellica had hit him with her Wind Blast.

Prophet wasn't laughing anymore.

The first strike was a test. Not a feint—that would imply a pulled blow, an attempt at misdirection. Kirito's attack was honest in its killing intent.

The test was to see what kind of opponent he was facing. He already knew the Imp with the estoc was quick and aggressive, but unless he landed a clean blow or inflicted a status effect, his weapon wasn't a serious threat—Kirito's had the advantage of reach and weight; the Imp wouldn't be able to block his attacks, only evade and counter. Moreover, the fact that the Imp kept to the air actually worked to Kirito's advantage as well—any movement, any attempt to fly in for an attack would likewise be accompanied by sound, by the changes in the noise made by the Imp's wings. And while his magic was the greater threat, Kirito would be able to hear him start casting well before he got off a spell.

All of which meant that Kirito could afford to keep his eyes on the Spriggan he faced, whose weapon he hadn't seen yet. He could see the hint of a pommel beneath the other player's thumb, but the weapon itself was hidden behind his arm.

Kirito shifted his weight slightly and angled his sword. The Spriggan PKer lowered his own stance. There was a brief pause as light surged along the length of Kirito's blade, and then he shot forward with his sword whipping back and around into a diagonal uppercut, water spraying away from the rapid-fire shuffle of his feet. His opponent danced around the attack and lashed out with what Kirito could now see was a long, dangerous-looking dagger, stabbing several times at Kirito's off arm with his weapon held in a reverse grip that Kirito had never seen used in the game before. He was fortunate that the man hadn't equipped the dagger with a status tip before striking; Kirito took two quick slashes to the arm before the half-second freeze at the end of his technique was over, somersaulting backwards across the bridge to give himself space.

Something was off. Kirito hadn't been able to read the attack, hadn't even had the opportunity to defend against it. And the way the other Spriggan was holding the dagger was all wrong; he shouldn't have been able to trigger a weapon technique—his wrist was turned so that the blade lay flush against his wrist and forearm, almost disappearing into his sleeve. Then, as the man changed his posture, the knife reversed in his hand—snapping into what looked like a more traditional hammer grip, albeit with his thumb aligned against the flat of the blade, the dagger snapping out in front of
him and pointing directly at Kirito's face so that the length of it was hard to gauge. Kirito jerked his head back reflexively before realizing that the attack wasn't coming.

"Well, well," the man grated out, a slow smile starting to touch his features once more. "I'm betting you're that Black Swordsman that Rosalia kept whining about. I'm afraid this time you've missed all the fun..."

Rage flared in Kirito; the other man smiled a little more widely when he noticed—as if he knew exactly how much anger he was kindling within Kirito, and enjoyed watching it. Fun. Without turning to look, he could still see the three Remain Lights behind him on the bridge, the only remaining signs of the nine children that should've been here. That was what this man, this creature, called fun—

"Why?" Kirito screamed over whatever it was the man had been saying, attempting to get control of his fury rather than the other way around. "Why them?"

"You don't get it, do you?" the Spriggan Pker asked conversationally. "The gods have brought us here for a rea—"

"Forget I asked," Kirito spat fiercely, both disgusted by and at once passionately disinterested in whatever insane justification was apparently about to come out of the other player's mouth. "I don't care about your head trauma." As he spoke, he twisted at the waist and tilted his sword into the opening position for a fast-attack, fast-recovery weapon technique. The two-hit combo lashed out almost as soon as it was ready, but his opponent was prepared. He diverted the first blow with an open-handed parry at Kirito's sword arm that knocked it away, then stepped inside the attack and jabbed at Kirito's exposed side with another pair of lightning-fast stabbing motions, ending with an elbow strike to the midsection that almost doubled him over. Kirito controlled the reflex and hop-stepped back just in time to evade a slash to his throat, then whirled his sword in a cyclic X-shaped attack that closely mimicked the pattern of one of his techniques and served mostly to give him some breathing room.

As his Spriggan opponent leapt away from his counterattack, Kirito heard the Imp's wings buzz into action, and pivoted on his heel to deflect a series of jabs from the estoc, nearly losing his balance in the middle of the stream running across the bridge. When they separated, the Imp's voice began to rise in a chant, and Kirito only barely managed to avoid the violet-black spell energy that splashed into the water at his feet, a Dark Magic debuff of some kind. He swung completely around and sliced his sword in a wild arc behind him to discourage the Spriggan from taking advantage of the momentary diversion, then incanted his own Illusion-based shield just in time to stop a follow-up spell from behind him.

It was only a matter of time until the Imp realized the way both his incantations and the sound of his wings were telegraphing his attacks and descended to the bridge on foot. Once he did, Kirito would be surrounded on either side—and with nowhere to dodge, the odds of his survival wouldn't be high. Worse, he still couldn't get a read on the way the Spriggan was attacking. There were no warning flares or sounds from the initiation of his weapon techniques, no stances or movements that Kirito recognized. It was like he was using his own—

Kirito's teeth clenched as the truth of what he was facing began to penetrate.

Anyone could use a weapon in Alfheim Online. One of the smallest children in the raid group had been wielding a massive warhammer simply because her STR stat and the system assist made it possible. All a player had to do was meet the minimum requirements to equip the weapon and learn the opening motion inputs of the weapon techniques, and the system would take over—moving their body and doing its best to connect the attack with the intended target.
But one thing had been clear even in the beta: a player who already knew how to use a weapon in the real world had the potential to be much more effective with it than an unskilled player with identical stats—to the point where when dueling another such player, it could sometimes be advantageous to forego the pre-programmed techniques, most of which had cooldowns and end frame freezes. Kirito had personally known a few testers whose real-world weapon skills had made them formidable in the beta.

The person Kirito was facing now not only knew how to use a knife in the real world—he had to be deadly with one. Where he'd acquired his skill, Kirito could only guess—Yakuza, maybe, or some other flavor of thug. Perhaps a soldier. Or even just someone dedicated to their hobby. Regardless of who he'd been back in riaru, in here he was a lethal threat.

*I can't rely on the system assist,* Kirito thought while he parried yet another wave of attacks from both players, keeping them at bay primarily by dint of his weapon's superior reach. *Every time I use a weapon technique, he waits for the freeze at the end and then takes advantage of the opening to chip away a little more of my HP. He's playing with me.*

For the first time, Kirito allowed himself to glance for a moment at the status gauge in his HUD. The amount of yellow left in the HP bar was not comforting; he hadn't heard it chime and wasn't actually sure when he'd dropped below half, only that it had been somewhere amidst a rain of small but numerous cuts from the flashing blade of that dagger. The single blow that Kirito had managed to land on the man in return had been a glancing one, but it had still chopped off at least a tenth of his opponent's health.

His Spriggan opponent—crouched at the other end of the bridge—suddenly dashed towards him, leaping clear over the projectile-based Illusion debuff that Kirito hastily cast in his path. Kirito tensed with his sword at ready, prepared to kick off and cut the man in two as he descended from the apex of his jump—

And then, as a light sensation of impact left his shoulder tingling, he went blind.

He realized immediately what must have happened. The Imp had waited until Kirito had begun casting his spell, then used Kirito's own voice to cover the noise from his own, quietly muttering his incantation without Kirito hearing it coming. The Blindness status debuff that he saw in his HUD had a timer running in it, displaying a little over five seconds remaining.

Five seconds. With two opponents closing in on him, those seconds might as well have been the rest of his life.

Deprived of sight except for the contents of his HUD, Kirito listened carefully. He heard the change in the wing noise from the Imp and the splashing footsteps of the Spriggan killer who was rushing towards him; he blindly spun his sword in a figure-eight form that might buy him a few moments of space at most. Worse still, he just barely caught the sound of a third set of footsteps as well, these behind him. The passing seconds, stretched out like a strand of taffy by his hyper-awareness in the tension of the moment, afforded him time to wonder whether or not he'd be better off leaping from the bridge and taking his chances with the falling damage rather than accepting the potentially-lethal blows that he couldn't even see coming now. At least then, if he died, he could deny these bastards any gain from it.

Defiance surged in him before he could follow that train of thought any further, sweeping away the momentary temptation of fatalism and putting his sword and body in motion again. Something in him refused to take the easy out, and he felt a fleeting satisfaction as the wild swing of his blade struck something, someone. *These PKer lowlifes might still kill me, but they're going to have to work for it.*
Then he heard a familiar, welcome voice rising from behind him, from the direction of the tunnel to the Lower Sewers. "Setto mezal keyavaz shippura yasun!"

Three Remain Lights. One resurrection spell not on cooldown. And now that Kirito's status effects had been cured, Asuna had a terrible choice to make.

It was a dilemma she had hoped never to face. In a raid, she was one healer among many; even the dedicated DPS mages in the Undine clearing groups were required to practice their native Water magic until they had access to at least the beginning rez spell, which split the cost between the caster's HP and MP and revived the target at one hit point. As a consequence, the Undine clearers under Diavel and Jahala's leadership hadn't lost a single member to a raid boss since the 10th gateway; there was simply never a situation where there wasn't at least one raid member with an available rez.

Asuna's skill in Water Magic was 741, which gave her access to Resurrect Remain Light spells at two different magnitudes, each with a number of variants that included heal-on-rez and area effects. Out of long habit she'd used the lowest-magnitude version available on Jeinaa, which had put Magnitude 5 on cooldown for several minutes. She could rez all three of the Remain Lights in front of her with an AOE spell, but with M5 on cooldown that meant incanting the spell at Magnitude 6—and she didn't meet the skill requirements for the M6 version of the AOE rez. Maybe if she knew how to—

No! She didn't have time to overthink this. Every fraction of a second she spent thinking was time that the fallen didn't have. She had to make a choice.

Three Remain Lights. Red, Yellow, and Blue. No way of knowing who the unfortunate players even were, only that at least some of them had to be from the children's raid group. The red Remain Light was a Salamander—hadn't Jeinaa said that their original assailants were Salamanders and Imps? If she rezzed that one, she could very well be giving herself and Kirito another enemy to fight. The yellow was a much safer bet; that could be Silica or one of the other two Cait Sith in her group. Then there was the Undine's blue light—

Asuna knew, then, what her decision had to be. It was not, she told herself, any kind of racial prejudice or bias towards her own faction—the deciding factor was that by rezzing an Undine, she at least had a better chance of bringing back someone else who might themselves have a rez spell.

No regrets, she swore to herself. This is simply the best way to save the most lives. She pressed her hands together as she ran across the bridge towards the blue Remain Light. "Zutto famudrokke—"

"Boss!" yelled the Imp who was harrying Kirito's flanks as the two Spriggans dueled on the other side of the bridge.

"Deal with it!" shouted the enemy Spriggan at the same time, weaving sinuously around Kirito's wild attacks like a snake fighting a mongoose. The Imp, rising out of range of Kirito's sword, aimed his free hand at Asuna and spoke.

As she reached the heartbeat-length pause in the first half of her incantation, Asuna kicked out and slid feet-first across the final meters separating her from the blue Remain Light, hands still presented in the correct form for the spell she was casting. Water fanned out to either side of her; a projectile of some kind crackled just over and past her head in a trail of violet-black light.

"—fletaze plachaz shaja yasun!" Her hands glowed blue with increasing intensity, and when she
reached her target and uttered the final syllable she reframed them into a cupped shape, holding them as if the Remain Light was a crystal ball from which she was attempting to divine the future—or ensure that at least one more person here had one.

Sachi had not dared to hope—not even when she'd recognized the words of the spell that Asuna had begun casting, and especially not when their Imp assailant had tried to stop her from completing the spell. She'd already accepted the fact of her death; allowing herself any further hope would be pointless cruelty, undoing the peace she'd achieved in her last moments.

But then the spell completed, and she felt the physical world rush back into her awareness, her entire body reforming with a tingling sensation like a sleeping limb awakening. She felt the cold air on her wet skin and clothes, and looked down at her hands, flexing them simply to reassure herself that she could, that this was real. The irony of the thought passed through her without really registering; nothing about this world was real except the consequences of failure.

Then her eyes, still wandering as she adjusted to the change in her circumstances, came to rest on the steady yellow flames of Silica's Remain Light where it hung in the air several meters away.

Something important within Sachi fell into place then, a missing piece that had eluded her for all her life. The thing she'd feared the most—her own death—had come for her. It had come, and it had been overcome. Rather than driving her further inside herself, the complete experience had burned away some of the fear of the unknown and left behind a realization that filled her with a sense of rightness.

Death could be faced.

It could be beaten. It must be.

Sachi resolved not to waste the chance she'd been given.

She heard the beginning of a Dark Magic spell, and before she could think to chant up a shield, she heard Asuna do so first; a surge of glowing blue water formed into a barrier against which the hostile spell effects splashed into violet-black mist. Thus protected, Sachi stretched out both hands, focusing on Silica's Remain Light until a blue reticule appeared centered on it. "Zutto mezal, kefletaz shippura yasun!"

Blue light met gold, converging in a greenish-orange tint to the flames just before they began to shift and coalesce into the form of a girl. Sachi didn't wait for Silica's body to finish reforming before looking around quickly for Asuna. "Rez Robert, too!" she yelled, pointing at the flickering red Remain Light near the older Undine girl.

"Is that who… oh no, please, I can't!" Asuna said as her face suddenly paled in shock. "My rezzes are still on cooldown!"

Sachi stared at Robert's Remain Light in horror, tears beginning to form in her eyes. "But that was my only one…"

The two girls met gazes. Sachi knew what their rez spells being on cooldown meant, and she knew the other girl did too. There was nothing more to say—and nothing they could do now for Robert except wait for his Remain Light to disappear.

Sachi turned away from it and quickly began running through her AOE healing spells to bring herself and Silica back up. The sound of wings in action filled the air again as the Imp decided to fly
around the shield rather than breaking through it, and Asuna rushed to put herself in front of Sachi and Silica, rapier drawn and held out before her.

When Sachi looked again, Robert's Remain Light was gone. The expression on Asuna's face was as hard as stone.

"Both of you, go follow that tunnel until you meet up with the others," Asuna said through her teeth as she locked eyes with XaXa. "I'll deal with him."

The Imp snorted in contempt as he drew up several meters out of her reach, free hand poised. "Worry about yourself, girl," he said as he maneuvered and watched for an opening.

Silica looked like she wanted to protest and help out, but her dagger was gone; although their revivals meant that Prophet hadn't received any of their inventory items or the majority of the EXP for the kill, Silica had dropped her weapon when he took her down. Sachi didn't have to reach to her side to know that her own dagger was lost as well—not that she was any good with it—and she shook her head silently. "We have to get back to the others anyway," she said to Silica. "They're our responsibility."

And we've already failed one of them.

"Go, now!" Asuna yelled, deflecting a sudden lunge from the Imp with a high-pitched whine of metal and a flash of light.

"His name is XaXa!" Silica called out, backing quickly away from the fight with frequent glances over her shoulder. "He called the other one Prophet."

"I'm not planning on forming a party with them!" Asuna said sharply, rapier once again in a high guard position that wavered only to track the Imp whenever he shifted positions. As soon as Sachi and Silica were both within the tunnel, she threw out her hand and uttered a rapid incantation; water surged out of the walls and formed into an elemental barrier that temporarily blocked the passage and cut off anyone who might try to pursue them—or anyone who might try to rejoin the fight.

XaXa. Prophet.

Despite her dismissive parting words to the Cait Sith girl called Silica, Asuna made an effort to commit the names to memory. They were the names of killers—the names of people who needed to be stopped. If she and Kirito couldn't stop them here, then she would make sure everyone knew who they were.

"Well?" XaXa taunted, feinting at her left side with the long, slender blade of his estoc. She watched his eyes and didn't rise to the bait. "The only ranged attacks you've got are your magic, girl. What's wrong, blew all your MP on rezzing that noob?"

He couldn't have known for sure—a person's MP gauge wasn't shown on their public status ribbon the way their HP was—but that was still uncomfortably close to the truth. Asuna's eyes narrowed in a sudden surge of anger at the casual way he talked about his predations, anger which she tried to harness. "I've got all the time in the world to deal with you," she said, casually parrying a probing attack before he zipped back out of her reach. "But your flight meter must be almost gone; you've got to land sometime."

The expression twisting the Imp's face told her she'd hit the mark. "Prophet!" he barked out. "How much longer do we have to wait for Wraith and Black?"

Asuna filed the new names away for reference and risked a sidewise glance. Prophet was still hotly
engaged with Kirito, both of their HP gauges as yellow as XaXa's; he didn't answer. The lack of a reply drew a follow-up look from XaXa, and when his attention shifted she quickly slipped a hand into one of the pouches at her side, fingers closing around the crystal she knew she'd find there.

"Restore!" she said as quietly as possible, using the voice command to activate the crystal. It shattered in her grasp, the sound of breaking glass muffled by the container but still audible. In the space of a few moments, the nearly-empty blue gauge below her HP refilled, and before XaXa could react to the sound, she whipped the hand out of her pocket and held it towards Kirito, taking her eyes off of the Imp only long enough to place the Focus reticule on her friend. "Zutto wilnachikke vuchaz shippura yasun!"

The attack came too late to stop her from finishing the incantation, but she couldn't parry it properly without the movement risking the disruption of her spell. The estoc cleanly pierced her shoulder, a cold spike of sensation preceding the numb feeling that spread from the point of impact. Her own weapon drew a glowing line of red across XaXa's arm just before he flitted back out of the way. When she glanced briefly up at the party list in her HUD, she could see Kirito's health slowly rising with every tick of the Heal Over Time effect. And whatever Yuuki was doing, wherever she was, she'd lost some HP but was still in the green.

"What's it going to be?" she said down the length of her rapier, the tip in a line between her eyes and his. She risked a bluff. "There are more of us coming, and you don't have a healer. Surrender and you can spend the rest of this game alive and well—in a jail cell."

XaXa laughed again. "And how do you plan to get me to one? This isn't anyone's territory, and you can't make me do shit once we're back in the city. We're the ones playing the game the way it was meant to be played."

He was right—at least, he was right about her inability to coerce him to go anywhere. Maybe if they could find the sewer exit that led outside of Arun's Safe Zone, she could force him to march all the way back to Parasel to face justice. It would be a long trip on foot, and the three of them—two if Kirito didn't come along—would have to watch him like a hawk the entire way, taking turns clearing the mostly-trivial trash mobs between here and there. What was she going to do, go through every PKer in the game and drag them back to her home city like that, one by one?

A rising, high-pitched whistle broke into her thoughts. Both she and XaXa glanced in the direction of the sound; she saw a slender, diminutive Imp crouched at the mouth of the passageway leading back to the surface, face shadowed by its cloak. The figure gave a thumbs-up gesture.

This, at least, seemed to get the attention of the Spriggan named Prophet. "Wrap it up!" he shouted, getting distance between himself and Kirito with a somersault backwards that took him almost to the base of the stairs.

"About time!" XaXa said petulantly. "My wings are almost vapor. Where the fuck is Black?"

"I don't care," Prophet said tightly, jumping two meters straight up and landing on one of the stairs above. Kirito's sword sliced through the air where he'd been and rebounded from the stone wall with a keening sound. "We've got what we needed; we're ghosting."

Kirito hesitated at the base of the ascent and backed away, obviously well aware of the prohibitive tactical disadvantage he'd suffer if he tried to follow Prophet up the narrow stairs to face three opponents—two of whom were airborne. XaXa's laughter continued as he began to rise and follow them, his wings starting to flicker. "Be seein ya round, babe!" he called back to Asuna.

Rage and defiance flared in her. It wasn't just XaXa's relentless mockery that pushed her over the
edge—it was the thought that these bastards, these murderers, were going to get away. XaXa had been right—she had almost no recourse to stop them. No authority could prosecute them, no law could bind them. They had killed a child, had probably killed dozens of other people in the months they’d been here, and they were going to keep right on doing it.

She couldn’t allow that. It was unforgivable.

It wasn’t a conscious, reasoned course of action that made her sheathe her rapier and sprint down the length of the bridge after XaXa. He was already well out of the reach of the weapon, and only the depleted state of his wings kept him from outracing her as he glided towards the stairway where Prophet and the other Imp were waiting.

"Kirito!" she cried out as she drew close to him, bringing him whirling to face her. She jumped, and as soon as her feet touched his shoulders she kicked off, leaping as high as she could out into the open air. She struck XaXa with force and clung to his back, both arms wrapped around him. The two of them spun and tumbled in the air, losing altitude rapidly.

"The fuck, you crazy bitch!" he snarled as he struggled to get his weapon arm free from where it was pinned at his side by her embrace. He spun and jinked as he veered away from the bridge in an uncontrolled descent, trying to shake her loose. "Gerroff!"

They both struck the side wall of the canal just below the level of the bridge and careened off of it, a constant stream of profanity coming from XaXa. "I said leggo, goddamnit, I can’t carry both of us!" As if in answer to his words, the sparkle in his violet wings—drained completely by the sudden increase in load—flickered one last time before they went dark and disappeared from his back entirely. The entwined pair dropped head-first like a cinder block from a skyscraper.

"Asuna!" Kirito screamed from above, the echoes quickly receding as she and XaXa fell.

XaXa’s voice was nearly hysterical now; he managed to pull his arm free and tried to awkwardly stab at Asuna while she continued clinging to him like a bear trap. Her HP was dropping quickly from the repeated piercing blows, but not quickly enough to matter. "You happy now, bitch? You’re gonna kill us both!"

"No," Asuna said fiercely, squeezing him even more tightly as the water rose up to meet them at terminal velocity. "Just you."
Chapter 26

"The «Status Ribbon» is an element of a player's Interface layer that displays information about targeted players or mobs. It appears when Focus is placed on the target's Cursor, and is rendered as a thin colored ribbon in a quarter-circle around the target's left side at approximately shoulder level. The ribbon itself serves to display the target's health, with the amount of color filled in the gauge indicating the portion of HP remaining without displaying the exact numbers. When relevant, icons will appear beside the Status Ribbon indicating guild affiliation and active status effects. Please note that two important pieces of information are not displayed on the ribbon: the target's remaining MP, and their character name. Both are shown only in a player's HUD display of party members (q.v. «UI Elements: HUD»), and character names are otherwise exposed in the UI only to their faction leader or to the target of a duel request."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Status Ribbons»

5 May 2023
Day 181 - Midday

The first time had been one of the most frightening experiences of Sasha's life.

The second had been an improvement only in that she knew what to expect—knowledge which failed to make it much less terrifying when Hrungrir turned its gaze upon her again, this time barely hesitating before rushing her. Knowing what was coming had done nothing to dispel the paralyzing fear that had gripped her as she waited for Bourne's spell to encase her in elemental stone, moments before the colossal boss of the 25th gateway would have reached her. Then she had again been sheathed in blackness, and that at least was a fear alleviated by foreknowledge—instead, relief had washed over and through her as soon as she checked her HUD and saw the icon for «Mountain Retreat» in her Active Effects display. Those seconds of silence and peace had been a welcome breather, as if she'd been playing a single-player game where she could press Escape to pause the action while her heart rate slowed.

Now, as she prepared to cast her shield-breaking spell for the third time, Sasha reflected that it was just as well that Kayaba hadn't programmed in the need for a player's avatar to use the restroom—she was fairly certain that she would've lost control and soiled herself at some point during this battle. She didn't know how the others did it, enduring day after day of this kind of life-threatening intensity.

It wasn't that she hadn't been in battle with a mob before. She wouldn't have reached level 27 if she hadn't put in countless hours fighting "normal" mobs out in the fields of Alfheim. But comparing those experiences to this raid was like comparing preschool to her university entrance exams. It wasn't even remotely the same thing, and more than once she'd felt like a naive little child who'd been suddenly expected to write a ten-page essay on world history, with her entire future at stake.

A tap on her shoulder brought her out of her thoughts, and she realized with embarrassment that she'd let her attention drift inwards after the last wave of adds had been burned down. Bourne, the massive Gnome healer who'd been assigned to protect her during this battle, gave her a searching look. "Everything all right, milady?"

Sasha nodded quickly, looking around to make sure she hadn't missed anything important. The protective triangular formation into which Klein had arranged their group had loosened up a bit now that there was no immediate threat near them, and the tank groups had the boss "parked" on the far
end of the cavernous chamber. They were tying it down—not with spells or effects, but by generating so much aggro that it had no interest in breaking away to deal with the mage groups. The latter were diligently avoiding the use of any attack spells or ranged projectiles while Sasha’s MP regenerated and the tanks built hate.

Realizing that she hadn’t really answered Bourne and that he might not have seen her nod, she hastened to speak up above the din of clashing metal and the offended bellows of the Jotunn boss. "I'm fine. Just trying to calm myself while I wait for my MP to finish recovering." She paused, and then asked, "why do you keep calling me 'milady'?"

A faint smile appeared on the man's craggy, bearded features. "Are you not a lady?"

"You know what I mean," she said, giving him a look filled with what amusement managed to make it through her nerves. "Are you a roleplayer?"

Bourne's head turned to track the boss as Thelvin's main tank group rotated out to recover while one of the off-tank groups switched in. "You might say that," he said.

Sasha laughed, then. "I did say that. I'm sorry, I meant no offense by it."

Bourne made a small sound of good humor that was almost swallowed by the background noise, reaching down and unlimbering his warhammer. He tapped it to check its status window; he'd actually needed to use it during the last wave of adds. "Well, milady, then consider this thought: is life not about the roles we choose to play? In another world, you were another person, and perhaps you wore different faces and titles depending on the company you kept. You would speak and act differently amongst your students than you would with friends, and different still before your elders."

"Code-switching," Sasha said, recalling a lecture on the topic from her Linguistics studies. She didn't bother to correct his assumption that she'd had students; in reality, she had been the student, albeit one studying to become a teacher. "It's a part of learning to get along in different contexts—learning to automatically adjust your vocabulary and manner of speech in the presence of others. We all do it, some better or worse than others; most people just don't have a name for it."

"Aye," Bourne agreed, eyes tracking relentlessly around the battlefield. The rest of Klein's group was ignoring their conversation—not, she suspected, out of rudeness or disregard, but because they couldn't follow it and had to stay focused. "But it is more than that. The way we think informs the way we speak, but the reverse is true as well. That is why I speak as I do." He carefully returned his weapon to its place on his belt, slipping the pommel loop back onto the blunt hook there. "What I'm trying to say is: we are who we choose to be. In that other world, you were a woman of learning, a human being in a human body. No doubt you bore another name, one to which you no longer answer."

He reached up and ran a finger briefly across one of the elongated, pointed ears that poked out from beneath his reddish-brown hair. "Here you are Sasha of Arun, Puca mage and scholar of the language of magic, mistress of Alfheim's only orphanage. You have already adapted to your new circumstances, chosen to become someone different—someone who is a part of this world. You play a role as surely as I do. If anything... it is those who cling to their former lives and selves here who are the roleplayers, pretending to still be something they are no longer."

A flashing in Sasha's peripheral vision drew her attention to her HUD; her MP was somewhere just above 80% and the regenerative effect of the MP potion was about to expire. She slipped a hand into the pouch at her side to withdraw another vial, and her fingers found only one. Grimacing, she took it out and quaffed it without hesitation.
"Running out?"

Sasha finished the potion and nodded, letting the empty glass vial drop from her fingers. It struck the ground and burst into blue particles with a tinkling sound that was barely audible over the noise of the battle on the other side of the room. "Last one."

"Worry not—I have more, and I suspect it's the last you'll need anyway."

As she watched the blue bar of her MP gauge begin ticking slowly upwards again, Sasha gave Bourne a grateful look. "What about you?" she asked, well aware that she was encroaching on the forbidden territory of asking about a person's life back in Japan. "Who were you back in the world… before you became Bourne of Nissengrof, Gnome battlemage and—if I'm not mistaken—a scholar of magic in your own right?"

Bourne briefly got a far-off look his eyes. "No one, I'm afraid," he said after a few moments, with a great solemnity of tone that suggested he meant it earnestly. "No one at all."

"I find that hard to believe," she replied. "Some of the things you've said, the way you talk about language usage… I get the impression that your education was similar to mine in some areas."

The large Gnome shrugged, becoming unusually quiet. Sasha let the matter drop, not wanting to pry; some people were very sensitive about the lives that had been stolen from them by Kayaba. If Bourne really felt like he'd been a nobody back in the real world, it said quite a lot about why he'd embraced his new self in this one. And if he really was a larper, he probably didn't like to break 'character'—to be reminded of whatever petty life he'd left behind. After everything he'd done for her today, respecting his desire for privacy was the least she could do. "Well, I'm glad you're here," she said, reaching up and twining one of her braids around her finger. "I wouldn't be alive if you weren't."

A new voice, rich with impatience, interrupted whatever Bourne might've said in response. "What's the delay over here?"

Everyone in Klein's group turned to regard the new arrival—the long-haired swordsman in light plate armor who appeared to be leading one of the Sylph mage groups. His expression was one of imperfectly-restrained annoyance as he stepped forward from his group and looked at Sasha. She couldn't even begin to guess why his face darkened so much when his eyes fell on her. "How much longer is it going to be until you can cast that shield-breaking spell of yours again?" he demanded. "We're wasting far too much time while you socialize."

"The lady's MP must recover sufficiently to cast the spell," Bourne said, turning slowly until he faced the Sylph. He didn't raise his voice or make any threatening gestures, but he loomed over the man by sheer size alone. "It should not be but another minute or two, and until then there is nothing to be done for it. Unless you'd care to volunteer an MP crystal, you'll just have to wait."

"Chill out, man," Klein said as he, too, stepped forward, crossing his arms. His weapon was sheathed, but Sasha didn't doubt he could have it ready in a moment. "I'm glad you guys came along to help, but Sasha's a lot lower-level than the rest of us—give her a break."

"Yes, about that, Salamander," said the Sylph man, who clearly did not care for being reprimanded by one of Klein's faction. "Why is she here?"

The withering look Klein gave the man in return was the very definition of stink-eye. "We need her to break the shield, dude," he said, as if explaining the concept to someone who had not, in fact, been there for the entire battle thus far.
"I know that," he said with rising testiness. "But Lord Skarrip said that the intent was for her to teach the spell to one of us. Someone of her level has no business being on this raid, and as I recall she has responsibilities she ought to be attending to—somewhere else she was supposed to be. This battle wouldn't be taking nearly as long if you'd brought someone level-appropriate or stuck to the original plan." He turned his ire-filled gaze back upon her. "No offense," he said without any apparent sincerity.

"None taken," Sasha said with equal sincerity, having reached her limit. "If you like, sir, your group is welcome to take my place. I'm quite happy to teach you everything you need to know to compose and cast the shield-breaking spell so that I can go be where I'm supposed to be. Do you have something with which to write?" She paused long enough to give him a chance to respond to the rhetorical question; he said nothing. "No? Well, it's quite simple, really. First, you need a single mage who has Fire, Wind, Water and Earth, all at a skill level of at least 500—the higher, the better. Any of you?"

She looked at each of the mages in his group, none of whom seemed to want to meet her eyes. Klein's group had fallen dead silent, too. "Well, that's unfortunate. Still, assuming you did have such a mage, he or she would need to wait until you identified the order of the elements for each of the boss's phases, concatenate the element spellwords with the conjunction pa, and then select the appropriate spell effects, arranging them so that they will map to the corresponding elements in the correct order. You would inflect the first three in the Sequential form—but then, you don't know what that is, so permit me to explain. For a Malign effect verb, you inflect -u to -i; for example, plorjaban to plorjabi. Then—"

"Never mind," said the Sylph man, cutting her off and turning his back on her with a flutter of his cape before she could continue her lecture. "Just be quick about it."

"Sigurd!" called the voice of the tall green-haired woman who led the other party as she approached. "Am I missing a strategy conference over here?"

"It's nothing, Sakuya," Sigurd said as he threw one last look over his shoulder at Sasha. "Get back in place and be ready to DPS. It won't be much longer now."

For all the noise echoing off the distant walls of the boss room from where the tank groups were keeping the four-armed Jotunn busy, there was a circle of silence that fell around Klein's group as the Sylphs returned to the flanks of where the mage groups were arranged. When Sasha turned back to her own group, she found everyone looking at her speechlessly in a way that made her abruptly very uncomfortable.

"What?" she said finally, once again feeling like the only person in the party who wasn't in on the secret.

It was Klein's snicker that finally set everyone else to laughing, setting an example for the rest of his group. Even Bourne's face seemed to crack a bit.

"Pwned," said Kunimitz, grinning. The single unfamiliar word sent the rest of the group—minus Bourne—into laughter again.

Sasha didn't have the faintest idea what he meant by that, but she smiled anyway.

"Asuna!" Kirito screamed, reaching pointlessly over the side of the bridge for a few moments before realizing how foolish and useless the gesture was. He'd reacted automatically to the sight of her
launching herself out to grab onto XaXa in mid-air, and to the inevitable drop to the Lower Sewers that followed. It took him a moment to remember the Undine affinity with water, and realize that she wouldn't take falling damage hitting it the way XaXa would. He wondered if she'd planned it that way, or simply acted impulsively with no thought for her own safety—if she'd truly grabbed onto him with the deliberate intent of killing him.

He wasn't sure which of the two possibilities he preferred.

The sound of Imp wings rose from far below, from the opposite side of the bridge. Kirito pivoted that direction with his weapon presented, wary of attack from a new source. He could see a violet flight trail some distance beneath the level of the bridge, and the Imp at the head of it was diving in the direction of the splash and column of water that rose from Asuna's point of impact.

"I've got her!" came Yuuki's voice echoing its way up the walls of the chasm. An incredible wave of relief rippled through him when he heard that; he'd been worried about Yuuki herself, and wondering how long it would take Asuna to get back up the hard way.

From above, Prophet's laughter reached Kirito's ears a moment later, bringing his gaze sideways with a glare. "PK by falling damage," the other Spriggan said, chuckling as he crouched on one knee at the top of the stairs and watched Yuuki's flight trail burn its way down to where Asuna had fallen. "Classic. I'm going to have to remember that one."

The other Imp, the late arrival with the slender frame who by process of elimination Kirito assumed had to be Wraith, hovered above and said nothing, turning and rising smoothly in the direction of the tunnel that led back towards the surface. Prophet shrugged as he took a look down at Kirito and spoke again. "Eh. XaXa was an idiot anyway. Enthusiastic about his work, but an idiot. I'm sure the Mistress will agree that was a creative kill worth celebrating, regardless of who was on the receiving end."

A part of Kirito raged, wanting nothing more than to charge up the stairs and pursue the two PKers all the way back to Arun, to call them out in front of everyone for what they were—if they didn't kill him first. Only the knowledge that there were others in the tunnels behind him who needed him—lives for which he was still responsible—stayed his hand. "Get out of here," he said with clenched teeth, bringing his sword around and angling it up at Prophet. "Go and never come back. We know your names, and clearers will be keeping an eye on the newbie areas from now on."

Prophet reacted to this with indifferent contempt. "You think I care about this zone, boy? Waste all the time you like—Wraith has what we came for. A shame the teacher wasn't here; I had something special in mind for her." He shrugged. "This ended up being entertaining enough, in its own way."

Kirito took a step towards the stairs, barely managing to restrain himself. His voice was someone else's, someone he didn't recognize. "Go. Now. And you'd better pray we never meet again. Because the next time I see you, I will cut you down and camp your Remain Light until you are gone from this world and every other—forever."

Prophet clapped his hands slowly, leaning over the top step a little more—as if daring Kirito to follow through on his threat. "That's the spirit! Now you're getting into the right frame of mind for this world."

"Go!" Kirito screamed, the tip of his sword wavering as his hands shook with rage. Prophet would never know just how close those parting words had come to tipping him over the edge into doing something rash.

Prophet turned then and and snapped his fingers, hopping up into the rounded mouth of the tunnel
where Wraith was waiting. The two of them disappeared a moment later, his laughter receding hollowly down the passageway into the distance.

The sound of steel on stone rang out as Kirito fell to his knees and slammed the pommel of his sword into the cold, damp bridge, water soaking through the shins of his leggings. An «Immortal Object» pop-up briefly appeared on the surface of the stonework, indicating that it was a type of world object that could not be damaged or destroyed. It was probably for the better—the repeated blows he struck as he vented his frustration and grief could’ve crumbled the narrow span out from under him if that flag hadn’t been set. As it was, the durability on his sword would give out first, and he had to stop himself before he could destroy the irreplaceable item, already worn from the battle.

Nearly half of the raid group was missing. He'd watched at least one of the Remain Lights disappear. He'd taken responsibility for their lives—how many of those lives were now gone? How could he possibly face Sasha when he returned with the traumatized survivors?

Stop it, he told himself. You can't bring them back now, and this isn't helping anyone. Get a grip on yourself and make sure the others are safe—you can help them.

He knew the words to be true, but he also knew they were delaying the inevitable. Sooner or later, he'd have to take responsibility for his failures.

A voice from the tunnel down to the Lower Sewers pulled him the rest of the way back out of himself, and he glanced back that way while he used his sword to push himself back to his feet. Sachi, the eldest Undine girl from Sasha's group, was there with Silica. He could faintly see smaller figures behind them, wide eyes reflecting glints of light from the torches hanging over the threshold.

"I… I didn't hear that," he said, straightening. "What did you say?"

"Is it over?" Sachi repeated, stepping out into the light and looking around warily. She had the look of a nocturnal animal tentatively venturing forth from its burrow after nightfall, alert for the moonlit shadow of an owl.

Kirito nodded, then glanced back up at the passageway into which Prophet and his companion had disappeared—almost as if he expected them to make a liar of him. "I think so. We drove them off, and I don't think they'll be back. They said they have what they came for." His free hand curled into a fist again, trembling when it couldn't clench any more. He couldn't bear the thought that the PKers had profited in any way from this tragedy. What had they been after, anyway?

The relieved sighs from both Sachi and Silica were audible then, and the Undine girl beckoned towards the other children still hiding in the lower tunnel. Kirito’s eyes darted from one to the other as they emerged into the light; he did a mental count of those still present other than Sachi and Silica. It was everyone that he'd run into on his way up, plus the Sylph girl who had been at the mouth of the tunnel when he'd arrived.

That left far, far too many missing. His throat tightened as he willed himself to be able to ask the question that came next. "What… what happened to the others?"

"They were all huddled together, holding on to each other," Sachi said. "They must've triggered the anti-harassment pop-ups, because when Prophet attacked Silica, she told them to say yes to the prompts. They're probably all in jail right now and really scared… but they're all safe, thanks to her." Then a look of grief overtook her features, and she looked down at her feet. She seemed to barely be able to say the words that followed. "All except Robert. He… I… I let him die."

Robert. Amidst the overwhelming mixture of relief and amazement at hearing that the others were
safe, Kirito tried to recall the name of the dead boy and put a face to it. He'd seen three Remain
Lights when he'd arrived: blue and yellow, which must have been Sachi and Silica's… and the red
Remain Light of a Salamander. At once something clicked into place; Kirito remembered a
Salamander boy not much younger than Silica who'd been one of the "troublemakers" when he'd
been at the church before. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to commit the boy's face to memory.

He didn't get to dwell on it. He could hear Yuuki's wings approaching again, and he glanced down
over the side to see her and Asuna rising quickly from below. It was a silver lining, at least, and one
more of his worries began to fade.

Then something that Sachi had said finally penetrated, and he turned back to her. "What do you
mean, 'let him die'?" Kirito thought back to the battle, trying to remember what had happened—he'd
been so focused on surviving the fight with Prophet and XaXa, he hadn't seen everything that
transpired once Asuna had arrived.

"I only have one rez," Sachi said, tears beginning to roll down her face. "And I'd already used it."

"That's not your fault," Kirito said at once. "If your rez was on cooldown, it means you'd already
saved someone else's life—and they'd be dead now instead, if you hadn't. If anything, this whole
thing…" And then, the tsunami of guilt that he'd been staving off returned in force, crashing into him
and stripping away his remaining ability to delay the reckoning any longer. His voice broke. "I'm
sorry… this isn't your fault, it's mine. None of you would've been here if not for me, and I should've
been here when this happened."

"Don't you dare," said Asuna as Yuuki dropped her to the surface of the bridge, the Imp girl's wings
flickering more and more quickly with the waning of the last of their flight power. "Kirito, don't you
even think about blaming yourself for this."

"But I—"

"No. Just don't. It wasn't your fault, either." Asuna stopped directly in front of him, head tilted up
slightly to look at him. She was dripping wet, her hair plastered to her cheeks like strings of blue
kelp, but it didn't soften the intensity of her gaze one bit. He looked down and away, unable to bear
it.

"You don't understand," Kirito said as he stared at his feet, sword dangling loosely in his grip. His
voice rose with each new emphatic utterance. "I... I told Sasha she was making a mistake by keeping
these kids sheltered inside the Safe Zone! I told her she should teach them magic and let them go
out! I promised to keep them safe if she went on the raid, and I—"

In the wake of Kirito's cut-off words, the sudden sharp sound echoed. It echoed off the bridge, the
walls, and every other surface. It kept echoing long after he looked up at Asuna, stunned, his cheek
still stinging from the slap. He met her eyes then, and found in them not judgment, but something…
something else. Her arm was still held out crosswise the way it had been when her palm had finished
its arc, and with a few steps she erased the remaining distance between them and reached up to
gently touch the still-fading red mark on his cheek.

"It wasn't your fault," she said, much more quietly now. "You didn't kill Robert, those… those…"
She didn't seem to be able to muster a word foul enough to describe the PKers—not one that she was
willing to speak aloud, anyway. "They did. And because we were here, they didn't get to kill anyone
else."

"But I still told Sasha—"
"Shh," Asuna said, pulling him into her arms. Kirito had no idea how to react to this—nothing in his life had prepared him for it. He leaned into the embrace as his whole body began to shake, his sword dropping into the running water at his feet with a splash and a muted two-beat metallic clank. She sank to the ground with him when his knees buckled, holding his head against her shoulder and stroking his hair while he broke down and sobbed into her. From the occasional twitches he felt from her beneath his cheek, she had to be crying too, at least a bit.

He heard Yuuki's small voice next to him as well, repeating the same words. "It's not your fault, Kirito," she said. "They were bad people and they were going to do awful things no matter who was here."

"And don't go blaming yourself for the advice you gave Sasha, either," Asuna continued, a hitch in her voice.

One of the children spoke then—a girl; Kirito couldn't see who and didn't recognize the voice. "We wanted Miss Sasha to teach us. We wanted to be here." More voices joined hers in agreement.

Kirito wasn't sure how much of the wetness on his face was from Asuna's soaked-through clothing, and how much was from his own tears. One of his arms was still draped loosely around her back while she cradled him, and from somewhere he found the ability to speak again, the strength to lift his head. Asuna's arms slipped away from him when he sat up, leaving him with an unfamiliar pang of regret as he pivoted to face the survivors of the raid group. "I'm sorry," he said, leaning forward in a bow from his sitting position until his forehead nearly touched the stone. "I still feel like I failed you."

"You didn't," said the young Sylph girl who'd been on the verge of becoming the next victim when Kirito arrived. When he raised his head and looked up at her, he saw nothing but gratitude on her face. "You saved us."

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Klein had to give Sasha credit—she might look like a total bookworm, but the woman had guts. He didn't really hold her earlier freakouts against her; it wasn't as if she had any experience being in a raid before this. And if he was honest with himself, Klein had to admit that he'd freaked out a bit himself during a raid all those months ago, when he'd gone back to Freelia to help the Caits take down Fellrach the Ravenous once and for all. The first brief encounter with the arachnid boss of the Valley of Butterflies had been scary enough, but when they'd actually engaged him with a full raid group, and all those baby spider adds had come pouring out of its den...

He shuddered. That was not a memory he wanted to relive at the moment. Or at any other moment, for that matter. At least Alicia hadn't been there to hear him scream like a little girl.

Klein forced his attention back to the present as he heard Sasha begin winding up for another one of her shield-busting spells—hopefully the last one; after this Hrungnir only had the one HP bar remaining. Everyone in his party was lined up now, spreading out just a little bit in order to give themselves ample room—once that shield came down, with no more need to worry about taking aggro, it was going to be a free-for-all.

The last word of the complex incantation left Sasha's lips, and arcane energy raced down her arms in colored pulses that shot away from her outstretched fingers one after the other. As they did, Klein watched the green bar on her status ribbon drain rapidly downward until all that remained was a sliver of red. It was a sight he doubted he'd ever get used to seeing.

The projectiles unerringly struck home and filled the air with flashes of light and the fragmented
sound of a thousand porcelain dishes shattering all at once. This time there was no hesitation on anyone's part; as soon as Sasha's HP began to drain, Dale began casting his HOT. Moments before that spell landed, Bourne held out both hands and uttered the words to that rock-shield deaggro spell he'd been using to protect Sasha.

And none too soon. Hrungnir seemed to react to the broken shield more quickly every time, and there was no hesitation on the part of the boss either before it viciously kicked one of Thelvin's party out of its path and charged directly at Sasha. The unlucky Cait erupted into yellow flames in mid-air with a cut-off shriek, leaving one of the healers in the MT group rushing in to resurrect him.

Then Klein couldn't allow himself to be distracted by their fate any longer—he had bigger worries to deal with. Elemental stone grew from the floor like a high-speed video of erosion in reverse, rapidly encasing Sasha's avatar only moments before the boss slammed both of its fists down. They rebounded off of the impervious «Immortal Object» status of the elemental stone, and with line-of-sight broken to its target, it immediately turned its attention to the nearest player on its hate list.

Which, as luck would have it, happened to be Klein.

Except Klein knew that luck really had nothing to do with it. He'd built up a decent amount of aggro every time the boss had come for Sasha—not enough to take it from the real tank groups, some of whom were even now charging to try to pull the boss away from the mage groups. But enough to discourage the boss from getting interested in, say, Dale or Kunimitsu once Bourne's spell dumped Sasha's aggro. Klein narrowly dodged a swipe from Hrungnir's stone-encrusted open hand, giving the arm a light slash with his katana as it passed over him. Having gotten the thing's attention, he made a point of running between the Jotunn's legs and getting behind it, forcing it to turn in order to face him—in the process making it face away from the mage groups.

The tactic paid off moments later when the boss began cycling through its attack patterns again, sending a fireball towards Klein that came in too quickly to be blocked with magic; Klein braced himself and counted on his innate fire resistance to mitigate the worst of the hit. It still took an uncomfortably significant portion of his HP; perhaps a tenth of it ticked down over the course of the half-second it took to drain. As Klein backpedaled to try to buy himself some space and pull the boss further away from his group, Hrungnir bounded towards him—and then stopped abruptly for a few moments, staggering. A root spell from one of the Sylphs had seemingly managed to get past its status resistances and take effect, albeit significantly mitigated.

The shackles of elemental earth that had grown from the floor and encased its ankles couldn't have lasted more than a second or two, but it had been enough. Klein wearily pushed himself back to his feet while one of the off-tank groups rushed past him, slashing at Hrungnir's legs and landing clean blows. The massive Jotunn bellowed, knocking one of its assailants to the ground in a clatter of steel armor with a fist the size and composition of a boulder. It clenched one of the other empty hands, that fist swirling with blue energy until a small portion of its last HP bar began to regenerate.

"Get some DOTs on that thing!" came Thelvin's shout as the Cait Sith raid leader charged into the fray, tucking and rolling under a lateral swipe from the Jotunn's axe and coming back up to his feet in time to absorb some of a fireball with his shield. His HP was in the yellow, but the large feline tank either didn't notice or didn't let it get in the way of what he had to do. When the off-tank groups withdrew, the boss chasing after them, he was right at its heels.

With the tank groups starting to get the boss under control and pull it back towards its spawn point again, Klein took the opportunity to survey the battlefield. There were a number of Remain Lights still glowing in the dim light of the boss room, and not all of them had healers in the process of rezing them. He couldn't see the MP gauges of anyone who wasn't in his immediate party, but he
wouldn't have been surprised if a number of the casters were starting to get low on supplies—it had been a mana-intensive fight so far. When he looked back at his own party, he saw Sasha emerging from her stony elemental cocoon, with Dale and Bourne beginning to run through the magnitudes on their healing spells to get her back up. She was visibly shaken, but less so than the first few times.

He took a hand off of his katana long enough to cup it over one side of his mouth while he yelled. "Dale! Bourne! Sasha! See if you can get some of the people rezzed who aren't close to the boss!"

"I'm out of MP!" Sasha yelled back, looking fretfully towards some of the glimmering yellow Remain Lights. As they watched, one of the orbs of amber flames flickered and went out.

"Use this," Bourne insisted, withdrawing a slender azure crystal from a sheath on his tunic and handing it to her.

Sasha looked shocked. "But Mana Crystals are—"

"A lot more replaceable than a someone's life!" Klein said, interrupting her and gesturing wildly with his free hand. "Go!"

When he turned back towards the boss, he saw the tank groups switching in and out as spellfire raged forth from the mage groups in streams, projectiles and explosions of light and sound. The star-bright flashes that erupted at the points of impact were so numerous that Klein wondered how the tank groups managed to see anything at all, being right in the thick of it. Everyone—including Kunimuth and Dynamm—was DPSing like crazy, chanting the next spell almost as soon as one had streaked away from them, and he could actually see the final HP bar decrementing noticeably with each new barrage. The boss seemed to share a trait with all the other non-trash Jotnar they'd fought, in that its damage resistance grew with each HP bar it lost—but despite that ability and the increasing frequency with which it interrupted its attack patterns to heal itself, it still didn't take long for them to burn that final gauge nearly to the halfway point.

At the rate they were going, the battle was going to be over soon. Satisfied, Klein spared a quick look over at the three healers he'd sent off. A very grateful-looking Cait Sith was getting back to his feet with a heavy-handed assist from Bourne, and Sasha was kneeling beside another Remain Light as deep blue energy surged around her cupped hands.

It was an itch at the back of his neck that warned him. Klein wasn't quite sure why, but it was a feeling he had learned to trust. A feeling that he was being watched, or that something else bad was coming; he'd occasionally wondered if it was even some kind of hidden skill in the game engine. More than once it had saved them from a linked group of roamers who had pathed near a fight already in progress. Wary of more adds being summoned by the boss, Klein pivoted sharply and checked their flanks and surroundings, then peered into the darkness that led down the corridor from which they'd come.

At first, nothing. Then, as he strained to see, there was movement. A lot of movement. Klein opened his mouth to shout a warning of more adds.

What came out a moment later was: "Oh, shit!"

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"Well," Heathcliff mused as the Salamander raid group marched to a stop and formed into a skirmish line. The noise level in the boss room from the ongoing battle was impressive, but they were far enough away yet that they didn't have to raise their voices; even from a distance of a few meters Tetsuo could still hear his group leader clearly. "This is unexpected."
"By you, maybe," Corvatz said as he flipped up his visor and shot a glare over at their raid leader. Eugene either didn't notice or didn't acknowledge the look. Which didn't stop the hard-faced Salamander clearer from pressing the point. "I told you we should've gone last night."

"We weren't ready last night," Heathcliff responded reasonably, letting his shield slide from his back and onto his arm with a fluid one-sided shrug.

"The enemy doesn't wait for you to be ready," Corvatz said, the words having the sound of ingrained doctrine—or dogma.

"Awkward," Tetsuo said quietly, not wanting to draw attention to himself. His own weapon and shield were already equipped, although now that they had finally arrived, it seemed... well, pointless. There was already a raid party here, apparently, and they looked like they were pretty close to finishing off the boss. It was disheartening to say the least, but what could they really do?

The answer to that unspoken question came momentarily. "Eugene," Corvatz said, drawing a line between their group and the raging Jotunn with his sword. "We need to act now or we lose everything. If we maneuver to max spell range and concentrate all of our ranged DPS on the boss right now, we still have a chance to get the Last Attack. And with any luck, our damage contribution will be significant enough for us to get some EXP and items."

Heathcliff made a throat-clearing noise. "Corvatz, you realize that if we do that, we stand a good chance of hitting the Cait Sith groups."

The elder clearer was unmoved, his posture unyielding as he faced his equal. "So?"

Tetsuo blinked in surprise. Even he could see the problem with that—the political problem, that is. He wasn't surprised that Eugene could as well. "No," their general said. "If they were Sylphs, I might consider it—they already hate us, so I wouldn't lose sleep over any collateral damage." A harsh smile tugged at his lips. "It isn't even a treaty violation if they just happen to get in the way of something fired at a mob. But attacking the Caits might well push them into an alliance with someone else—and war with us."

"Are you blind?" Corvatz said sharply. He gestured again with the tip of his blade. "Do you not see the Sylphs mixed in with their mage groups? Do you not recognize two of the senior-most Sylph clearers, including their raid leader?"

"I see them just fine," Eugene growled, sounding none too pleased about the fact—or about the necessity of arguing the point with his subordinate. "What I also see is that only the Caits are close to the boss, and if we attack them, then we turn their possible alliance with the Sylphs into a certain one."

"They've seen us," said Denkao, the healer stepping forward and pointing towards what actually looked like another Salamander standing in the midst of the other raid's mage groups. The katana-wielding man had a striped crimson bandana restraining a shock of orange-red hair, and while it was hard to see from his vantage point, Tetsuo could swear for a moment that he looked familiar.

"Oh for—" Eugene sighed, shaking his head. "Goddamnit Klein, what the hell are you doing here."

It wasn't even a question, just a rhetorical complaint.

Corvatz answered it anyway, his voice dripping with scorn. "Helping our enemies—just like that Puca woman who the boy swore wouldn't take a side." He turned his ire-filled eyes upon Tetsuo, who fought not to shrink from it. "Now are we going to act or not? We outnumber them; what can they do?"
Plenty, Tetsuo thought but didn't say. He didn't feel like giving Corvatz any more reasons to dislike him; he had enough already.

The struggle on Eugene's face was plain, but it only lasted a few beats. "Ranged DPS!" he barked. "Advance to maximum range and target the boss! No AOEis, headshots only! We're not going to take the risk of starting a war here today." He turned and waved to the groups surrounding him. "Tank groups and melee DPS, screen and protect the ranged groups but do not engage unless they attack first."

"Mistake," Corvatz said. "If you wait for the enemy to strike first—"

"Corvatz," Eugene said, finally facing the smaller man squarely. "Don't think I don't appreciate your nuggets of real-world military wisdom, because I do. Your counsel and experience have been invaluable in training our army, and I want that to continue. But shut the fuck up and stop arguing with me in the field—a soldier should damn well know better. You have your orders."

To Tetsuo's amazement, that did indeed shut Corvatz up with remarkable efficiency—so much so that he wondered why Eugene hadn't just played that card to begin with. "Yes, sir," Corvatz said crisply. "Melee DPS! Advance in screening formation!"

As much as she wanted to run in and join the melee surrounding the boss, Sakuya had a job to do. Her mages launched volley after volley of attack spells as soon as their cooldowns were over—cooldowns accelerated by Haste buffs that every single Sylph knew how to cast, even if only at Magnitude 1. Sakuya herself was casting more than a few of those, allowing the mages in her group to reserve as much MP as possible for burning down the boss. Anyone who had begun the battle with a Mana Crystal had either already used it or was about to; at this point it was all or nothing. Even with Rejuvenation buffs and potion effects running, they were going to run dry eventually.

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But not before we finish off this boss, she thought with satisfaction. This had, in truth, always been her favorite part of any raid. The strategy was not only known, but successfully executed. Only one HP bar remained, and that one was well into the yellow. The tanks by this point had so much aggro that DPS could go all-out without concern for anything other than running out of power—and they were doing so with great enthusiasm.

What was that sports term? Sakuya wondered as a momentary lull came in the waves of spellfire. Most of the mages in her group needed to pause for one reason or another, be it cooldowns or the need to recover MP. She glanced up at her HUD, noting the time left before she could Haste someone again. The home stretch, that was it. We still need to be diligent and not let our guards down, but the end is in sight—as is our reward for a job damn well done.

Klein's abrupt shout from nearby yanked her out of her musings, more from the alarm in his tone than from what he said. She glanced over her shoulder at him, then followed his gaze to the back of the room. Her eyes were as sharp as anyone else's except the Caits; it only took a moment to realize what was happening. "Sigurd!" she called out, the same alarm creeping into her own voice as well. "Sallies!"

The Sylph lead clearer whipped his head around, and rage stamped itself on his features as soon as he took in the sight of the advancing line of Salamanders. "Go run interference!" he shouted back.

Sakuya's jaw dropped. "Are you insane?"

"We can't let them steal this kill out from under us!" If Sigurd had been angry before, his face
became livid when attack spells started streaking out from the Salamander lines towards Hrungnir's head and upper torso. "If one of the Cait's manages to get the Last Attack, fine—at least we'll get our share of the raid EXP and loot. But if the Salamanders get it, we could end up with nothing! We can't afford that!"

"I'm not committing suicide for you," Sakuya said flatly. "And suicide is what it would be for us to charge the Salamander lines in our condition. Why don't you go?"

"So talk them out of it, I don't care how you do it," Sigurd fired back, half-turning to make sure his group was still giving the boss everything they had. "Our group has better DPS, so we're going to stay here and try to get the LA for the Sylphs. You and your party go take one of the Cait groups and interfere with the Sallies."

Sakuya still wasn't willing to let the point go. "How?"

"Go get the Puca woman and sing them a fucking ballad for all I care, just slow them down!"

Sakuya chafed at Sigurd's tone, and wrestled through the conflicting desires that struck her as the man showed her his back and began chanting to refresh the Haste buff on some of his group. She couldn't stand the idea of the Salamanders stealing their kill any more than he could. But every mote of common sense she possessed told her that Sigurd was taking advantage of the situation by sending her away so that he could try to get the Last Attack—and that what he was asking might very well be asking her to throw herself into near-certain death, depending on how the Salamanders reacted to her.

It wasn't usually a risk they had to take—not as much anymore, at any rate. Clearing parties and raids from the two factions tended to avoid each other entirely whenever possible, because more than once arguments over hunting grounds or boss rights had ended in conflicts of varying intensity. The fact was, Sylphs in general weren't exactly a welcome sight to Salamanders—and the reverse was just as true, if not moreso. And where there was a Salamander ganking party or clearing group, there was almost always at least one Imp—in fact, this very raid group proved to have a few parties from that faction; a number of Imps began rising above the Salamander lines and hovering in place, using their higher vantage point to pour more DPS into the Jotunn. It was so close—the HP bar looked as if it ought to be ready to turn red just about any minute! There was no telling how the Cait Sith raid party might react if the Salamanders stole this kill from them, let alone the reaction from Sigurd.

Something struck her then, a fleeting thought that firmed up as she twisted to pan her gaze around her, eyes drifting past Klein and—

"Natsuo, keep everyone right here!" she called out to the rest of her group suddenly, the fleeting thought forming into the beginnings of an idea. "I don't care what Sigurd tells you, you just keep DPSing the boss, and don't stop until your MP's gone. It's that many more chances for a Sylph to get the Last Attack." Without waiting for a response, she turned and dashed towards Klein's diverse group of players. "Klein!" she called out almost immediately. "I need you to bring your party and come with me!"

The scruffy-faced Salamander gave her a stunned, incredulous look as she approached, then glanced back over his shoulder. The Puca woman and the bigger Gnome mage were on their way back with a few Cait Sith whose HP gauges were deep in the yellow, the colored bars growing slowly while the two mages continued to refresh their healing magic.

"There's no time to explain!" she yelled, coming to a stop a few meters away. "Just please, trust me! We have to go stall the Salamanders!"
"Stall them?" Klein repeated stupidly. "How is walking into the line of fire a good plan for stalling them?"

"Because they're less likely to shoot at your people!" Sakuya replied, exasperated. "You're a fellow Salamander to them, and there's an Imp in your party—plus a Puca and two Gnomes, and they can't afford to piss off the NCC! They're not going to fire on you." She didn't figure it was worth mentioning that the Sylph in his party plus her made two, and that wasn't likely to go over quite as well.

She could see Klein turning it over in his head, and as the man looked from one member of his party to the next in turn, sometimes finding a reaction and sometimes not, she realized that he was actually weighing the risks to them and what they wanted to do. It made her wonder if perhaps she'd underestimated him.

"You've got a plan?" he asked finally, having taken the measure of the group that gathered around him.

"Yes," Sakuya said firmly.

Klein nodded. "What is it?"

"It's…" she hesitated. She'd been hoping she might get away with bullshitting her way this far. "It's still a work in progress."

Klein's free hand covered one side of his face. "You have no plan."

"My plan is that they're not likely to kill us," she said earnestly as she pointed past his left ear towards where the boss was parked. "Look at where the other raid group is aiming—all of their magic is going high, well above the heads of Thelvin's party and the off-tank groups. I think they're actually trying to avoid hitting them—out of fear of starting a war with the Caits if nothing else. Worst case they might ignore us and keep DPSing, but I really don't think they'll attack."

"I'm pretty sure the worst case involves them turning the combined firepower of their mage groups on us for the half-second it would take to obliterate us." Despite his complaint, though, Klein nodded when his eyes met hers again. "But you've got a point, too. I know Eugene—as long as he's still in command here, I don't think he'd do it."

He very carefully sheathed his katana, giving the wrapping a quick pat before letting his hands fall harmlessly to his sides. "Let's go try talking to the Salamanders."

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This is a stupid, stupid idea, Klein thought as he walked towards the Salamander lines, trying not to let his feelings show on his face. Eugene won't order anyone to attack me, and Sakuya's probably right about him not wanting to start shit with the Caits or the NCC either. But that doesn't mean there won't be at least one person there with a grudge who isn't so restrained—especially not with two Sylphs accompanying us.

But he also couldn't help but think about what might happen if the Salamander raid managed to steal the boss kill out from under the Sylphs and Cait Sith. If Klein's own raid still got the Last Attack, then that was all good—there might be some hard feelings about the Salamanders showing up and butting in, but it was unlikely to last.

If the Salamanders took the boss, though, and after more than a few Cait Sith had already died for it… bad news. There could very easily be a serious fight over it; the miracle was that there hadn't
been already. And with how tired and depleted everyone here was, it was a fight the Salamanders—fresh from the outside, almost full on MP, and with superior numbers—would almost certainly win. The Caits and the Sylphs had to know that, too—they weren't stupid.

Then again, it's not like the Salamanders didn't lose people to this boss, either, Klein had to admit to himself. A lot more of them, actually, and those lives bought the info that we used to come up with our strategy.

It was a tough call. But as much as he wanted to stay out of this and avoid getting in the middle of what was obviously a highly volatile political situation, he could almost taste the consequences that loomed if the Salamanders got the kill. And after all the effort he and his group had put in to burn this damn thing down… no.

So Klein mentally rehearsed about five different things that he might try saying to Eugene which had any chance of delaying or distracting the Salamanders, and hoped that Sakuya had the sense to keep her mouth shut when they got there.

Well before they reached the raid, however, one of the Salamander melee parties forming a defensive screen in front of the mage groups broke away and moved to intercept them. Klein held up both palms in front him to show that he wasn’t armed and had no hostile intentions, and turned the gesture into a wave when they got closer—he was pretty sure he recognized some of the party members from when his group had done scouting work for the Salamander raid.

"That's far enough," said the tank with a long gray ponytail as the melee party came to a stop and spread out in a line to either side of him. His long sword was in his hand but held point-down at his side, angled so that it didn't drag on the ground. An expensive-looking kite shield hung from the other arm, and his slate-gray eyes betrayed nothing of his thoughts as they flitted from one member of Klein's party to the next.

"We just want to talk to Eugene, man," Klein said. "You know me; I'm not here looking for a fight."

"As you can see, General Eugene is currently occupied," said the older tank with a perfectly even tone, as if informing Klein that the World Tree was tall. "My name is Heathcliff, and I will hear what you have to say and decide if it is worth interrupting him."

The man's gaze—eyes suddenly alert with surprise—darted towards something behind Klein, who glanced that way in time to see Bourne and Sasha jog up to join them.

When Klein returned his attention to the Salamanders, one of the younger members of Heathcliff's group was even more wide-eyed, his jaw hanging agape. "S-Sasha?" he said, both looking and sounding completely stunned.

"Tetsuo?" Sasha stepped forward to Klein's side when she was addressed; she looked nearly as shocked as the boy. "What are you—" She stopped herself suddenly and lightly bit her lip. "I forgot that you were a clearer."

"You two know each other?" Klein asked. He would not have ever, in any universe, pegged the two of them for acquaintances—let alone friends.

Tetsuo wasn't paying attention to Klein. When he looked again, the expression on the boy's face was still just as stunned as before… but now had an element of hurt to it. "So it's true?"

Sasha, for her part, simply looked confused. "What is?"

"That you're helping the Caits and the Sylphs," Tetsuo said, sounding almost as if this was a personal
Something in Sasha's face abruptly hardened, and the glare with which she fixed Tetsuo then was sharp enough to make him look down at his feet. "Don't you take that tone with me, young man," she said, drawing snickers from a few of the older members of Tetsuo's party. "They asked. And they paid for the church so that none of us—you and your riaru friends included—need to grind rent money anymore in order for my children to have a home." She put her hands on her hips. "I might well have offered you the same help if you'd asked first."

Heathcliff made a slight noise of amusement at this exchange. "Will ironies never cease." His gaze shifted again, a frown creasing his forehead as Bourne's massive bulk drew up next to Sasha. "With that said, I would be much more comfortable if you had come alone, Klein. If your intent was to speak to Eugene, then your friends are a complication at best—particularly the Sylphs."

"We should go rejoin the raid, milady," Bourne said urgently, placing a hand on Sasha's shoulder and leaning in to speak to her without taking his eyes off of the Salamander party. "There is no need for us to be here, and all manner of reasons why we shouldn't be."

"Klein!" Sakuya hissed from behind him, not quite managing to be as quiet as he'd hoped. "We have to do something! The boss is almost in the red!"

The words drew a reaction from the Salamander group's tank—but not the reaction Klein had been expecting. Heathcliff looked quickly towards the boss, and whatever it was that he saw did not seem to please him. If anything, for a moment the otherwise-unflappable man looked almost panicked. He whirled and called out towards the main body of the raid, voice projecting loudly in an effort to be heard over the cacophony of spellcasting. "Eugene!" he yelled. "DPS out!"

A particularly titanic roar from the boss yanked everyone's attention back in that direction, both groups turning as one. As Klein watched, the little that remained of Hrungnir's final HP bar turned from yellow to red. The Jotunn boss leapt straight up into the air, and came down with a stomp that scattered all of the nearby Cait Sith in every direction, laying them out radially like trees flattened by an explosion. The barrage of spellfire from the Cait Sith and Sylph groups ceased abruptly, some of them rushing in to provide emergency healing.

The Salamander raid, perhaps sensing victory, kept DPSing as hard as they had been before. Whether they hadn't heard Heathcliff's shout or weren't listening, the end result was the same: continuous volleys of attack spells lanced out over the heads of Klein's group in a flurry of projectiles, the sound of the overlapping incantations from the Salamander mage groups forming a wall of noise almost as loud as the explosions that resulted.

With dozens of glowing, hissing projectiles of arcane energy now exploding against its body with elemental fury from only one direction, Hrungnir completely ignored the Cait Sith tanks trying to regain its attention. The ground transmitted the thundering footsteps of its charge even at this distance as the boss rushed towards the Salamander raid with frightening speed.

"Son of a bitch!" Klein yelled. "What the—"

"Hate wipe!" Heathcliff shouted, shield held before him and weapon at ready.

As soon as he heard the words, Klein realized that Heathcliff had to be right on the money with his assessment. Many bosses seemed to change up their abilities or attack patterns in some way when they lost an HP bar, but Klein had yet to participate in a raid where a boss didn't do something really shitty when its last bar hit the red zone.
It'd be just like that asshole Kayaba to make this boss clear its hate table, he thought viciously. And now the Salamanders just pulled all the aggro.

A moment later, Klein realized in full just how very bad a thing that actually was. This realization came as Hrungnir's massive legs kept rapidly closing the distance between itself and the Salamander raid—a path that took the boss directly through Klein's and Heathcliff's groups.

Both group leaders, for all of their differences, reacted in exactly the same way to this threat to the people they led: they ran out to meet the danger head-on. Heathcliff was several strides ahead of Klein, and while he could hear the metallic jangle of armor behind him from some of the other Salamanders, he hoped like hell that everyone in his group—squishy as they were—had the sense to run. But run where? he wondered.

With no incantation to warn them, a fireball shot out from the Jotunn's arm that seemed tied to that element, the boss throwing it almost like a baseball. Heathcliff kicked himself off the ground, pulling his shield under him; when the fireball exploded beneath the Salamander tank, it launched him some distance further into the air. Then, as he turned his upwards motion into a flip that belied the apparent awkwardness of his plate armor, Heathcliff's kite shield began emitting blue light with the preparation of some kind of technique. He suddenly shot forward as he activated a charge technique that carried him through the remaining space between him and the boss. From that height, the shield bash connected solidly with the Jotunn's face and rocked it back for a moment.

As Klein watched in amazement, the Salamander tank took advantage of the brief window of opportunity by reversing the blade of his sword and stabbing it down into the giant's neck to arrest his fall. He then used the blade to hold himself in place long enough to solidly kick himself away and out of range of a counterattack.

It wasn't in time. The boss seemed to recover before Heathcliff could completely clear its reach; the back of the stone-encased fist struck him squarely in mid-air and sent him tumbling far away. But while Heathcliff's actions had been enough to get its attention, they hadn't been enough to keep it—not with all of the damage the collective efforts of the Salamander ranged DPS groups had been putting out since the hate wipe. Hrungnir didn't even seem to concern itself with the fate of the player it had just swatted away like an irritating bug, it simply resumed its headlong charge towards the Salamander groups, who—a little too late—had managed to mostly stop DPSing while the tank groups formed a defensive line.

Klein specifically remembered thinking to himself, not too long ago, that this whole non-plan of Sakuya's had been a very bad idea. I hate it when I'm right, he thought as he tried to interrupt the boss with one of his hardest-hitting katana techniques. To his dismay, the powerful technique didn't even slow the thing down—instead, there was a terrible impact that Klein felt throughout his whole body, and the world spun around him as he found himself simply kicked out of the way.

With no power to his wings within the World Tree and no way to control his trajectory, the spinning seemed to last an eternity—an eternity during which he couldn't even follow what direction he was facing or where he was going. The only thing fixed in his sight was his HUD, where he could clearly see his HP gauge in the red zone—and a flashing icon for Stun status. He struck the ground and rolled with an overwhelming sense of uncomfortable numbness across most of his avatar, coming to a rest on his side with a 90-degree skewed view of Hrungnir's continued charge.

That charge, aimed directly at the Salamander ranged DPS groups, resumed its heedless path through Heathcliff's and Klein's parties. Sakuya and the five Salamanders tried to slow the boss down while the mages spread themselves out; she and the others found themselves scattered to either side when it brought the wind axe down in an overhand swing that smashed a fragmented crease into the ornate
stonework of the floor, a blow that Klein could feel through the ground even from twenty-some meters away. Tetsuo and Sakuya were both sent flying back into the other Salamanders by an open-handed follow-up swipe from its earth-element arm, which slammed another Salamander into Bourne with uncontrolled velocity.

Klein tried to move his head, his movements still sluggish; he could see his sword lying on the ground only a few meters from his outstretched arm. With the Stun status still seconds away from fading, he struggled to get his hand into his belt pouch. There was one Healing Crystal left in there, and if ever there'd been a time to use it…

His fingers touched the smooth, flat edges of the crystal, warmed by his avatar's body heat. He didn't even bother pulling it out to verify it was what he wanted; it was the only crystal item of any kind that he had left outside of his inventory or bank vault. "Heal!" he croaked out.

The crystal shattered in his grasp. Klein's HP bar shot from almost nothing to full in the space of a breath, filling him with a sense of relief that nearly matched for intensity the discomfort he still felt all over his body.

That relief lasted only moments. While he pushed himself to his feet and scrambled to reclaim his weapon, he could do nothing but watch as Hrungrir's wild swings of anger turned Sasha, Bourne and two of Heathcliff's Salamanders into Remain Lights.

Nobody dies in my party...

Never before had those words—spoken more than once over the preceding months, a promise that so far he'd always been able to keep—rung in his ears so loudly. They kept ringing as Klein fought to banish all of the fatigue and numbness that threatened to overtake him with each accelerating step, katana and voice both raised high as he drove himself back towards the thing that had nearly killed him with a loud kiai.

Nobody had ever died in Klein's party before.

And if there was anything he could still do about it, no one ever would.
"Hate, often referred to by veteran MMO players as 'aggro', is a game mechanic used to measure a mob's level of aggression towards a target. Hate is tracked separately for each player, and is incurred by performing actions that the mob perceives as hostile, such as attacking it or healing its enemies. There are skills and spells which increase or decrease hate, allowing a player to try to attract or avoid a mob's attention, but the majority of hate with a mob is generated by dealing damage to it. At any given time, a mob will prioritize its target based on a variety of factors, including a player's accumulated hate, current actions, and physical proximity to the mob..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Hate Mechanics»

5 May 2023
Day 181 - Midday

"Hate wipe!" yelled the gray-haired Salamander who'd named himself as Heathcliff. The words drew immediate reactions of dismay from everyone.

Sasha was no exception. She wasn't a complete newbie—she'd known what aggro was even before this raid, if only because there were spells designed to increase or decrease hate with a mob. She'd been using some of those buffs herself in this battle to mitigate the aggro spikes from her shield-breaking spell. But when she turned around at Heathcliff's yell and saw the towering Jotunn boss already running towards them with a stride that ate up at least ten meters per step, all of that knowledge washed away in a paralyzing flood of terror. Three times now she'd faced this sight, and even knowing then to expect the mob's attention hadn't made it any easier to face certain death coming her way, trusting only that the healers in her group would keep her alive.

This time was different. This was so much worse. And everything seemed to happen in the blink of an eye—or rather it would have, if she'd even been able to blink.

There was a word that she'd seen once, long ago in a classic novel that she'd read for a college English Literature class. The book had been about rabbits, of all things, and it had stuck in her head primarily because of her interest in linguistics: the author had made up fictional languages for all of the animals in the book. She remembered that when the rabbits were scared out of their wits, facing a deadly predator, they froze in an instinctive state of paralysis they called *tharn*—capable only of staring motionlessly at their death as it approached. She'd thought it rather silly at the time.

But there in those first brief moments, when her body unwillingly locked up while Klein and Heathcliff dashed out to intercept the boss, Sasha finally understood on a visceral level exactly what the word meant—what it was to go *tharn*. And knowing that it was so didn't make it any easier to snap out of it.

What did help was when she felt herself suddenly shoved by strong hands; the rough contact broke the spell and spurred her to movement in a sudden rush of adrenaline. With Bourne falling in step right beside her, watching to make sure she kept going, she started to run as fast as her legs would carry her back towards the Cait Sith mage groups—perpendicular to the path between Hrunungir and the Salamanders. It felt like the two of them had barely gotten moving before the giant's earth-shaking footsteps stopped briefly, and there was a terrible metallic clamor from somewhere behind her and off to the side—too close! Her peripheral vision caught a glimpse of a large object hurtling towards them very quickly, and both she and Bourne instinctively threw themselves to the ground to avoid it.

That "object" turned out to be Klein, who flew past them while tumbling bandana over boots until he
struck the floor limply some twenty meters or so away and rolled to a stop. Alarmed, Sasha focused on him just long enough to pop his status ribbon, relieved when she saw that his health wasn't going to drop any further than it already had—he was just stunned, and wasn't in any immediate danger.

The same couldn't be said for her. "Come on!" Bourne urged, trying to get back to his feet while reaching out to offer his hand to her. Inwardly swearing at the awkwardness of trying to do anything athletic in these unfamiliar robes, she pushed herself up as quickly as she could—and then found herself losing her balance again when a nearby blow from the boss made the floor lurch unexpectedly beneath her feet. As Bourne kept her from falling, she couldn't help but look back at the source of the noise, fearful of another human projectile—and cried out when she saw just how close the boss was. Its flailing fists were knocking aside the unbuffed Salamanders like bowling pins, and with sudden horror she saw Tetsuo crushed to the floor under the impact of the Jotunn's stony fist, his HP bar reduced to an almost invisible slice of red. Hrungnir raised the fist again for a finishing blow.

"No!" she screamed. "Let go of me!" She tried to jerk her arm away from Bourne's grasp, couldn't, and raised her other arm instead. "Zutto famudrag—"

"Don't cast!" Bourne yelled, yanking at her sharply.

"—shippura yasun!" The Focus reticle appeared centered on Tetsuo's avatar, and a wave of blue energy sheeted across the surface of his body from head to toe. His HP spiked immediately upwards, just past green, and when he scrambled away from the attack, the glancing blow he took only cost him half of what remained rather than turning him into a Remain Light.

Sasha knew what had to happen then, and it was no surprise at all when Hrungnir lifted its fist from the ground and turned its eyes on her. She hadn't needed Bourne's warning; she'd known that casting a healing spell on the target of a mob's attack risked pulling aggro onto the caster. She'd known that she might very be trading her life for Tetsuo's.

But there was simply no way that she was going to watch a child die. Especially not someone who, while not technically one of her charges at the orphanage, was still dear to her—and to the people she loved.

She tried to turn and run anyway—it wasn't as if she wanted to die. She even felt a rising note of hope as Bourne let go of her arm and started to chant the words to his Mountain Retreat spell, knowing and trusting that he meant to cast it on her, hoping that it was in time.

It wasn't. She felt the entire world hit her at once, and then nothing else.

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Just a few short minutes ago, Klein had been giving plenty of flak to Sakuya for rushing into a dangerous situation with no plan. And it would've been easy to blame her for the fact that he and his group were right in the middle of this mess; it was at her urging that they'd broken off from the Cait Sith raid and approached the Salamander lines in the first place. They could've been back with the other mage groups in the joint raid, watching Eugene's raid group get curbstomped by the boss from a safe distance.

But somewhere in the back of his mind, as he screamed his defiance and charged into danger, a fleeting thought ran through him: that a part of him almost wanted to apologize to her for the grief he'd given her over her impulsiveness. She'd had her reasons; they'd sounded like good ones, or else he wouldn't have come. And now here he was, for reasons of his own, dashing directly towards a mob the size of a five-story building. Did he have a plan? Hell no. If irony could kill, the air in
Hrungnir's boss room would've been lethal poison.

"Dale!" he yelled as he finally spotted his group's healer; the Gnome had been one of the lucky ones who had retreated out of Hrungnir's range in time. "Get them up! Then give me every tanking buff you've got!"

"The Sal tanks don't have aggro yet!" Dale yelled back, running back in despite his protests—back in, and towards the multicolored collection of Remain Lights that were gathered near Hrungnir's stomping feet as the boss sent player after player flying away from it.

"That's what the buffs are for!" Klein shot back. "Use your AOE rez, your de-agg, and then lay everything on me!" He dropped to his knees suddenly and slid on his shinguards as a Salamander in heavy plate went hurtling through the air above him. "Goddamnit, I hate red-zone state changes!"

It wasn't just the hate wipe, although that was crappy enough. Klein could swear that Hrungnir packed a much bigger wallop now than it had before. Earlier in the battle, he'd been able to take hits from the boss, although he'd had all of Dale's buffs stacked on him at the time. But that last kick he'd taken had nearly one-shotted him even through his armor's damage mitigation—and he was equipped with quality gear; that shouldn't have been possible.

It sure as hell called into question the game's balance, as far as Klein was concerned. But this wasn't the time to be analyzing Kayaba's design principles.

Klein saw Sakuya dive and flow into an evasive roll, her sword held out to one side like an axle. Hrungnir's wind-bladed axe sliced through the air just above her while she was in mid-roll, and when she came back up to her feet she spun and slashed at the giant's outstretched elbow, sword emitting the characteristic deep crimson of a "taunt" technique—an attack that would earn her additional hate on top of the damage she was dealing.

Was she trying to get aggro under control too? Here, in the middle of the Salamander lines? She would've been smarter leaving and running back to her own people—Klein knew none of the Salamander AOE attacks would hit him, since as a fellow Salamander his cursor would be green to them, but Sakuya was neither a member of their raid nor of their faction; hers was certain to be yellow to them. Most AOEs would hit Neutral and Hostile targets alike—it meant she was taking a hell of a risk.

But the ability of AOEs to affect targets with a yellow cursor cut both ways. Klein caught a glimpse of bright lights in his peripheral vision as Dale's rez spell began to re-form the avatars of not only Bourne and Sasha, but every fallen Salamander within 25 meters—which was more than a few. The act drew an immediate surge of aggro from Hrungnir, which prompted Klein to jig to the right in order to cut off the boss.

"Oh no you don't!" Klein yelled as he triggered one of his emergency skills, a long-cooldown taunt attack of his own. This one had a brief Stumble effect, and Klein blessed his luck when he saw the debuff actually apply successfully. The short window during which Hrungnir lost its balance and had to recover was enough time for Dale to cast his aggro-reduction spell and put distance between the two of them—sufficient distance for the boss to re-prioritize Klein as his target.

With Dale starting to stack tank buffs on him again, and Hrungnir's HP down to a fine red sliver, there was no point in holding back any longer. Klein unloaded every high-damage, high-aggro attack he had, and when Hrungnir tried to kick him out of the way again, Dale's damage shield and reactive heal prevented his HP from dropping below the halfway point, and the knockback-reduction buff kept his feet on the ground and prevented him from sliding more than a few meters. A rippling blur of green crossed in front of him as Sakuya dashed into the opening and used a sword technique to
parry Hrungnir's follow-up attack with the axe—damn, she was moving fast, almost too fast to follow; Klein assumed she had to be buffed by a speed-enhancing wind spell that he'd seen Dynamm use a few times.

"Switch!" Sakuya yelled as she dodged backwards and easily avoided a crushing blow from the stone fist. Klein didn't need the cue; he was already lunging back in and used a quick two-hit combo to draw a glowing red cross of damage on the Jotunn's forearm before it pulled its arm back again. The Salamander main tank group had joined the fray as well, struggling to get the aggro under control and focused on one person so that the ranged DPS groups could resume their barrage. It was starting to get a little tight in there, which meant that someone ought to focus on parrying the mob's—

As the thought struck him, Sakuya came leaping back in to do exactly that; the long curved blade of her nodachi bled a trail of yellow-green light with the execution of a powerful technique aimed at intercepting Hrungnir's descending axe blade before it could hit one of the Salamander swordsmen who'd just switched in. But the icon on her status ribbon for the «Blur» buff had flickered and disappeared while she was already committed to the technique; it threw off her timing. She picked up on it quickly enough to get her blade in between the Jotunn's wind axe and her body, but even the glancing blow slammed her into the floor with about a quarter of her HP remaining.

What the hell are they feeding this thing? Klein wondered as he rushed back with the urge to parry the attack with a technique of his own. He knew he wasn't going to get there in time, but it didn't matter—someone else was closer. The Cait Sith melee groups had reached the fight, and Thelvin executed that shield dash technique that Klein had seen Heathcliff do earlier, swinging his shield up when he came to the end frame of his attack and absorbing the brunt of the follow-up from the Jotunn's earth-enchanted fist. But the kick that came next must have depleted what little HP the Cait Sith raid leader had left; he staggered backwards a few steps before combusting into bright yellow flames. Klein raged and swore, throwing himself back towards the fight.

Sakuya attacked at almost the same time that Klein did, unleashing a quick crosscut technique that tore a glowing red rent across the massive leg in front of her before jumping back out. She hadn't even had time to yell for a switch; Klein's blow landed only a moment later. But the blade of his sword rebounded off of the mob's skin with the familiar purple flash of an «Immortal Object» warning. "State change!" he and several other people yelled.

It was really only then that Klein realized something that should've been completely obvious: Kayaba is a sadistic bastard. Seriously? He's going to throw in another stage for this thing after all we've been through? Fuck you, man. With a lawnmower.

But Hrungnir fell to its knees then, the impact cracking the tiles beneath it. The mob's HP gauge and cursor disappeared, and it coughed a bit with a sound like an asthmatic elephant, sounding like it was starting to say something.

And your unskippable cutscene dialogue, too, Klein thought as he did the next-best thing to spamming the X button on a controller that he didn't have: he ignored it. His averted gaze was drawn immediately to Thelvin's burning Remain Light, and when he looked at Dale, his friend shook his head, not even needing the question said. He turned the rest of the way around until he saw Bourne and Sasha standing a relatively safe distance away, and whistled sharply at them. "Do you have any rezzes left, Bourne?"

The Gnome healer paused only briefly before calling back. "Cooldown for another minute and—"

"Then get her out of here!" Klein said, returning his attention to the boss just in time to hear it wrap up what must've been a pretty short monologue. It let out what sounded like a laugh with its last breath, and its skin began to rapidly frost over like a time-lapse video until it shattered into millions of
Klein had expected at least some cheering when the thing died, but most of the players on both sides had apprehensive looks on their faces until each player's after-battle result screen appeared. As usual, it had lines for the EXP and Yuld that he'd earned—which were significant; the numbers there almost made him do a double take. A number of items had dropped as well, and above all of these things, it had another message in a slightly larger typeface, the one that everyone had been waiting to see.

*Last Attack: Sakuya (Sylph).*

When Klein looked back up from his window, he saw a lot of very unfriendly looks passing back and forth between the Salamander forces and Klein's raid group, and Sakuya herself was the conspicuous object of attention from a number of her own raid members until their eyes returned to their result windows. Klein hadn't really paid close attention to the drops on his own, but from the brief glance he'd given the numbers and items there, and the fact that he'd leveled up, he knew. As a member of the same raid as Sakuya, he'd shared in the rewards. All of them would.

And he was just as sure that the players in Eugene's group wouldn't. Whether they'd done enough damage to earn EXP from the encounter or not, they wouldn't get any rare drops—and they definitely wouldn't get the bragging rights.

It didn't take long for someone on the Cait Sith side to raise their voice. "What the hell was with that kill-stealing bullshit there?" That set off a ragged chorus of agreement from the winning side, compared to the sullen silence that still radiated from most of the Salamanders.

"Shut up!" Klein yelled, pushing his way through until he reached Thelvin's Remain Light. "Does anyone have a rez?"

Looks went back and forth between the healers and other mages in the joint raid group, conversing back and forth and one by one shaking their heads or letting their gazes drop.

A woman in the nearest Cait Sith group spoke up. "If I had one that wasn't on cooldown, I'd already be using it. I think any of us would."

Except that the Salamanders weren't. He knew plenty of them still had to have spells that weren't on cooldown, and so did everyone else there. And for whatever reason, out of whatever sense of duty or fear they had, they weren't moving. They were looking at each other uneasily even under the weight of the stares from the other raid group, but no one took a step forward or admitted to having available spells.

No one, that is, until there was a stir behind the Salamander lines as someone began pushing through. Corvatz's voice barked out almost immediately. "Get back in formation!"

Eugene's deep voice immediately cut through all of this, booming out over the Salamander raid group in a tone that invited no dispute. "Rez him."

The clamor that followed then was greater than before, and it was so overlapping and conflicting that Klein really couldn't get a read on who was likely to do what. But after a few tense moments, the Salamander lines parted enough for one of their water mages to get a clear line of sight, wasting no time before facing Thelvin's Remain Light and pressing his hands together to began his incantation.

Several Cait Sith rushed forward when Thelvin's body began to re-form, stopping just short of tackling him. Klein let out a breath that he'd probably been holding for the last thirty seconds without
being aware of it. Thelvin gave them a tight smile as he used his shield to help push himself back to his feet, and then turned to face Eugene where the man stood at the fore of the Salamander lines. He bowed respectfully. "Thank you for that."

Eugene either ignored or wasn't aware of the looks that Klein could see Corvatz giving him. He just nodded once. "If we kill each other fighting, that's one thing. But there's no point in standing there and letting a man die."

Thelvin gave his own nod of acknowledgement. "And I appreciate it. But that was still cheap as hell, what you did there at the end. We paid for this victory in lives. What did your people do except screw up our raid strategy, Eugene? We had this thing."

"We paid in lives too," Corvatz shot back, pushing his way forward through his front lines. "Salamander lives bought the information you used to beat this boss."

Eugene didn't let him get on a roll, for which Klein was quite grateful. "That aside, this is a contested zone—we have as much right to try to kill the boss as you do."

"Maybe so," Thelvin said, inspecting his sword's status window before returning it to its sheath. "But that doesn't mean it's a good idea. Did you notice what happened there at the end, after your people pulled aggro?"

"I noticed both of our groups trying to kill the boss at the same time," Eugene replied. "With all the attacks coming in, and a target that big, anyone had as much of a chance as anyone else to get the Last Attack."

Thelvin shook his head. "That's not what I'm talking about. You wouldn't have picked up on it, Eugene, because your people weren't here for the whole raid. But I can tell you that as soon as your groups showed up, that boss started hitting a lot harder."

"He's right," Klein said, hoping that he might be able to shortcut whatever debate was about to happen by lending Thelvin's argument credibility. "Right after the hate wipe, the thing started hitting us a lot harder, sometimes even one-shotting people without buffs or a decent damage mit. Hell, it almost killed me, man."

"But we're completely different raid groups," Eugene said flatly. "We're not allied. The scaling shouldn't kick in with the raid sizes either of us brought."

"I think it did," Thelvin said. "I think Kayaba foresaw that if two races that weren't allied formed different raid groups, they could exploit the fact that the difficulty scaling counted the groups separately—basically, cheesing the bosses by double-teaming them. So when you showed up it treated your raid group as having joined ours for the purposes of scaling the boss difficulty."

Both raid groups were almost silent as this assertion settled over them, silence broke only by scattered low murmurs between neighbors. Klein was smart enough to put two and two together—and if it was that obvious to him, he was certain everyone else got the point too.

"So while I thank you for your decency in raising my Remain Light," Thelvin went on, his calm voice betrayed by the furious lashing of his tail behind him, "I think it's best that you and your raid group go on ahead to the gateway, and get a nice head start on your way back to Gattan so that our parties don't run into each other again today. Because your assumptions just about got everyone here killed, and I don't think I'm the only one who's a little bit pissed about it right now."

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No one seemed able to relax until the last Salamander party had disappeared down the short hallway that led to the gateway room, and only once the last of them had warped back to Arun was anything approaching normal conversation possible without the specter of potential conflict overshadowing them. Most of the Cait Sith and Sylph clearers were collected around their party leaders, and after the last Salamander group was gone there was a flicker of lights here and there as individual players set their interfaces visible in order to show off a newly-dropped item.

"Well, that was nice and awkward," Klein said finally, keenly aware that he was now the only Salamander in the room. He felt a bit better now that all of his friends were back with him, but being the odd man out in a raid mostly full of cat people was still a weird feeling.

"We'll give them a few minutes to clear out from around the warpgate," Thelvin said, pitching his voice to carry beyond the people gathered immediately around him. "No point in courting any more unnecessary conflicts."

Klein wasn't the only person nodding in clear agreement at that. But there was something else in the larger man's voice; the near-death experience had to still be fresh and raw. "You alright, man?"

A ripple of metal buckles tinkling against armor plates accompanied Thelvin's shrug; the vaguely feline features of the man's face were carefully neutral. "On the balance, I'm glad we won. But we lost five people today, and many more had their progress set back by the death penalty after they were rezzed. Some of those didn't need to happen."

He didn't get any more specific; he didn't have to. Everyone there had to know that Thelvin had lost a significant amount of EXP and skill progress from his one death there at the very end—and since he'd been a Remain Light at the time the boss was killed, there was a good chance he hadn't gotten anything at all from the win. If he wasn't venturing any information on that subject, no one was going to be rude enough to ask.

"I imagine everyone leveled up?" Thelvin asked with what looked to Klein like a put-on grin, noticeably deflecting the discussion from the death penalty. That question, at least, was well within the acceptable bounds of a party member to ask; players were players, no matter their faction—many of them would be hard-pressed to not want to share with their party the fact that they just leveled up. And a player had to really be overleveled for a gateway boss in order to not get a level-up out of it, which was one of the reasons why these bosses were the target of such a competitive race.

Klein had noticed his own level-up window after closing the result window, but he'd only had a moment to look at it before swiping it closed and trying to find a rez for Thelvin. He'd have some stat points that would be better spent later when he could think them over, but now that everyone seemed to be taking a breather, he drew open his menu and searched his inventory for the new drops. One crystal was not all that uncommon a drop from a gateway boss, but this time Klein had been lucky enough to get two: an HP and MP crystal, one of each. There was also a new katana he hadn't had before, but Klein promised himself that he'd save that for later, too—a weapon drop from a gateway boss was bound to be a significant upgrade, and once he looked at it he wasn't likely to pay attention to anything else for a while.

Thelvin looked satisfied at the response he got. Looking over towards Klein's group, he waved. "Sasha! Thank you for all of your help today. We couldn't have done this without you. Whatever drops or rewards you got out of this, you more than earned."

When Klein looked up from his menu, he noticed Sasha grinning from ear to ear—more genuinely happy than he'd seen her since… well, ever, really; he'd just met her today. But happier than he'd seen her for the entire raid, that was for sure, and from the excited way she was almost bouncing on her toes, it was about more than just Thelvin's praise. "Well?" he asked, being purposefully vague in
case she was sensitive to others inquiring about her stats.

If she was, though, she was making an exception in this case. "Three levels, Klein. Three. I'm still having trouble believing it; I've never received so much EXP at a time from anything, any quest."

Klein's grin matched hers, and a few of his teammates came over to give her a pat on the back when they heard this. "Right on. Thelvin's right, you did a great job out there, really. I'm sorry we couldn't keep you on your feet there at the end."

Sasha's brief grimace made it clear that she'd lost a fair amount of skill progress as well. "I knew it could happen when I came here. At least Dale rezzed me quickly. Thank you, for that. And to all of you, for protecting me throughout this whole experience."

Dale accepted the thanks graciously, if a bit bashfully. "Well, now that you've leveled up a bit, maybe you could join a clearing group? Don't worry, everyone freaks the hell out the first time they go up against a really big boss like this. Ask Klein, he—"

Klein butted in abruptly, heat rising to his face. "How about we not finish this story, Dale."

Sasha laughed, shaking her head and holding up a hand as if to ward off the notion. To Klein's relief, she seemed to be ignoring Dale's aborted anecdote, whatever it was. "No, even if I didn't have responsibilities, I still want to pursue my—oh!" Her eyes suddenly widened, and she got an eager look on her face, moving her hand in the air in the familiar gestures of using her game menu. "I just realized: level 30 means I should get a new skill slot, which means another element to learn!"

The smile that Bourne wore then was the first he'd really reacted in any noticeable way to their discussion; if anything, he'd been looking a little uneasy ever since the fiasco at the end of the raid. And to be fair, Klein knew, it was understandable—he'd been one of the people turned into a Remain Light and rezzed in time.

Sasha continued sweeping her finger through the air in front of her. "And I think I know just… what… that's odd. What is—?"

"What is what?" Klein asked, unable to see whatever she was looking at and mirroring the puzzled look he saw on her face.

She didn't answer, but Klein could see her eyes tracking back and forth like a printer head as she read something. And for a brief moment, her eyes widened a bit as something—panic, surprise, amazement, or something that looked an awful lot like one or more of those—took over her face. She got control of it very quickly, but Klein had been looking right at her when it happened, and it was a bit unsettling. Almost as much as the guarded look that she gave him when she looked back up and quickly swept her menu closed.

"Everything all right, milady?" Bourne said.

Sasha pulled a smile over the guarded expression she'd just worn, giving her head a quick nod. "It's fine. Actually, I think I've decided to give a bit more thought to which element I pick next, so I'll do that later."

Over Sasha's shoulder, Klein could see a throng of green-clad figures approach Thelvin, and he let the questions drop as he shifted his attention in that direction. The long-haired man who'd been such a dick to his group during the raid stepped forward and gave a short bow, being far more polite now. "We're very grateful for your people's help in bringing us this victory, Thelvin. But I fear the hour grows late, and we should be returning to Sylvain."
Thelvin gave a bow in return that was at least as respectful. "The victory belongs to all of us here, regardless of who got the last attack." His gaze shifted. "My congratulations to you for that accomplishment, Sakuya; I saw you there at the end, dancing in and out with your quick strikes. You haven't lost a step."

To Klein's eye, Sakuya looked a little uncomfortable at being singled out again and having attention drawn to her—but she tipped her head in acknowledgement. "Thanks, Thel. It was good to fight beside you again, even if briefly."

There was nothing particularly flattering about the sour look that Sigurd gave her then. "Yes, we're all quite pleased for Sakuya and the victory she's brought us. But for now, we should be taking our leave. I am certain that Lord Skarrip will be in touch with Lady Alicia before long."

"Or she with him," Thelvin answered. "All right, then, godspeed to you. We'll be right behind you." He lifted his chin and pitched his voice to project, raising his hands. "Okay, time to stop bragging about your drops and pack up. Hang out here if you want, but I'm going back to Arun so I can send Alicia the good news and then put my feet up for the night. Who's with me?"

The answer, judging from the sudden rise in volume, was quite a few people. When Thelvin gave a significant nod towards Sasha and looked at Klein, he returned the nod. Since his friends seemed eager to get back to the Safe Zone anyway, Klein glanced over at Sasha and Bourne. "You two ready to head back?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid this is where we part ways, milady," Bourne said, bowing to her and taking to one knee so that his eyes would be on level with hers.

Sasha looked disappointed at this news. "I was hoping you'd have time to come back with me, have some tea, and take a look at my research notes. I think you'd find them interesting, and no doubt there are things you could teach me as well."

As he straightened again, the large Gnome mage shook his head. "I am sorry, but I have a prior obligation that requires me to return to the North."

"At least let me add you to my friend list," Sasha said, drawing open her menu again.

Bourne looked momentarily hesitant, but then nodded and reached up to touch the air in front of him, doubtlessly accepting the prompt that had just appeared for him. Sasha looked satisfied with this, and turned back to Klein. "I suppose there's nothing more for us here, is there? I wonder if the children will be back from their adventure by now?"

The second bit didn't really make much sense to Klein, but he shrugged and gave her a noncommittal smile. "Why don't we head through the warpgate and find out? I mean, we pretty much owe this victory to you, lady; you should've been the first one to go through."

"I don't really care about all that," Sasha said as they all joined the knots of players heading towards the brightly-lit hallway that led through a newly-open door to the warpgate. "I'm just glad that I'm alive to go through it at all."

The sensation was the same as every other warpgate transition, and by this point Klein was mostly used to the split-second feeling of nothingness and the disorientation of suddenly being in a different place with a different temperature and surrounding noise level. And sure enough, when he came through on the other side it was like suddenly throwing open the doors on a theater crowd; the warpgate was surrounded by clusters of players who all seemed to be pressing for news. A gateway boss raid was a big event, and by now a crowd would have already been drawn by the Salamanders
coming through first—and they probably hadn't been in the mood to answer questions. The Caits seemed to already have them riled up.

"If you want to get past them," said a feminine voice to his left, "I have a Transparency spell that I've gotten very good at casting. Our wings will need a few minutes to charge before we can fly over them."

Klein's eyes followed the sound, and he saw Sakuya there with a lopsided smile on her lips. "I thought you guys were going ahead to Sylvain?"

"I'm not Sigurd's biggest fan," she responded, "nor he mine. We'll put on smiles for the crowds for Skarrip's sake, but I'd just as soon give him as much of a head start as the Sals." She tilted her head to the side, giving him an unreadable look. "Present company excluded."

"Ugh," Sasha said from Klein's other side, hands halfway to her ears. "This is almost as bad as being back in the raid. Maybe we should give them a little while to disperse?"

"Trust me, ma'am," Sakuya said, waving a hand absently to ward off a curious onlooker. "They're not going to disperse. Not soon, anyway; this is big news and it'll be even bigger because of all the drama around it. If you want quiet, we need to go someplace quiet." She glanced off to the south, the general direction in which Sigurd and his party were likely long gone. "And honestly, that sounds like a pretty nice idea right now."

"Milady?" It was Bourne's voice, and it drew everyone's eyes over to where he stood—and to the fact that he was still there. "Am I to understand that you'd like to retire somewhere quiet, and there are quite a lot of noisy people in your way?"

The look on Sasha's face was briefly but gloriously impish. "You might say that."

The man's craggy face cracked in a smile. "I did say that." He turned and looked from place to place in the crowd, as if seeking something in particular. Then he held out one hand and barked, "futto tsutakke tamzul buren!"

A flood of green-tinted air surged down his arm and gathered in his palm before filling out into the familiar broad disc shape of the Defensive Shield spell. Wielding it in front of him as if it were an actual physical shield, with his free hand he took his warhammer from the hook at his belt and advanced on the crowd. "Coming through, please," he said with his voice booming out before him.

Between the churning magic of the Defensive Shield spell, the weapon in his hand and his sheer size, people got out of the way with a speed and agreeability that almost made Klein laugh. He understood suddenly why Bourne had chosen the spell he had; shields of all the other elements blocked visibility to a more significant degree, and since the Defensive Shield wasn't an offensive spell, he could still use it to push through if he had to—although then it would come down to a test of STR, which Klein suspected the mage lacked.

He and his group followed Bourne and Sasha through the break in the crowd that the Gnome's stunt had created, and when they finally reached a more open area, the Gnome clenched his hand to dismiss the maintained spell. Turning back to Sasha again, he gave her another bow. "And this is where I truly do leave you, Sasha of Arun. I have little doubt that we will encounter each other again at some point."

"Goodbye, Bourne of Nissengrof," Sasha said, looking as if she was having a hard time keeping a straight face at the exchange of formalities in his way of speaking. "Safe trip home."
"So Klein," Sakuya said once Bourne had disappeared into the multitude of players and NPCs, materializing at Klein's side and looping an arm around his shoulders. "This is terribly nosy of me, but is there any truth to the rumors that you and Alicia are a thing?"

Klein almost tripped, then, as one foot tried to stop almost at the same time as the other—distracted by the sudden eruption of snickers from the people he liked to call his friends. His stumble did have the useful effect of dislodging Sakuya from him, however, and not in an especially graceful way. "Wait, what, there are rumors? I mean, what?"

Sakuya did not do him any favors by laughing then. "Oh, look at your face. There so totally is. No wonder you were so distracted while Hrungnir was doing his stupid dying monologue; you couldn't wait to get out of there and back to Freelia."

*Not exactly,* Klein thought, but there was still more truth in it than he wanted to admit. He seized on the opportunity to change the subject with great enthusiasm. "What did he say, anyway? I hate cutscenes that you can't skip."

Sakuya didn't look fooled by the gambit—but then, she'd already pretty much gotten her answer anyway. "Oh, just the usual lore and dying-bad-guy nonsense—you know, 'you think you've won, children of Midgard', blah blah, something about his king being unbound. I'm guessing that's an upcoming boss. It was short; you didn't really miss much."

"Children of Midgard?" Sasha asked.

Klein shrugged, not caring all that much. "More Norse stuff? New to me."

The Puca mage made a small, thoughtful sound. "Interesting."

Klein made a face. "Boring is more like it. I kinda feel like we're letting that Kayaba guy win a little bit anytime we play along with his story."

"What about it is interesting?" Sakuya asked, disregarding his comment.

"Well," Sasha said, looking to Klein's great despair as if she was going to wind up into a lecture, "Midgard is what our world, Earth, is called in Norse mythology. It's one of the Nine Worlds that are connected by the World Tree, Yggdrasil. Alfheim takes its name—if not a whole lot else—from another of those realms."

"Huh," said Sakuya, from which Klein could interpret no meaning whatsoever. What she said next was only a little more informative. "I knew some of that, but I still don't know what you're getting at. Sorry."

A struggle manifested itself on Sasha's face for a few moments, brow furrowed as if she was trying to figure out how to explain something. "Never mind," she said. "You're not interested anyway."

"Okay," said Klein, clapping his hands once and rubbing them together, once again trying to win a round at the game of Change the Subject. "So Sasha, this place you live, is it quiet?" He was in agreement with Sakuya; a quiet place to sit down and have a drink wasn't the worst idea.

The question, though, seemed to put a smile back on her face, even amuse her greatly. "As quiet as a raid group's worth of children ever is," she said, laughing. "Although most of them are probably still out at the moment."

Sakuya looked almost as horrified as Klein felt at the prospect of dealing with a swarming mass of kids. "Scratch that idea," he said. "Maybe there'll be an inn that—" He squinted suddenly as his eyes
picked out a familiar figure mixed in with the crowd of strangers, and he actually had to stop and look a moment to be sure it wasn't a case of mistaken identity; there were girls with him.

But no, that was Kirito all right—there was no mistaking his youthful features wrapped in a black overcoat strapped with a longsword. Nor the mop of black hair almost as wild as his own; there was a reason why Klein wore the bandana. He called out to the Spriggan, waving.

The name got immediate reactions from both of the women with him. "Kirito?" they both echoed at once, then looked at each other.

"He was at the signing of the Treaty of Arun," Sakuya said, looking puzzled—as if she knew why she knew Kirito, but wasn't sure why Sasha would.

"You know that raid group of children? He was helping keep an eye on them while I was at our raid," Sasha said quickly, excitedly. But then she didn't spare another moment of attention for Sakuya, instead turning and jogging towards the young Spriggan and his company. "Speaking of which, Kirito! You didn't have to come meet me! So how... did..." Sasha stopped there, an odd note coming into her voice as she trailed off.

Now that Kirito was closer, Klein didn't have any trouble understanding her sudden change in demeanor. The look on his friend's face was grave, and it was an expression shared by the three young girls who accompanied him. "Sasha—" he began.

"What happened?" Sasha said urgently before Kirito had finished saying her name, all of the joyful enthusiasm gone from her—leaving a void which was quickly filled by something that looked a lot like panic. Her eyes quickly went between him and the younger of the two Undine girls, and whatever she saw there only seemed to feed her anxiety. "Sachi—"

The look in Kirito's eyes was haunted, and he couldn't seem to raise them from the ground as he went to his knees. The words came out in a rush, but fluently—as if he'd planned on what to say, but really just wanted to get it over with. "We were attacked by a gang led by a PKer named Prophet. Robert is dead. Everyone else is safe."

There was a terrible moment after Kirito dropped this news when everyone in their group completely froze—nobody seemed to even be willing or able to turn their heads and look at anyone else, let alone be the first to speak. Klein couldn't see Sasha's face from where he stood behind her, but her hands were trembling. To him, it seemed like one of those painfully long pauses in the seconds before a boss's scripted AOE was supposed to go off, when he knew what was coming but couldn't do anything but turtle and hope for the best.

Klein watched Kirito and Sasha, and waited for the explosion.

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Get it over with quickly, Asuna had told Kirito. It's awful news we have to deliver, but it'll just be worse if we try to drag it out or beat around the bush. So before she can start flipping out or thinking too much about what's happened, give her the basic facts as simply as possible: we were attacked, Robert is dead. Everyone else is safe. That last bit is important—it'll keep her from assuming the worst.

It had seemed like good advice at the time. But now, as Asuna watched the fast-forward parade of emotions struggle for dominance on Sasha's face, she wasn't so sure. Sasha had looked so happy, so obviously riding high on the feeling of victory from their raid; it seemed cruel to do what felt like abruptly slapping her in the face with tragedy. Could it not have waited until she got back to the
No, she told herself. It's like ripping off an adhesive bandage—the pain is coming one way or another, so it's best to just get it over with quickly. She glanced at the others in Sasha's group long enough to evaluate their reactions; the Sylph woman was open-mouthed with shock, while most of the rest of the mismatched party were looking anywhere but at someone else, avoiding the painfully awkward scene by pretending that it wasn't happening.

Sasha's mouth kept working soundlessly, as if she was trying to say something but couldn't complete the thought—that, or she was trying very hard not to cry out. "You said you'd keep an eye on them," were the first words that eventually made it out, and that much only in a whisper that was almost drowned by the passing conversations of other players. "I should have been there."

Kirito didn't raise his forehead from the ground, but he did try to reply. "I'm sorry, Sasha, but as terrible as this is, it's better that you weren't. Because—"

"They're my responsibility!" Sasha screamed suddenly, eyes flooding with the tears that she'd apparently been holding back. "Mine! I should never have let them out of my sight, should never have relied on you or anyone else to keep them safe! I should have been there!"

"If you had been, you'd be dead now, and so would they!" Asuna said bluntly, stomping a foot on the ground as her own voice rose to match.

This seemed to penetrate the shock, grief and anger that Sasha had to be feeling; at the very least it shut down her sudden outburst. "What?"

"It's true, Miss Sasha," said Sachi, looking as if it took more courage to say this to her caretaker than it had to face Prophet's group. "They were after your research… and I don't think they meant to leave any survivors once they got it. They killed Jeinaa, but she got rezzed. They made Silica and I fight each other, and then killed us both." She didn't need to mention that Asuna had rezzed her; the fact that she and Sachi were standing before her said enough. "They would've killed Jellica too, if Kirito hadn't shown up when he did. And they even almost killed him, too."

"I'm sorry, Sasha," Kirito said, rising from his kneeling position and finally managing to meet Sasha's eyes. "They had two objectives: to steal your notes, and to kill you—probably along with everyone else who was with you. Please understand… we came as soon as we found out what was happening, and we were lucky that they were stalling for time while waiting for someone to rendezvous with them. Between myself, Asuna and Yuuki, we barely survived the encounter and drove them off with only half their goal achieved. If it had been only you, then right now you would absolutely be dead—and the other kids probably would be as well. And nobody would ever know what had happened to you."

Asuna didn't want to look at the pain that was clear on Sasha's face, but she forced herself to anyway. "Why," Sasha began in something like a croak, then cleared her throat and licked her lips. "Why me? Did I… did I bring this on them? By teaching them, or by joining this raid?"

Kirito shook his head. "I don't think so, Miss Sasha. I think it's because of the things you've discovered… the research you've done. I'm guessing that someone wants that for themselves, and doesn't want anyone else to have it. There was more than one group after your notes—Silica says the first was what was left of the bandit group who jumped us on Cloudspire Island, Rosalia and her party. Prophet's group came in and killed them, then threatened the children."

"It all happened so fast," Sachi said. "A couple of minutes at most. They attacked us right after Kirito had just checked in on us."
Asuna couldn't even begin to guess at the turmoil that churned behind Sasha's eyes as she digested all of this. The Puca woman's hands formed her robes into knots where she clutched at them with white knuckles, and she looked between each person in turn who'd spoken or had a part in this, meeting their eyes and staring into them intensely. Asuna eventually flinched away from that look, but when she averted her eyes she saw Kirito meeting it head-on.

"I don't blame you for what happened, Kirito," Sasha said, her voice quiet but firm. "I'm sure you did everything you could to help, and I'm grateful for that much. Blame is for the people who did the killing." Asuna flinched then, too; Sasha couldn't have known what she'd done earlier, but it still cut all the same. "But I do hold you responsible for it—the children were in your care when this happened, and it was your responsibility to keep them safe as much as it was mine. So I need to know: what are you going to do to make this right?"

Defensiveness rose up in Asuna—for once, on Kirito's behalf rather than aimed at him. Someone's life had been ended—you couldn't make that right, no matter how hard you tried. But the thought died before it could be voiced; it reminded her again that she, too, had taken a life today—the first time for her. And it wasn't a critical hit in the heat of battle or anything like that; she'd done what she did with the full knowledge that it would kill XaXa, when he was already retreating. She'd been shocked at how easy it was to do.

She couldn't continue with that train of thought; she'd been burying it ever since it happened in order to keep the guilt from overflowing and drowning her. She tried to push herself back to the original train of thought, and was about to butt in and protest what an unfair question Sasha had posed—after all, what could Kirito really do that would bring Robert back?

But her hesitation had given him time to respond for himself. "I'm going to find these people, Miss Sasha," Kirito said, fire returning to his words. "Prophet. Black. Wraith. I'm going to find out where they hide. How many others there are. Who's helping them, and who their so-called 'Mistress' is."

"And do what?" Sasha asked.

"And destroy them," Kirito said with hard-edged certainty. "I will remove them from this world, because it needs to be done. Me, and anyone else who's willing to help." He glanced aside at Asuna, who didn't hesitate before nodding. She wasn't sure if she could ever kill again if it came to that, but she knew she couldn't stay on the sidelines either. Not after what those people had done today. She felt an inexplicable rush of joy then, and wasn't sure why—not until she looked back at Kirito and realized that she was proud of him. He had to know what any kind of public manhunt for Prophet would do to the already-dismal reputation of his faction, but was actually stepping up and doing something about it. She was a little surprised at how happy that made her.

Sasha, however, did not look pleased at all by this answer. If possible, the expression of sadness on her face seemed to intensify further. "You can't fix killing with more killing, Kirito," she said softly. "I would've thought you'd know that by now."

"I know you can't," Kirito said. "I know that killing Prophet and his people won't bring Robert back, Sasha. It can't ever make that right. But what it can do is stop them from ever killing again. And understand this: if someone doesn't stop them, that is exactly what they will do. They will keep ending people until someone ends them."

"But the Treaty—" Sasha began.

"The Treaty is unenforceable!" Kirito said, voice rising a little before being brought back under control. "I hate to say it, but I'm almost starting to wonder if Yoshihara had a point. What power do the faction leaders have to enforce the Treaty against someone who doesn't care about it? There's no
way to keep someone in prison for PKing when PvP is the whole point of this death game—it's not against the law. Banishment? Exile? They have to know the player's name, first!"

"You said you had their names," Sasha said. "Prophet, Black and Wraith."

"Yes," Kirito said, "and I'm going to take them to the Spriggan and Imp faction leaders, as well as to the NCC. Who may or may not do anything with that information. And if they do? What then? If Prophet's group is self-sufficient, Exiling or Banishing them won't slow them down. Putting them on the NCC blacklist would probably only be an inconvenience. But I'm willing to bet that taking them out one by one will make a dent in their ability to prey on others. There can't be all that many players who are as twisted as those people, and I think Prophet is the glue that holds them together and gives them purpose."

The Sylph woman with improbably long hair—who had been looking increasingly uncomfortable as the discussion progressed—made a throat-clearing sound. "Look, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I don't think I belong here, and I should excuse myself. I really need to get back to Sylvain anyway."

The Salamander who led the motley group behind him gave her an odd look. "You sure, Sakuya? A few minutes ago you wanted to find somewhere quiet to relax."

Sakuya nodded, although the expression on her face was anything but certain. "Tragedy has a way of ruining the mood, Klein, and the topic of conversation here doesn't seem likely to lead to anything quiet, does it? We can catch up another time."

"Wait," Kirito said as she turned to leave. "You're still highly placed in the Sylph clearing groups, aren't you?"

"I am," Sakuya said with a hint of wariness. "Why?"

"Because I want you to talk to Skarrip and your raid leader. Bring them this message: a PKer named Prophet and three accomplices attacked a raid group of children and killed one of them, with the intent of assassinating the person who just helped you win your raid and stealing her research. Give Skarrip their names. Give them to the leader of your clearing group as well; I'll send you a message with their descriptions. Any help you can give in hunting these people down... well, you heard what they're capable of."

Sakuya nodded, her lips pressed thin. "I don't disagree, and I'll be sure to have that conversation with Sigurd and Skarrip when I return—so please do send me that message. Now, if you'll excuse me, my wings should be mostly charged by now."

Once said wings had carried her out of immediate earshot, Klein looked around at his friends—who seemed to enjoy the role of third wheel in this drama no more than Asuna would've—then stepped forward and put a hand on Sasha's shoulder. "You going to be okay from here, Sasha?"

Sasha shook her head. "Probably not for a while. But if what you're asking is whether or not I need you to escort me further, the answer is no. Take your friends and get some rest—I know the way home from here, and I have a lot to discuss with these four."

Klein's hand slipped away from Sasha's shoulder; he waved to Kirito and turned to join the rest of his party, who were already waiting for him a short distance away. "Miss Sasha," Sachi said as he went, looking down nervously and sounding reluctant to even speak up. "There's one more thing."

Sasha closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. "There would be," she said finally. "You said everyone else was safe, so it can't be as bad as the rest of this."
"I mentioned that they were after your research," Kirito said. "It looks like they got it."

Sasha took one slow step through the doorway to her study, staring at the empty bookshelves as if they might magically replenish their contents at any moment. "How?" she said, voice rising to a squeak. "How did they even get in?"

"We think one of Prophet's group, the one he called Wraith, snuck in when one of the kids came to the door to let Pina in," Kirito said. "When we got back here, we found Pina locked in Sachi and Silica's room, and Sachi found this." He gestured towards the empty shelves. "The kids who were here at the time said they didn't see any strangers in the church, and didn't notice anything unusual."

Sasha had mixed feelings about this—dominant was her relief that the kids waiting at the church had been spared the trauma of a run-in with this horrific group, but she couldn't help be frustrated at the lack of clues. She'd had to save up to get the books printed mainly because her UI's note-taking buffer filled up quickly, and she could only carry so many scrolls in her inventory before the system became unmanageable. But that meant that aside from what few notes she had in her inventory right now, nearly all of her records had been stolen—all of her research, gone.

On the scale of things, it didn't measure up to the death of a young boy. But it was still a tremendous blow. She had most of the language itself in her head, of course, but all of her notes on MP costs, cooldowns… all of that data was gone. And even the linguistic information would take months to re-create from memory, and she'd almost certainly forget many words that she didn't use in her own magic. Let alone the work of organizing it all neatly the way she had for the books, and then the cost of printing them again.

"I can't deal with this right now," Sasha said, putting her hands up as if surrendering. "You said that the children who sent each other to jail should get out around noon tomorrow?"

"Roughly," Asuna said from the doorway. "We don't have an exact time for when they did it, but it was around then, if you want to be waiting there for them."

"I do," Sasha said. "But for now, I should get back downstairs and spend some more time with the kids. I can't even begin to imagine what they've been through or what emotional trauma they've suffered from this, and I don't want to leave them alone for long." She nibbled slightly at her lip before proceeding, feeling a little guilty for what she had to say next. "Kirito, you and your two friends can stay here tonight if you don't have anywhere to go. But I hope you'll understand when I say that I'd prefer you didn't. Not tonight, anyway."

Kirito and Asuna both bowed, the former stepping back out to join the latter in the hallway. "I understand," he said. "And again… I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for what happened."

"Don't be sorry, Kirito," Sasha said, turning her back on them so that they couldn't see her face or the conflict on it. "Just do the right thing."

She was aware that saying so was leaving "the right thing" entirely up to his interpretation. But he simply made a quiet un of agreement, and the two of them rejoined their friend Yuuki and went back downstairs. A few moments later, Sasha heard the front door latch shut.

The first two fingers of her hand drew her menu open with a pinching motion, the familiar chime sounding as the game's main menu opened in the air before her. It only took her a few practiced moments to go into her Skills menu and scan the list of equipped skills.
She'd begun the day with four skill slots, each filled with one of the elements she had equipped. And she knew that because she'd hit level 30, she should have a new empty slot which hadn't been filled with anything yet.

That wasn't what she saw now when she looked at her list of equipped skills. She still saw Water, Earth, Fire and Wind, in the order in which she'd started leveling them up. And she also saw the new blank skill slot below them, exactly as she had when she'd reached levels 10 and 20.

Below that blank slot was something else that hadn't been there before. An unfamiliar icon that looked somewhat like the interlocked triangles of a *valknut* symbol sat beside a word entirely in *katakana*—spelling out the name of a skill that she'd never heard of, knew for certain she'd never selected, and which wasn't occupying one of the skill slots she already had. It was just an extra that had no explanation for its existence.

But it had a description. And as she read through it again and thought about everything that she'd learned in the last half hour or so, she decided that she'd been right not to say anything to Klein, Bourne, or anyone else about this. Not until she knew what it could do.

An accelerated series of ringing tones played as she swept her menu closed with one hand, leaning back against the wall of her study and indulging in a few conscious, calming breaths.

She had an opportunity here, she realized, and it wasn't just this unexplained new skill that had appeared in her menu. These people had come after her because of what she knew. That meant that it was valuable to them. They valued it either because of the power or advantage they thought it would bring them, or because they thought they could sell it. And they wanted to eliminate her so that no one else could have that advantage.

But it was, in the end, only information. And information that has value mainly because of how few people know it loses that value if knowing it is no longer so exclusive that it grants an advantage.

Whatever Kirito and his friends decided to do about Prophet and his group, Sasha couldn't stop them or do much more than she already had to influence them. But that didn't mean she was powerless to fight them. There was one thing she knew for certain she could do that would thwart the intent of these killers and rob them of any profit or advantage they hoped to derive from their crimes. And it was something that, as long as she stayed in a Safe Zone, they were powerless to stop.

She could make sure that *everyone* knew the things she did.

It was a pleasant thought for a teacher to have as she returned downstairs to her children.

"Sigurd, you sick son of a bitch."

That had not been the full extent of Sakuya's thoughts on the long journey home. But it defined the general *tone* of her musings on the crimes of a man she already greatly disliked. And as much as she detested Sigurd, it was still shocking to contemplate the connection she'd made when Kirito had started talking about what this *Prophet* person had done—as if she'd discovered a new low to which she hadn't known her colleague would stoop. It had been shocking and unexpected enough that it had been all she could do to keep Kirito and his friends from realizing that she'd recognized the name of their assailant.

She could be wrong. The name she'd overheard while eavesdropping on Sigurd's clandestine meeting earlier that morning could've just been a coincidence. She was self-aware enough to realize
that she might be allowing her pre-existing opinion of Sigurd to cause her to jump to conclusions that weren't supported by the evidence.

But she was fairly certain that she wasn't. Too many things fell into place when you added the name *Prophet*: Sigurd's behavior towards Sasha during the raid, the fact that he knew she was supposed to be somewhere else... it all fit. The only thing she couldn't really pin down was motive—why would he have done such a thing, or ordered it done?

She continued west through the Valley of Butterflies, then south through Cait Sith territory, open plains giving way to a sparse tree line that quickly densified. And when she wasn't dealing with low-level aggro mobs that were more a waste of time than anything else, she was continuously distracted by the need to figure out exactly what she was planning to *do* about her Sigurd problem—if she was right.

She could go to Skarrip, of course. That was the obvious answer, the responsible one, and it was probably what she ought to do first—there wasn't anyone to whom Sigurd answered other than him, so if nothing else maybe she could get her leader to act like a leader and take responsibility for something his subordinate did.

But there was something in her that just wouldn't let it be at that. Skarrip might punish Sigurd, but he could also very well decide the political fallout of admitting a Sylph had done this wasn't worth it, and find some excuse to sweep things under the rug. She wouldn't put it past him—not with as deep "in character" he'd gotten as the Sylph leader over the months since the game launched. Skarrip seemed to see everything more and more through the lens of racial politics, and the conclusions drawn from that perspective were not always what she would consider healthy.

No, she thought, it might be better to confront Sigurd first. *Maybe he'll run his mouth and give me a bit more ammunition to work with.*

Ironic as it was for her to actually want to track him down for once, it was a task made more difficult by the fact that by the time she got back to Sylvain and the festival atmosphere that had swept over it with the news of the raid group's victory, neither he nor Skarrip were anywhere to be found. From what she could learn, they had both made appearances earlier in the evening, but first Skarrip and then eventually Sigurd had bowed out and gone somewhere private once Sylvain started turning into a city-wide party—a party that even now, getting late in the evening, was reminiscent of Mardis Gras with more cosplay.

She supposed that she could just drop by his home and look for him there—it might simplify things if she could catch both Sigurd and Skarrip together and confront the man in front of his boss. But Sakuya was a little uneasy about setting foot inside Sigurd's residence; she couldn't really be sure what special privileges he might've set on it until she got there. He could, in theory, change the ruleset for the interior of a dwelling he owned so that combat was permitted, although almost no one ever did; that was a setting that cut both ways and took away the Safe Zone that was half the point of having a home. Unlikely or not, though, it still wasn't worth the risk of going, not with the gravity of the issue over which she intended to confront him. There wasn't much she'd put past him at this point.

In the end, her inability to find either of the people she needed to talk to was only part of what decided the matter and sent her home with no results. She was tired and weary, both from a day of combat and travel and from an evening of having to continually but politely fend off other Sylphs who wanted to congratulate or talk to her about the raid. She needed the rest, and she knew Skarrip would at least be in his office first thing in the morning—he always was when there was a leadership vote. And with the computer-administered vote closing at 7:00 AM, she was fairly sure that Sigurd
wouldn't be up yet.

Sakuya set her alarm for 6:45, and was asleep almost as soon as her head found a pillow.

When morning came, she was much more confident in the decision to sleep on her conundrum. Her nerves were still frayed from all the stress and conflict of the previous day, but she was well-rested and no longer felt like she was running on fumes. It was a much better state of mind in which to go explain to her leader that his favorite minion was an accessory to murder. Light was just starting to peek over the treetops to the east when she left her apartment and took immediately to the air, staying low at first to avoid being blinded by the sun. Sylvain was usually on the warm side of temperate, but even by local standards it looked like it was going to be a gorgeous day—there wasn't a cloud in the sky, not even northwards in the direction of Cait Sith territory; she could already see player merchants beginning to set up shop in the market district alongside their NPC counterparts, who had probably already been there for at least a few hours.

The first sign that her morning wasn't going to go as planned came when she glided in for a landing at the highest platform of Sylvain's central administrative building. Usually a fairly busy entrance, it was mostly deserted at this time of morning—save for a distressingly familiar figure.

Having psyched herself up for confronting Skarrip about Sigurd's transgressions, the last thing she'd been expecting this morning was to find Sigurd himself standing just inside the overhang by the door leading from the landing platform. She felt the same involuntary rush of excitement that she might've at having stumbled across a roaming aggro mob, and her momentary panic was such that she had to restrain herself from the defensive reflex of reaching for her weapon.

Sigurd noticed, and rolled his eyes. "Melodramatic as always, Sakuya. Just what do you think I can or would do to you, here in the Safe Zone?"

"I don't really care to find out," Sakuya responded as she walked towards and past him. "And complaints about melodrama are rich, coming from a larper."

Sigurd pushed himself off of the wall against which he was leaning, which prompted Sakuya to take a step to the side so that he wasn't so close. "Your attitude is unfair," he said in what to him probably sounded like a conciliatory tone. "I don't bite, you know."

"No," Sakuya said, reaching for the door handle, "and thank the gods for that, because we don't have vaccinations in this world."

The hurt, affronted expression Sigurd wore was entirely too polished to be genuine. "Dear Sakuya, what have I ever done to you to deserve the way you speak to me?"

Sakuya's hand stopped just short of the door, and she turned a slightly incredulous look upon him. She wasn't sure why he was suddenly trying to make nice with her again, but she wasn't having any of it. "For starters?" she said, holding out a hand between them and touching the tip of a new finger with each point she gave. "You've spent months trying to make me fall in love and join your clearing group, and in no particular order. You're condescending, arrogant, self-important, sexist, and act as though you think women ought to fling their *panty* at you every time you manage to tie your shoes without personal injury. You don't take no for an answer no matter how many different ways I try to explain that I find your company repugnant and your leadership lacking, and when you finally do seem to get it through your head that I'm not interested, you stop pretending to be a nice person." She paused, and looked him directly in the eyes. "All of which pretty much puts you in the category of 'people I wouldn't piss on if they were on fire', but on top of that, you also apparently hire assassins to kill kids."
Sakuya was waiting for the reaction; she wanted to watch it. She wasn't disappointed. Sigurd's eyes had grown increasingly glazed over as he tuned out her running tally of his failings, but when she dropped the last line on him, there was a very brief window when something that looked like panic and fear flashed across his face before he governed his expression again. *Gotcha*, she thought, erasing any remaining doubts she had about the correctness of her reasoning.

"What was his name?" Sakuya wondered aloud, tapping a fingertip against her lower lip. "Oh yes —*Prophet.*" She watched the spark of recognition in his eyes when she spoke the name. "Someone you know, yes? A strange name for a Spriggan assassin, but then, people like to name themselves after their favorite cartoon or video game characters, so who am I to judge?"

"There's only one place you could've heard that name," Sigurd said through clenched teeth, his mask of friendliness completely torn away. "I'd wondered if you'd been following me, or if you showing up yesterday was just a coincidence." He jabbed an accusing finger towards her. "You fault me for pursuing you, but it seems to me that you are the stalker here."

"In this case, probably," Sakuya said. "Which, on the scale of moral relativity, still puts me a few notches ahead of someone who kills kids. In case you were wondering, I'm okay with that."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sigurd snapped suddenly. "If you must know, I hired someone to steal a game asset and eliminate a target who poses a threat to our security, and neither effort was successful—the contractor failed at the elimination, and never showed up to hand over the package. There was nothing about killing kids in this; it was just a business transaction. Politics, nothing more."

"Oh," Sakuya said with a sarcastic veneer of regret. "I'm sorry, did your assassin double-cross you and refuse to give you Sasha's work? How terrible for you. It seems you just can't trust people who kill for money."

"Whatever," Sigurd spat out. "I hired him to do something that would benefit all Sylphs. What have you done?"

"Me? I killed a gateway boss while you were trying to kill the person who helped us do it." She had the pleasure of savoring Sigurd's expression as she said this; he'd walked right into it. "And now I'm going to go talk to Skarrip about this bullshit you tried to pull. Because whether it was what you intended to happen or not, the fact is that your hit man killed a little boy. And if clearers hadn't been there to protect the other kids, he probably would've killed a lot more. That is on your shoulders, you pompous piece of shit. Now, is there anything you'd like me to tell Skarrip before I have you Exiled?"

Sigurd barked out a sharp, disdainful laugh. "Exiled? Really? You have an over-inflated idea of your own importance, Sakuya. You may be the leader of the second-ranked group amongst our clearers, but you are not my peer and you are nothing to Lord Skarrip. I am the one he trusts most."

Sakuya nodded. "That may have been true once. We'll see whether he still trusts you after he finds out what you've done."

Sigurd stepped aside, gesturing towards the door. "If you want to disgrace yourself, be my guest. When you emerge crying and stripped of your position, I will still be here—and if you beg, I might still let you join my group."

"Don't start making retirement plans, Sigurd," Sakuya said as she opened the door and put it in between herself and the man's smirk. "This fantasy world of yours is about to come crashing down around you." She shut it quickly behind her before he could say anything else.
"A Non-Player Character, or NPC, is a type of interactive computer-controlled entity in the game. An NPC simulates a person with whom players may interact, and serve to offer or progress quests, deliver exposition, or provide a variety of services. They may be distinguished from a mob, player or GM avatar by their white cursor, and as they have no HP gauge they typically cannot engage or be engaged in combat unless scripted to change into a mob. Quest-related characters may appear quite lifelike in the context of their own quest, depending on its scope and their complexity, but when dealing with the average service NPC players are advised to avoid modern slang, metaphors, and other interactions that may only confuse their simpler AI."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Non-Player Characters»

6 May 2023
Day 182 - Morning

Asuna was not the least bit surprised to find that her sleep came fitfully, when at all.

She had killed a man. No—a boy. He'd been an awful, horrible person, but he'd still been a person, a boy not much older than her, and she'd deliberately murdered him.

And murder was the only possible word for it—it had felt differently at the time, but looking back now, she couldn't deny on some level making the deliberate, knowing choice to sacrifice herself to bring him down, forgetting in the heat of the moment as she leapt that an Undine wouldn't take the damage from the fall that he would.

Murder. She hadn't been able to let that go all day yesterday; those moments had cornered her whenever there was silence and forced her to relive them, to defend her choices.

What's more, she couldn't defend them—couldn't even try. And so they went on tormenting her once she fell asleep as well, accosting her in her dreams with little details that she'd sooner forget. She remembered the very last moment that she'd felt the physical body of his avatar before it had burst into a Remain Light and left her tightly hugging herself, right before she plunged through it and into the sewer waterway—which thankfully had been deep enough for her to not strike bottom; that probably would have killed her where the water didn't. She remembered his raspy voice, screaming obscenities in her ear right up until the moment of their impact on the water's surface; despite his youth it had an odd cadence that she couldn't really find the words to describe, and she couldn't scrub it out of her mind.

Most of all—and worst of all—Asuna remembered the flush of pleasure she'd felt when she'd realized that it was going to work, and that she was going to end one of the bastards who had murdered Robert. She hated that most of all, because it had felt so incredibly satisfying—and that sickened her to her core; it made her feel utterly ashamed of herself.

It had been the first time in this death game that Asuna had killed anyone. She'd fought battles with other players, yes—but only in her own defense or that of others, and never with killing intent. She knew that wasn't true for a lot of people, not after six months in Alfheim... but it had been true for her, and she wished it still was. She knew Kirito had taken more than one life before, and after the third time coming abruptly awake, shaking and sobbing, she couldn't fathom how he managed to handle it. Did he ever sleep?

Only Yuuki's warm presence snuggled up beside her let her find any peace at all that night. Her own troubled mind kept waking her up, but the game seemed to shut off outside stimuli when it detected
that a player was asleep; it was a small blessing of game design that at least prevented her own
insomnia from keeping Yuuki awake.

There came a point when Asuna knew that she wasn't getting back to sleep; she needed to do
something other than lie there in bed with the darkness and her thoughts, staring at her HUD. She
checked the clock in her peripheral vision as she carefully disentangled herself from Yuuki's arms—it
was just after six in the morning. She supposed there were worse hours to find herself awake; when
she peeked through the curtains of the room in eastern Arun where they were staying, she could see
hints of orange beginning to color the dark and cloudy skies beyond the Canopy of the World Tree.

After taking a few moments to equip her clothing, Asuna slipped out of the front door and onto the
landing deck of the rented room. It was one of many such rooms built into the bark of a great root
that rose in the midst of the smaller eastern side of the city; each room had its own small balcony that
served as a place for guests and visitors to still their wings before entering, or to let them build up
their flight meters before leaving after a long stint indoors. She sat herself down at the edge and
dangled her feet over the open air, leaning to one side against the railing while she watched the sky
grow gradually brighter. The beautiful view went a long way towards driving out the self-flagellating
thoughts which had plagued her all night.

The better part of twenty minutes passed like that, the oranges shifting to yellows which promised
that the sun would be making its appearance very soon. She could hear the wings of different races
in the distance as players began to wake up and set out on their day's agenda, the higher-pitched
sounds carrying further than the deeper ones. One in particular stood out for how close it was, and
when she leaned forward and looked down, she saw Kirito flying up from his own room's balcony
towards hers. They'd agreed to both get rooms at this particular inn so that they could get a head start
going east in the morning, and it looked like Kirito was an early riser.

Kirito's landing was so delicate that his booted feet barely made a sound on the platform once his
wings went silent. Asuna gave him a tiny smile when he walked over and stood beside her where
she sat, arms folded on the railing before him as he looked off to the east. "Trouble sleeping?" he
asked.

A defensive reflex immediately rose up in Asuna before she shut it down. She was still too ashamed
of herself to try to protest or give him grief for his assumption—especially since it happened to be
true. She looked down at her dangling feet, past them to the city below. She realized that she was
more taken aback by wondering how he'd known in the first place. "How do you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?"

She turned her teal eyes up towards him then. "Sleep," she said. She didn't pretend not to know what
they were talking about.

Kirito had glanced down at her briefly when she'd first spoken, and when she met his eyes again she
saw no judgment in them. "You get to a point," he said, "where you kind of have to. These aren't
flesh-and-blood bodies, but the game still simulates fatigue, and our brains need REM sleep sooner
or later."

"That's not what I meant," Asuna said, looking away once more. "I just don't understand how you
can live with it. I don't know how I ever will."

She felt a light touch on the top of her head; when she looked up she saw that Kirito had reached out
to rest his palm there in what was obviously meant to be a reassuring gesture. For the briefest span,
when she looked back at him, she saw a note of alarm on his face—as if he realized that he might've
overstepped her boundaries and was expecting her to berate him for the unsolicited touch even if it
didn't cross whatever threshold existed for the anti-harassment system. Before he could snatch his hand away, she reached up and covered it with hers, trapping it against one of the braids at her temples. She felt him relax.

It had been unsolicited, but it was far from unwelcome.

The thought startled her when it passed through her. Yuuki had sometimes teased her in good fun about how close she and Kirito were getting, and had chided her gently on more than one occasion for being too standoffish with him, but she'd never really stopped to think about it further than that. What point was there? He was a loner, a solo player, and she had responsibilities in the Undine clearing group—responsibilities to push forward and clear the game, to win freedom for as many people as possible. She liked him. She even thought that maybe, if circumstances had been different, she might've been able to—

_No. Just... no._ She shook her head as if to ward off the words even in the privacy of her own thoughts; Kirito seemed to take the motion as a hint, and moved to withdraw his hand. She closed hers more tightly around his without conscious thought, maintaining the contact.

"Asuna?" Kirito said questioningly. She turned her head a little, enough to see the flush on his ashen skin.

"I'm a murderer, Kirito," she said as tears began to form in her eyes. "Even once we clear the game, even once we're back in the real world, I'll still be a murderer. That stain will never go away. They're probably keeping track of who kills who, and the police will be waiting to arrest me when I wake up. And I'll deserve it."

"No," Kirito said at once. "If they know that much about what's happening in the game, then they'll have to know the circumstances, too. They'll know that you killed someone who had just killed a child, and that it was self-defense. They might even give you a medal for it."

"I don't want a medal!" Asuna screamed suddenly, tears flying off of her cheeks as she whipped her head around and looked up at him. Kirito took a step back; she grasped for his hand as he retreated, and missed it. A bit more quietly, but with a voice still full of grief and shame: "And it wasn't self-defense, either. He was retreating, Kirito. He was flying away, mocking us, and I couldn't bear the thought of him getting away with what he'd just done." To Asuna's chargin, the system responded to her emotional state by making her nose feel runny and her eyes persuasively burn with her tears; she wiped ineffectually at her face with the sleeve of her robe. "I couldn't even tell Yuuki that I did it on purpose. She feels even more strongly than I do about taking a life; it's forbidden by her religion."

"You don't have to tell her what you did, you know," Kirito said after taking some time to think about it, appearing to relax a little. She was grateful; it gave her the time she needed to settle her emotions a bit again. "It's personal—and not really something she needs to know. Look, Asuna... I won't tell you that you're wrong to feel this way, because you're not. I'm not proud of the things I've had to do in this game. You wanted to know how I sleep? Sometimes I don't. Sometimes I stare at the ceiling and wait for sleep, and all I can see are the faces of each player I've killed."

"And now you're putting yourself on a mission to kill even more." That still ate at her. Why had she agreed to go along with his plan? Why had she done so almost without hesitation when he talked about hunting down Prophet's group—a hunt that could only end in someone's death?

It was because—

"They need to be stopped," Kirito said, as if he'd read her mind. "I don't know how many people they've killed before this—I'm guessing a lot. What I do know is that they have every intent of killing
again. And I have a responsibility to stop them. You don't have to come with me for that—in fact, it
might be better for you if you didn't."

"Oh no you don't," Asuna said, bringing out her wings just long enough to lift herself gracefully to
her feet. "If you go off and do this alone, you're going to get yourself killed, Kirito. I'm not going to
let that happen."

"Asuna," Kirito said, his expression conflicted, "I thought about this a lot last night. I don't know if
I'll be able to protect both you and Yuuki if you come with me."

"This again?" Asuna said. "You don't have to; I'm a healer. If anything, I'll be the one
keeping you alive."

"Even if it means you have to take a life in order to save one?"

The words stopped Asuna cold. She felt momentarily dizzy, and during those few beats her eyes
couldn't focus. "Even if," she said softly after a far-too-long pause, unable to look him in the eyes.

The silence stretched on and on; neither of them seemed to know what to say after that. It left Asuna
with no company but that of her own racing thoughts, which were full of regrets and second-
guessing of herself. Sometimes, when she was talking to Kirito, it felt like her mouth had a mind of
its own—like she couldn't stop herself from saying things that were uncharacteristic for her, even
though she always found that they were true once she'd had time to think them over after the fact.
She felt like her mind was becoming a mess of contradictions and hypocrisy.

"All right," Kirito said finally, the skepticism gone from his voice. She looked up at him and saw a
weak smile that was a twin to the one she'd worn when he'd joined her this morning. The smile then
faded enough so that it was almost not even there at all. "I don't want to end anyone's life any more
than you do, Asuna. I just don't see any other way that these people can be stopped, and it's a burden
I'm willing to bear if it means stopping Prophet."

"We'll bear it together, then," Asuna said, both horrified and elated at the words coming out of her
mouth. "Because you're right—they do need to be stopped. But maybe, between the two of us…
maybe we'll be able to find an alternative so that we don't have to have their deaths weighing on us
for the rest of our lives."

As Kirito nodded, his eyes went up and to the left. She saw them go distant for a moment, and
realized he must have received a private message. "Can we put this on hold for about, say, half an
hour?" he said after his focus returned. "Once Yuuki wakes up, we can still head towards the Valley
of Rainbows together."

"On hold?" Asuna said, confused about what could've pulled Kirito away this early in the morning.
"Why? Who was that from?"

"That was Sasha," Kirito answered, sounding uncertain of how he should feel about the Puca
woman's message. "She wants to talk to me face-to-face before we leave. And she wants you to
come, too."

Running the gauntlet with Sigurd had at least been useful; he'd confirmed Sakuya's suspicions and
given her plenty more to tell Skarrip. The second gauntlet she had to run was far less productive, and
it brought back her real-life distaste for bureaucracy—to say nothing of well-meaning office drones
who mistook rigid adherence to process for an end rather than a means.
"I'm sorry, Sakuya," said the stocky administrative assistant, bowing low. "Lord Skarrip is quite busy at the moment, and I'm afraid—"

"Don't give me that crap, Chimiro," Sakuya said as she continued walking towards the door to the executive office. "We both know he's sitting at his desk while he waits for the leadership vote results to come in. This is important."

"Be that as it may," Chimiro said, hastily trying to put himself between Sakuya and the door again. "You don't have an appointment, and these things must be done a certain way—"

Sakuya sighed and put a hand to her face, halting in her tracks. "Look," she said, "I know you're just trying to do your job. Fearless Leader probably asked you to run interference and keep anyone from interrupting; good on you. But you've also got discretion, and it's time to think for yourself and use it: this is a matter of life and death, and it really cannot wait until later."

As Sakuya stepped back from the door, Chimiro relaxed a little and did the same. "I understand," he said, making it plainly obvious that he didn't and thought she was exaggerating. "And I empathize with your concerns. But Lord Skarrip's preference for the morning of a leadership vote is clear: no interruptions. If you'd like to leave a message, I would be happy to—"

"Nope," Sakuya said, suddenly pushing past the hapless assistant. "Not playing this game today, sorry." Before Chimiro could do anything other than squawk a surprised protest, she quickly slid open the heavy wooden door and went through, surprised to find that it was actually unlocked.

Skarrip sat facing the northern set of bay windows opposite the entrance; the morning sun streamed in through the eastern set and turned the left and right halves of his chair and desk into dark and light, respectively. She couldn't see the Sylph leader at all from where she stood, but she could see the shadows he and his furniture cast across the western side of the room.

"I knew you'd come," he said without turning or rising from his chair. "I've been waiting. Leave us, Chimiro."

"How very cliché of you," Sakuya said coolly as the assistant bowed and shut the door behind him, at the end of her patience with the excessive dramatics and pretensions from those around her. She realized that her hand was again on the hilt of her weapon as she stepped forward, and wasn't quite sure why—it wasn't as if it would be of any use in this confrontation, or persuasive in getting her leader to deal with Sigurd. She let her hands relax to her sides with conscious effort, a little perturbed with herself at how on-edge she felt. "If you were expecting me, you should've told your poor assistant to let me in. Did you really mean it, or was that line just part of the leadership roleplaying game, too?"

"We all play our roles, Sakuya," Skarrip said with a touch of weariness, as if the subject bored him. She could hear him shifting his weight in the plush chair, and it rocked slightly as he did. "Some more deeply than others."

Sakuya halted on the other side of his player-crafted hardwood desk. "Speak for yourself, sir. I don't care to forget who I really am for the sake of fitting into this world. Maybe you'd rather not think about it, but the reality is that we've been trapped inside of a game by a terrorist with a god complex. This isn't a fantasy world—it's a very pretty prison cell with gameplay."

The laughter that then drifted up from the other side of the chair was unlike any that she'd ever heard from Skarrip before. His large, high-backed chair was on a swivel; he slowly spun it around with a push at the floor, turning himself to face her at last. He was grinning, and that alone was enough to unnerve her. Skarrip occasionally smiled, and faintly at that. He never grinned.
"You said you were expecting me," Sakuya said, gathering her courage by pushing forward. "Does that have anything to do with robbery and murder?"

Skarrip's eyebrows rose slightly. "You've been talking to Sigurd."

Sakuya's mouth dropped open. "So he told you?"

"Of course. Do you think Sigurd breaks his fast without my leave?"

Sakuya was horrified. From Sigurd she could've believed this. But Skarrip? She'd suspected he might've turned a blind eye, not knowing all of the details, but his words made it sound like he had a more direct hand in this atrocity—like it was done at his order. She struggled to find words. "T-to what purpose? What possible threat were those children to us? And why, when their caretaker was helping us—"

"The children? No threat at all," Skarrip answered. "But the primary objective was to secure that woman's research… and eliminate her so that it could not be reproduced. What she's discovered is far too useful to allow it to spread." He spread his hands. "A partial success, at any rate. She was supposed to be in the Sewers, not along on the raid, and the collateral damage is… shall we say, unfortunate."

Sakuya knew that her jaw was hanging wide open, but she couldn't help it. She felt like the reality she lived in and knew to be true was being rewritten every time her leader spoke. "What in the actual fuck, Skarrip?" She leaned forward and planted her palms on the edge of his desk. "What the hell did you think was going to happen when you sent an assassin after someone who was traveling with a bunch of kids? Seriously, how broken are you that you'd even think doing something like this was a good idea?"

"Surely you realize that kind of question seeks no answer."

"I got a tip from someone who told me Sigurd was up to something," Sakuya said, anger rising in her. "They were half-right. They should've warned me about you, too."

Skarrip's smile bordered on smug. "Ah, but they did."

That brought Sakuya's building tirade to a halt, momentarily replacing it with confusion. "I don't understand."

"Who do you think sent you that note? And why do you think they used the letter S from the Latin alphabet rather than something a bit more specific, like Shi or Su in katakana?"

This did not aid Sakuya in dispelling her confusion. She was aware that he had her reacting, now, and that she needed to regain control of the conversation. But if Skarrip had been behind that anonymous tip, then why—

"Why?" Skarrip said, as if plucking the thoughts from her mind. "Oh, but this is so entertaining to watch. You think you've pieced it together, and then suddenly find you're as lost as ever were. Work through it, now."

"You gave Sigurd orders to contact an assassin in Arun," Sakuya said, fuming at the condescension she could hear in Skarrip's voice. "At the time, you thought that Sasha was going to be in the Sewers. But before we even left, you sent me an anonymous note telling me to watch 'S'. You knew I'd assume that meant Sigurd, but it also could've referred to you."

Skarrip made a steeple of his fingers in front of him, not too different from the opening gesture of a
healing spell. He looked amused by her conflict. "Keep going."

She could see it, but it didn't make sense to her. "So you wanted me to catch him… doing what you'd told him to do? Wait, you said you were expecting me… you wanted this confrontation?"

He inclined his head slightly. "Thank you for not disappointing me."

"You're not Skarrip," Sakuya said suddenly, certainty rising in her as all of the wrongness and incongruity she'd been feeling finally found a name. "Who the hell are you?"

Skarrip's unsettling grin twisted. "What possesses you to say that?"

"Because I knew Skarrip in the beta," she said, hand again instinctively settling on the grip of her sword where it lay in her sheath. "He could be a pretentious jackass, but he wasn't a roleplayer, he never talked like a cartoon villain, and he never would've signed off on this murder-conspiracy crap. Now who are you, truly?"

Skarrip tapped his fingertips together, gazing at her just over them with eyes gone briefly distant, as if recalling a faint memory. "Ah, yes, that's right—you did know him. Well then, who do you think I am?"

Sakuya swallowed hard, fighting to keep her expression neutral, her face free of fear or indecision. Whatever happened after she spoke next could very well take her fate completely out of her own hands—if it wasn't already. "I think you're Kayaba. I think you took over this account at some point after the game started so that you'd have a character with power to play, and it's been getting harder and harder for you to stay 'in character' as the real Skarrip, whoever he was."

Skarrip's laughter then was like the high-pitched bark of a medium-sized dog, and Sakuya jumped slightly as he slapped the edge of his desk once. There was genuine amusement in his face as he stood up and began to pace around one side, looping slowly around the desk towards her. Sakuya automatically turned and took a step back to keep space between them, which gave him pause before he smiled again. "That's an interesting theory you have there."

Oh god, Sakuya thought, frozen in place. She tried very hard not to flee right then, knowing that it would do her absolutely no good if she'd been right. Where could she possibly go?

"It is true that I am not the person who once wore Skarrip's name and body in this world," Skarrip said conversationally, stepping around Sakuya until they stood almost side by side, facing opposite directions. "That man is long dead, and I do tire of pretending to be him. But your wits have led you astray on one important point."

He leaned in towards her; Sakuya was too terrified to do anything but ineffectually lean away. "This Kayaba person of whom you speak?" he said, his whisper intimate as a smirk touched his face. "I am not he."

These words—and the confusion diluting her fear—were cold comfort. Even if he wasn't that man, the madman who'd trapped them all in this world, he was still someone in a position of considerable power over her—and she was aware of just how thin the ice was under her feet at the moment. "If you're not Kayaba, then who—?"

Skarrip resumed a leisurely circuit around the other side of the desk, returning himself to the comfortable swivel chair and setting himself on a slow spin in the other direction. "And this is where I riddle you, Sakuya," he said, stopping himself with one foot so that he faced away from her; she had no doubt he knew exactly how rude it was. "Do you know why I chose this particular character,
as you call them? This particular dead man's manifestation in this world?"

Sakuya shook her head, and then remembered that he was sitting with his back to her and couldn't see it. "No. But you seem to get off on having an audience, so I'm betting that you're about to tell me."

A chuckle. "I had a number of reasons, but not least of them was that the name the dead man had chosen was pleasing to me. I suspect that he named himself so because he admired me in some fashion, or at least some aspect of me."

"Skarrip," Sakuya began slowly as her fear began to give ground to the combined forces of confusion and impatience, with righteous anger once again in the vanguard. "Or whoever-the-hell you actually are. The things you are saying to me... the words are in Japanese, but they make no sense. I honestly, actually, have no goddamn idea what it is you are trying to explain. And that, combined with the fact that you admit to ordering someone to commit a heinous crime and a treaty violation and still haven't adequately explained yourself... well, it's starting to really piss me off."

"Say my name." The words were sharp, abrupt, commanding; any pretense of mirth had vanished in the moment it took him to speak them.

Sakuya stopped, trying to reconcile that non sequitur response with anything at all that she'd said. "What?"

"What is my name? Say it."

"Skarrip," Sakuya repeated, bewildered.

"Sukaarippu," he said, drawing out each mora of the name crisply, with mechanically precise meter and enunciation that would've made even Sakuya's strict college kokugo teacher proud. "Your language's approximation of a phrase in the English tongue. The former owner of this body gave it that name, but when he chose the English letters with which to write it, he spelled it the way it sounded to him as a name, not the way it ought to have been written."

The part about this entire conversation that was giving Sakuya the biggest headache was the fact that every answer from Skarrip prompted more questions—and more black holes of missing rationality for which she couldn't even begin to formulate questions. "What do you mean, 'your language'? Skarrip, I am really not following you and I think we need to get back to the whole matter of—"

A chiming sound in her inner ear interrupted her then, her attention drawn by the flashing icon of a system notification in her peripheral vision. She focused on it just long enough to open the window and scan the text, then immediately closed it again in disgust, looking back up. "Congratulations on your re-election," she said with dry sarcasm.

"Thank you," said a voice that was not Skarrip's. The chair turned to face her again, and the rest of Sakuya's world dropped out from under her.

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"I'm sorry," Sasha said as she bowed at the waist until her bangs fell forward to cover her face.

Kirito blinked. Whatever he had expected her to have to say to the two of them, it hadn't been that. His eyes shifted to the side just long enough to see Asuna's look of surprise matching his own feelings; he knew that she'd been expecting another lecture about Kirito's part in the previous day's tragedy or his decision to go after Prophet. He'd spent some of the short flight to the church cautioning her to wait and see what Sasha had to say before getting defensive on his behalf.
It seemed that had been wise advice.

"I…" Kirito rubbed at the back of his neck as he tried to figure out how to respond. "Um, for what?"

Straightening, Sasha gestured with an upturned hand towards one of the seats at the long table in the dining room. Once they were both seated, she pulled out a chair on the opposite side and joined them. "I said some terribly unfair things to both of you yesterday," she said, pulling her single lengthy braid over her shoulder and wrapping it around the first two fingers of one hand in what seemed to be an unconscious habit. "I spoke with the children at length last night—Sachi and Silica in particular, but I gave all of them some time to talk about what happened if they wanted to."

"And?" Kirito asked, feeling a bit of apprehension begin to clear from the air.

She smiled thinly. "You would be hard-pressed to get twenty-plus children to agree that water was wet, but they were unanimous in their gratitude to the both of you. And in retrospect, I was ashamed of how I treated the people responsible for the fact that they are all still alive today." She bowed again from a sitting position, less deeply but with her eyes on the table. "And so I owe you an apology. No, more than an apology. I owe you the same gratitude that these children—who had just been through the trauma and grief that I was only receiving second-hand—were so free in giving."

"You were hurt," Kirito said when she raised her gaze again. "You'd just found out not only that one of your students had been murdered, but that six months of work had been stolen. Anyone would have snapped."

Sasha flinched at the mention of murder, but it didn't stop her from rebutting his words. "But I'm not anyone, Kirito. I'm the adult here and I ought to have known better—ought to have dealt with something like this without taking it out on others." She looked between Kirito and Asuna both, then. "Least of all two of the children who had just been through the same ordeal."

Asuna opened her mouth as if to protest something, but seemed to think better of it. Kirito imagined she was probably resisting being lumped in with the rest of the children at the orphanage; he'd felt a twinge of that himself—but he had a pretty good idea what Sasha was trying to say.

"Thank you," Asuna said after a few moments of silence had passed, the corners of her eyes glistening. Kirito let out some of the tension in his shoulders; she seemed to understand Sasha's intent here as well as he did.

Sasha's head dipped slightly. "They're only words, but as it was words that wronged you, words are what I have to offer."

Kirito again met Asuna's eyes out of the corner of his own, and was relieved by what he saw there. "So if you got to talk to all the kids, I'm guessing you know as much about Prophet and his gang as we do."

"Possibly more in some areas, actually," Sasha said. "Which is part of what I meant by having words to offer. Silica told me that after Prophet turned her and Sachi into Remain Lights, he must have assumed that there was no chance of them being rezzed—because he let something slip that I don't think he intended anyone to know."

Kirito straightened a bit in his seat, his attention suddenly as sharp as his sword. "Please tell us. Anything will help."

"Silica said that he said something about a rendezvous at an inn—I'm sorry, but he didn't mention which one. But he used a particular term to refer to the person they were meeting. Have you ever
heard the phrase 'Keroppi fop'?

"Keroppi is a cartoon character," Asuna said. "I had a sticker of one on my phone. I've never heard the word foppu before, though. It doesn't sound Japanese."

"If he was using the word I think he was, it's not," Sasha said. "It's a somewhat archaic English colloquialism. The closest equivalent in Japanese would probably be sharemono, but that doesn't really have quite the same derogatory meaning as fop does." She paused, drumming her fingers briefly on the table. "It's like a man who's somewhat vain, well-dressed, concerned with appearances and not particularly intelligent."

"I get it now," Asuna said. "I can't imagine what that has to do with a cartoon frog, though."

"Very little," Sasha said. "The two of you probably haven't spent time around too many people from other factions before, but we have all of them here at the church… and well… children can be truly inventive, and are quite quick to pick up on slang. Keroppi is a very nasty slur for Sylphs that is mostly used by Salamanders and Imps. I imagine it refers to their faction's association with the color green." She smiled a little bitterly. "Robert used to get in quite a lot of trouble for calling Jellica that."

"Are you sure?" Kirito asked, suddenly very disturbed. "Is there anything else he could've meant by using that word?"

"Not unless you think Prophet likes Sanrio," Sasha said with a wry twist to her lips.

"So what you're saying," Kirito said, too bothered by this revelation to find any humor in the comment, "is that Prophet was planning on meeting with a Sylph afterwards. And that it might well have been a Sylph who hired him."

"Careful, Kirito," Asuna cautioned. "We don't know that for sure, and even if it was, that doesn't mean it was anyone in the Sylph leadership. There are thousands of people in that faction. I've met the Sylph clearers before; lots of them are really nice."

"And some of them aren't so much," Sasha said. "There was one at the raid who had a very bad attitude, although I got the impression that he was aggravated because I was slowing the raid down by being low-level."

"Still, it's a lead," Kirito said. "It's one more detail that gets us closer to finding out who was behind this attack."

"And one that leads us in the opposite direction from where we were going this morning," Asuna pointed out. She looked at Sasha and explained. "The three of us—Kirito, Yuuki and I—were going to head east through the Valley of Rainbows and then split up. I need to talk to Diavel, Kirito was going to talk to the Spriggan leader and see if she knows anything about Prophet, and Yuuki was going to head south to Everdark and ask about the Imps in his gang."

"I know," Kirito replied. "But we don't have to follow up on it ourselves—we have someone in the Sylphs who can do that for us. Remember Sakuya?"

"The woman who came out of the raid with Sasha yesterday?"

Kirito nodded. "She said she'd talk to Skarrip for us. I can send her another message with this detail and ask her to look into it."

"Assuming she wasn't part of this plot herself," Asuna said. "I mean, she seemed nice, but who knows at this point?"
"I doubt it was her," Sasha said. "The word *fop* is almost exclusively used to refer to men."

"In English," Asuna said. "That's a pretty subtle nuance. Who knows if Prophet knew how the word was originally used?"

Sasha shrugged. "A fair point, but… I still don't think it was her. She was at the raid when all of this happened, and although I didn't see her interacting socially much, she just didn't strike me as the sort. Besides… no offense, but I have a hard time imagining a *woman* being willing to kill a bunch of children."

"Rosalia," Kirito said bluntly, offering the most obvious counter-example that came to mind.

Sasha shook her head. "Not even her. Silica told me what happened. Rosalia was scum, but Prophet killed her because she *wasn't* okay with what he was going to do."

The sound of several light thumps and the distant murmur of voices drew everyone's eyes to the ceiling. The murmur was momentarily interrupted by a loud yell, but it didn't sound like one of pain or fear. Sasha smiled. "That would be the children starting to wake up. I usually would've gotten them up an hour ago, but it's a Saturday and given all that they've been through…"

Another collection of irregular thumps worked their way down the stairs. Asuna's upturned gaze went briefly unfocused in a way that usually meant someone was looking at their HUD. "It's almost seven. We should be getting back to the inn before Yuuki wakes up."

Kirito nodded, eyes going to his own HUD where the digits on the unobtrusive clock read 06:58:34. "That, and the system should be tallying the leadership vote any minute now. There's going to be a lot of crowds in the skies and streets today."

Sasha looked surprised, and then sighed. "Oh my, I'd forgotten. That's going to make my day interesting as well; the children are always really rambunctious after the announcement messages go out, and we have sort of a little ritual to keep things structured. Honestly, they make such a big deal out of it, and none of them have even been back to their starting cities since the beginning of this game. I doubt they could pick Merifelle or Thinker out of a crowd if someone described them."

"I couldn't pick Merifelle or Thinker out of a crowd either," Asuna said.

"Kirito!" came a young and familiar voice from the doorway behind him. Footsteps pattered over to where he was sitting, and someone grabbed him from behind in a hug. Kirito reached up and awkwardly dismissed a harassment dialog, then patted one of the arms wrapped around him.

"Good morning, Jellica," Sasha said with a smile. "May I assume from the sound of things that everyone is awake?"

"Almost everyone," said the young Sylph girl, releasing Kirito and stepping back. "Kai was still being a sleepyhead, but Rainy cast some kind of water spell at him that made him really wet, and that woke him up in a hurry."

Sasha frowned disapprovingly. "See now," she began, "just because you can use magic doesn't mean—"

"It wasn't me!" Jellica said quickly.

"No, but you offered to 'helpfully' dry me off with a wind spell," said the young Spriggan boy in question as he came through the same doorway with several of the others. "Which I'm pretty sure woulda blown me out the window."
Sachi was the next to join the fray, if it could be called that. "It's a good thing you didn't, Jellica, otherwise you'd be in Time Out like Rainy." She smiled as she turned her gaze towards Kirito and Asuna. "Hullo," she said.

Kirito smiled at the Undine girl. He was about to respond when a soft chime sounded, a familiar system notification appearing at the edge of his vision. When he focused on it he saw exactly what he'd expected.

06/05/23 07:00 JST — Spriggan Leadership voting closed. For the next 30 days your «Faction Leader» will be «Yoshihara». Please congratulate her!

Fat chance of that, Kirito thought before the clamor from the growing crowd of kids in the dining room drove out any ability to focus on his own thoughts. Sasha clapped her hands loudly, clearing her throat in a pointed way. "Everyone, you know how this works. One at a time. Jellica, you can announce the Sylph vote today."

Kirito could not imagine why the young blonde girl looked so happy when she did so. "The Sylph leader is Skarrip!"

There were snorts and snickers from several of the other kids. "There's a surprise!" said one.

"Quiet," Sasha said. "Remember what you learned about incumbency from our civics lessons? It's quite unusual for an elected leader to be voted out unless they've done something to make people unhappy with them. And the Sylphs just helped win an important raid battle. Kai, you're next."

The gangly Spriggan boy nodded with solemn pride. "Yoshihara," he said, his voice quiet.

"I dunno why you guys even bother voting for her," said one of the Salamander boys. "Ain't like she does anything."

"Which is why we vote for her," Kai said stiffly. "Anyway, like you'd know, Genji. You're just repeating what someone else said."

"So are you!"

Sasha sighed, giving Kirito and Asuna a long-suffering look. "You see what I have to deal with," she said with good humor. "Genji, I was going to pick you next, but since you talked out of turn I guess Masaki gets the privilege of announcing the Salamander vote."

The named boy, a youth with short-cropped hair the color of red wine who looked about eight or nine years old, had a puzzled look on his face. His lips moved silently for a moment as if he was sounding something out in his head.

"Well?" Sasha prodded gently.

Masaki looked up at her. "Sorry," he said. "It just took me a sec. I've never heard of this 'Corvatz' guy before."

The temptation for Sakuya to rub her eyes was strong. Even after six months of having her senses spoofed by the Nerve Gear, six months of seeing the impossible brought to life in a virtual reality simulation, she still simply could not process what she was seeing now as anything other than a hallucination.
Where Skarrip had been sitting was someone... else. He had the pale skin and blue lips reminiscent of someone suffering from hypothermia, an appearance that tickled some sense of familiarity—something Sakuya was certain she'd seen elsewhere recently. His blue-black hair rippled down to his shoulders, joined at the temples by a curly beard that sliced around the edge of his thick jaw and rose above his smiling lips, the mustache broken at intervals by the thin lines of old scars. Even his clothes were different; where Skarrip had been wearing emerald-green robes with gold lace, this person appeared to be wearing a deep blue tunic and skirt with black piping over some sort of light mail and leggings. His build was impressive; from size alone he could've almost been a Gnome.

Magic, Sakuya thought. Or rare items. The chair's high-backed and wide; he could've quietly whispered the words to an Illusion spell while I was talking. Or used an item to change his appearance. Or something.

When Sakuya focused on him, she expected to see the green cursor and nameless status ribbon of another Sylph player. Instead, the cursor was white, as if he was an NPC... and it had a name written above it, hanging there in the air.

Her lips moved silently in willful disbelief as she mouthed the name.

"Do you understand now, lost child of Midgard?" he finally said, beginning to rise from his chair. "The chain of events you've fought so valiantly to piece together, that even now your mind struggles to comprehend—these motivations were incomprehensible to you because they were those of an aesir. I am Loki Laufeyjarson, King of the Jotnar. Once imprisoned for all the ages, I was unbound and called forth once more by the Allfather to set trials before those of you who quest to return to Midgard." The corner of his mouth lifted once again in a slight smirk. "And your trials have scarcely begun."

While Sakuya looked on, too stupefied by the insanity of what was happening to muster words, Skarrip—no, she thought, reading the name again, Loki—stood to his full height. The Sylph leader had already been on the tall side, but as Loki he appeared to Sakuya's eye to be at least two meters in height, if not taller. He had a presence that seemed to swell to fill the room, a sensation that Sakuya told herself angrily had to be her imagination—there was no such effect in the game that she knew of; this was in her head.

Hrungrir's parting words suddenly rung in her ears. My king is unbound, children of Midgard. He comes for you.

Sakuya shivered.

Loki grinned suddenly, and with malice. "I have a different idea in mind. Not for ages have I seen a people as naturally duplicitous and given to scheming as those of you brought here by the Allfather's will and transformed into fae. The interspecies psychodrama in this world has provided me with no end of entertainment thus far, and I desire that should continue... indefinitely."

Somewhere in all of this, Sakuya found the steel within herself once more. She stopped herself from retreating every time one of Loki's languid paces brought him closer around the desk, and stood face to face with him, tilting her head up to meet his golden-yellow eyes. "The Allfather? You mean Kayaba," she said fiercely. "I'm no programmer, but I know most NPCs can't talk the way you do. They're just not that complex, not unless someone wrote their dialogue in advance—and you're arguing with me. Now enough of the in-character crap, who is it who is actually playing the role of Loki in this game? You've got to be a GM or something, you're wired up to a Nerve Gear somewhere in Japan with your life on the line just like we are, so why are you playing along with
"Your anachronistic protests grow tedious," Loki said, some of the vicious cheer slipping from his face. "Once you may have lived another life in Midgard, but you are here now, in Alfheim. This world is your home—"

"This \textit{virtual} world," Sakuya said, determined not to gamely go along with this person's need to stay in character—or with the script if he really was a very complex NPC. "The product of Kayaba's imagination. It's nothing more than bits in a computer. Data projected into our minds by the Nerve Gear hardware."

"That is what it was to you in Midgard—" Loki began.

"Earth," Sakuya stated defiantly.

Loki blew right past the interruption; she might as well have not even spoken. "But your minds no longer live in that realm. The Allfather has manifested this as a facet of the true Alfheim that has existed all across time, just as the Loki you see before you now is merely a facet of the eternal existence I have held throughout the ages. And so manifested, it—and I—are as real now as the world from which you came."

"Bullshit," Sakuya said, abruptly reaching her fill. "Whoever you are, whoever you worked for on the outside, what you are now is a crazy person who cracked when we were imprisoned in here. And I'm done listening to your crazy talk." She turned.

Loki sharply spoke a single word, his voice suddenly reverberating inside her mind until she couldn't even be certain what he'd said. Her feet would not lift from the floor no matter how hard she tried and she could barely move otherwise; her eyes darted frantically around her HUD, but she couldn't see a status effect anywhere.

Distantly, she heard the door to the entry foyer lock.

"What the hell—" She could speak, at least. It wasn't Paralysis status; she would've simply crumpled to the ground. There were very rare moments in the game when a player would find their avatars frozen in place, unable to move themselves for a non-status-related reason; most often it was the recovery frame of a weapon technique. But she hadn't—

His voice was in her ear then, a deep rumble that penetrated her unwillingness to listen. Her back fought to arch despite the resistance to her every movement; the fear felt like he had a fist clenched around her heart, a heart that her avatar didn't even have.

"Forget what you thought you knew about reality," Loki growled, his voice like gravel bound in silk. "Forget the world you left behind. And forget this Kayaba person who set the Midgardian side of this in motion. He was but a mortal puppet of the Allfather, his miraculous toy merely a gateway to this world. He no more controls the fate of Alfheim now than a squirrel controls the tree in which it nests."

"Let me go," Sakuya begged, hating the sound of it but hating the feeling of helplessness even more.

"I am no human like you once were," he said, ignoring her pleas as if following a script. "I am no shadow puppet projected from Midgard, yearning to return to a weakening mortal body in a world slowly becoming forgotten by your fellow faekin. Nor am I like the petty, scripted automatons who populate this version of Alfheim and give it false color. I am Loki, and Alfheim is \textit{my} playground now. And my time playing at leading you Sylphs has grown predictable and boring. You, like most
of your kind, are too easily led."

She felt a jerk as her body was whipped around; she found herself suspended in mid-air a meter away from Loki with her arms spread wide. He had his hand held out before him and black energy swirling in his palm; every time his hand moved in the air, so did she, as if he were manhandling her remotely with no effort whatsoever. She had heard him speak no incantation, seen no spell cast—and they were in the middle of Sylvain; he shouldn't have been able to use hostile magic on her anyway!

Then she saw. His white cursor had turned red now, and she felt her entire body go cold and rigid with terror as she saw the nine HP bars curling up around and above his head, higher even than the glowing «Loki» centered above the dark crimson cursor.

_Nine_. Since each bar could represent any arbitrary number of HP, depending on a mob's level and classification, more than one bar usually indicated a boss of some kind with phases, changes in attack pattern, or something similarly significant. Even the gateway bosses thus far had no more than four HP bars, and more than that was only rarely seen on quest-related bosses that you weren't actually supposed to fight.

The chill deepened as that last thought sunk in. _I've provoked an essential quest NPC who's capable of combat. If he enabled PvP in this room, he's going to kill me—and if I'm lucky it'll be by talking me to death._

"When the Allfather incarnated me here," Loki continued, "he granted me the freedom to test your kind as I saw fit, so long as the balance of the world was preserved." His scarred lips twisted in a smile. "Foolish, to ask such a thing of me. He should have known that my notion of balance is quite a different thing than his. The forces that govern this world are simple to manipulate, for one with a tongue such as I."

He swung his hand, dragging Sakuya uncomfortably across his desk and sending the chess pieces he'd been using as markers scattering in a spray across the floor. "The game has changed, lost child of Midgard, and now you are playing by my rules. It's time for your true grand quest to begin."

Sakuya forced herself to think. The change in Loki's cursor wasn't just cosmetic; he was actually engaged in combat with her—she'd lost a very tiny amount of HP when he'd slammed her into the desk. Even a mob shouldn't have been able to cause her to take damage within a safe zone... which meant that either there had to be some sort of plot-related "cutscene" suspension of the game engine's rules in effect right now, or else the owner had changed the permissions—

Sakuya froze, her eyes locked onto Loki's. Some kind of understanding seemed to pass between them.

She could see a system message notification beginning to flash in her peripheral vision, but she couldn't spare the attention to focus on it. She could hear a general commotion outside and banging on the door that grew in volume; the noise drew Loki's gaze to the side, though he did not turn his head. He simply stretched out his unoccupied palm as if holding a distant object in place. "I wonder what alarmed them so," he said mockingly. "And I wonder what they'll think when they come in here and see the disturbance you've created?"

Sakuya stared down into Loki's bearded, smirking face, trying to move any part of her, willing at least her arm to move. It felt as if she was fighting her way through a swimming pool filled with mud, every motion requiring incredible effort and slowed to a fraction of normal speed—the sluggishness was similar to the Delay status effect, but an order of magnitude more powerful. As her hand struggled towards her sword where it dangled uselessly from its straps, her captor's eyes drew a line across the diminishing distance between the two and he gave her a mischievous grin. "Let's find
In the moment that Loki clenched his outstretched hand, dismissing the energy knotted up there, she felt all of the resistance leave her body; she dropped as if she’d been suspended from strings suddenly severed. Her hand completed the action towards which she’d been devoting every iota of strength she had, snapping onto the hilt of her *nodachi* and whipping it out of its sheath in a lightning-fast horizontal motion that twisted her in the air.

Loki’s grin never wavered. The moment her blade touched him, his avatar shattered into thousands of azure polygons the way a defeated mob’s would have, each of them sparkling in the morning sun that streamed in through the windows and momentarily dazzling her. The force of her unresisted blow spun her all the way around as she spiraled to the ground with her robes fluttering, scattering fading blue motes of light in every direction. By the time she’d landed in a crouch, her long blade held so far out to the side at an angle that it nearly touched the ground, the particle effect raining around her had dispersed. There was no pop-up window, nothing congratulating her for what could only with biting sarcasm be called a victory.

No EXP, no items. And no Remain Light.

He was simply gone—as if he had never existed.

There was a metallic *click* from the locked door, which rapidly slid open with a loud bang and spilled a few other Sylph players into the room; it looked like they’d been applying force and hadn’t expected it to open quite so readily. Their looks of surprise turned to shock as they took in the signs of a struggle and Sakuya's frozen follow-through posture. Chimiro was stuttering while what seemed like ten different questions all tried to force their way out at once, colliding along the way. "S-Sakuya, why a—wh-what the hell—?"

As she stood and carefully sheathed her *nodachi*, forcibly reclaiming some of her calm, she noticed she had more than one system message that had piled up while she was fighting with Loki. Before trying to respond to anyone’s questions with answers she didn’t have, she focused on the first one, bringing it briefly to the foreground of her HUD.

『06/05/23 07:08 JST — «Skarrip» has been defeated in combat, and «Sakuya» is now your «Faction Leader» until the next scheduled vote. Please congratulate her!』

Oh my god—

She blinked at the notification to close it and brought up the next one. 『Welcome, new «Faction Leader», and congratulations on your victory. The role you’ve taken on is one which holds great responsibility, but also the power to influence the course of the game. The next time you open your «Game Menu», you will notice a new top-level category: «Administration». This is where you, as a leader, will—』

"Sakuya!"

Sakuya's nerves felt like they had been stretched to the limit, broken, mended imperfectly, and then stretched again. It was one too many things at once in a string of days filled with such things, and the clamor before her from other distressed players, all demanding answers from her, was pushing her further still. The words seemed to swim before her eyes—

『—this «Tutorial Mode» will acquaint you with the basic functions of the «Faction Leader Menu», beginning with the essential—』
"Sakuya! What happened here?"

What could she tell them? *Sorry to be a wet blanket, but the guy who's been leading us for the last six months turned out to be a really complex NPC wearing the shell of a dead player, and quite possibly the end boss. He calls himself Loki, King of the Jotnar, and I don't know why I'm still alive right now. But that's okay! I hit him once and he went poof.*

By lunch, half the Sylph faction was probably already going to think she was a murderer, an usurper, an assassin. Best not to add *lunatic* to the list of descriptors paired up with her name. Her eyes remained fixed on the message window in her HUD, as if seeking refuge there from the necessity of dealing with the growing crowd of players at the door.

> —recommend that you take the time to study the relevant sections of the manual in detail, which have been hyperlinked below—

"Sakuya," pleaded a woman who she didn't recognize at all. "What have you done?"

Sakuya squeezed her eyes shut for a moment; the sudden change in focus dismissed the message window. The nightmare of the last ten minutes was still real when she opened them again—the truth filled her vision with scattered chess pieces and the uncomprehending looks of the Sylphs who were still pushing their way into the room, most of them not daring to approach much further than that. Even while pressing her for answers, they gave her plenty of space—as if afraid that she'd do to them whatever she'd done to Skarrip, here in the heart of their own Safe Zone.

She had to say something. Anything. No, not anything—the *right* thing.

There was no going back now. Sakuya made a decision, then and there.

"What have I done?" she said finally, repeating the last question back to nobody in particular, in part to give herself another few moments to think and compose herself. She straightened her posture, rising to her full 175 centimeters, smoothed down her *yukata*, and adjusted her weapon so that it hung, sheathed, more properly behind her.

"I've dealt with a monster who would've destroyed us all."

·····

There were many things that Argo liked about the virtual world, and in fact preferred over real life. The convenience of Alfheim Online's private messaging system, for example, was hard to beat—especially for someone who made her living by staying in touch with her contacts. Getting dressed and undressed was as easy as tapping items in your inventory or status screen, and simple habits of daily hygiene like brushing your teeth or washing your hands were unnecessary considering that the simulation's level of fidelity did not seem to include microbes.

But aside from the minor detail of being trapped in a death game where people were killing each other, Argo was especially vexed at the moment by one thing: it was impossible for a player to ignore their HUD. She could plug her ears, but the system notifications still made the same noise internally every time she received a PM. She could close her eyes—or in this case, pull a pillow over her face—but even if she afflicted herself with Blindness status, she would still see her HP gauge and the parade of new messages on her notification bar.

Which was really no help at all when she presently wished for the entire world to vanish and leave her alone so that she could wallow in how badly she'd fucked up.

Light invaded through her shut eyelids as someone else lifted the pillow away, and she immediately
grasped blindly around her until she found another to replace it. That one, too, was taken from her, and when she opened her eyes she saw Thelvin towering over her, looking faintly amused.

Argo glared. "Fuck off," she said with as much eloquence as she could muster.

"I think I'll decline that invitation for the moment," the large black-haired clearer said with a smile. "Besides, it's Alicia who wants to talk to you."

"I'm ignoring her messages."

"Which is why I'm here."

Lacking any more loose pillows within easy reach, Argo threw an arm over her face. "Jesus Miyamoto Hisashi, have either of you ever heard of the concept of privacy?"

Thelvin let loose a snort. "Do you have any idea how amusing that complaint is, coming from you?"

Argo fumed silently. Thelvin had a point, and she didn't really like it. While she was trying to think of an appropriate response that would sidestep admitting she was being a hypocrite, she heard the door to her room open again. If her eyes hadn't been closed, she would've rolled them; she was starting to regret accepting Alicia's invitation to use the castle as her primary residence while she was in Freelia. It had seemed like such a great idea at the time—complete access to everything going on in the castle without having to sneak in or find an excuse to visit. What she hadn't counted on was that the "complete access" part worked in both directions.

"She still moping?" said Alicia's voice.

"Still," Thelvin said tersely.

"It's been all of half an hour since the vote," Argo complained, pushing herself upright and resigning herself to the fact that she wasn't going to be allowed to mope in peace. The look she gave her two harassers was about a step and a half short of lethal.

"And a lot has happened in that time," Alicia said, padding in and dropping herself into a sitting position onto the pillow bed beside Argo with her tail curled around her waist.

"You mean besides the worst imaginable outcome to the Salamander election, which was exactly what I told you would happen if we won that raid? Besides the fact that I pretty much helped make that happen by sticking my nose into everything?"

"Besides all that," Alicia said. "Didn't you read your PMs?"

"I'm ignoring them."

Alicia sighed. "Read them."

With a weak grimace of resignation, Argo did. It took some time—there was always a flood of information from her contacts after every leadership vote, and she'd been letting them pile up as soon as she learned that Corvatz had unseated Mortimer in the election. At first she was annoyed that Alicia hadn't given her any idea what she ought to be looking for, especially when the first half-dozen messages were largely repeating what she already knew.

Then she found what Alicia was referring to—it couldn't have been anything other than the sudden surge of messages from her Sylph contacts, considering the payload in those messages.
Argo stared at the PM window, despite the fact that she'd immediately memorized its contents; the words weren't going to change no matter how long she looked at them. Her ears were flat against her head, and she could feel the hairs on her neck standing up. "What."

Alicia nodded. "See what I mean?"

Argo was still staring. When she spoke, each word felt like it had to be forced out. "What in the mother of… what happened in Sylvain?"

"That," Alicia said, "is what we'd all like to know." She reached up and stroked the air with her left hand, opening her menu and setting a window visible. "About fifteen minutes ago, I got this message from Sakuya."

Argo leaned over and glanced at the window long enough to have the words in her head. She was aware that her jaw was hanging open enough to bare her fangs, and at the moment couldn't really manage to care.

「 Please help me, Alicia. I know we haven't talked much since the beta, but I'm begging you, please. I need to talk to Argo. Things are really fucked up and I have no idea what's real anymore.」

"That was the first one," Alicia said, visibly bothered by the desperation in her friend's message. She used a fingertip to scroll her interface. "I asked her what was wrong, and what I could do. Here's the next."

「 I just killed Skarrip, and I need to know who or what he is—was. The real him, I mean. All of our lives could depend on that answer. And if there's anyone who would stand a chance of knowing, it's The Rat. Now please, will you put her in touch with me?」

Argo looked up at Alicia, feeling more confused than she had when she'd read her own PMs. "Who or what?"

Alicia's slender shoulders shrugged. "Got me. I'm just passing along what she said. Do you know who Skarrip was?"

"I've got my suspicions," Argo said, not certain that she wanted to divulge all of those details quite yet. "There are rumors that he worked at Argus. But seriously, Allie, what the hell? I got a dozen messages in holy-crap-thirty-point-font telling me that Sakuya assassinated Skarrip in his own office and took the leadership of the Sylphs by force. Everything you and I both know about Sakuya and safe zones says that's complete bullshit. Is there anything you're not telling me?"

"Argo," Alicia said, the look in her golden eyes almost frightened, "right now you know everything I do about this. Probably more. I'd tell you to just PM her yourself, but she's stopped accepting messages from people who aren't on her friends list, and if the truth is anything even close to the rumors, I can't say I blame her for it."

"I can get ahold of her," Argo said. "But I've always done it through my network, not directly. I don't know that I wanna trust anyone as a middle-man for this."

As soon as the words were spoken, Argo realized that this left her with only one option. She stopped to review what she knew. Skarrip was dead—that at least had enough corroboration to be considered factual, regardless of the circumstances in which it had actually happened. And if Sakuya had killed him—which it sure sounded like she had—then she was now the Sylph leader. And Sakuya fervently, desperately, wanted to talk to her.

Everything else was still smoke and vapor.
Argo stood up suddenly, wobbling for a moment as the pillow on which she'd been sitting shifted unsteadily under her feet. Thelvin's hand snaked out quickly and grabbed her wrist before she could slip, and let go as soon as she'd steadied herself.

"Argo?" Alicia said, standing a bit more carefully and following with her gaze as Argo made her way over to a bureau and began dragging items from it into her inventory window, each one going translucent and shimmering before disappearing.

"I'm going to Sylvain," Argo said as she stowed all the supplies she could carry without going over her encumbrance limit. "There's only one way I'm gonna get to the bottom of what just happened, and it isn't by sitting around here trading PMs."

"I'll go with you," Thelvin said at once.

"Thanks," Argo said, slashing at the air to close her menu. "But I don't need an escort for this one. I got no idea what kinda situation I'm gonna find in Sylvain, and I might need to be quiet and stealthy." She gave the much taller man a look up and down, eyes lingering on his plate armor. "You're... not."

Thelvin's shrug made her point with the susurration of his shoulder armor's metal plates. "Be that as it may, I'm coming anyway. In a worst case scenario, a tank might be the difference between life and death for you. And if we get there and find that the situation really does call for stealth, I can return and let you go on ahead."

Argo resisted the temptation to roll her eyes straight back into her head. She gave Alicia a look of entreaty, waving a hand at the air. "Can you make him not do the thing?"

Alicia snorted, folding her arms neatly under her bust. "I don't make Thelvin do anything. I ask him and he does."

"So ask him not to do the thing."

"No," Alicia said. "Because I kinda agree with him. Besides, if you do run into a patrol, having the head of our clearing group along will make you look a lot less like a spy, and a lot more like you're on official business."

Argo looked between Alicia and Thelvin, feeling very much like she was being unfairly double-teamed. "It's just Thelvin, right? He's not bringing his whole damn group?"

"If only I were right here and could answer for myself," Thelvin said with a quirk at the corner of his lips. "And no, it's just me. We don't really need a group; there are no mobs between here and there that are any kind of threat."

"Except the lynch mob that might be waiting for us in Sylvain," Argo said, heading towards the door. "But whatevs. It's not on me if you get yourself killed tagging along, Thel."

"I've already died once," Thelvin said, falling into step with her. "I don't plan on doing so again."

*Plans, Argo thought darkly, are great when they work the way you expect them to.* It was an uncomfortable thought on which to begin the long journey that lay ahead of her, but it was one that came from recent, bitter experience.

Argo was not, in her own opinion, often wrong—a faith in her wits that had been gravely shaken recently.
This was one occasion where she very much hoped that she was.

"Going somewhere?"

Tetsuo froze in place, hand halfway to his inventory screen. After a few beats spent like that, the translucent outline of the item that he'd been dragging there flickered once as the system assumed that he'd changed his mind about stowing the item in his inventory; the potion shimmered and reappeared in the open trunk in front of him.

He recognized the voice of his group leader, but even so he was still afraid to turn and look. But when he did, he saw only Heathcliff silhouetted in the doorway; the older man hadn't brought anyone with him. Tetsuo relaxed a little bit and turned long enough to give Heathcliff a bow of respect; his game menu bobbed in front of him as he did, invisible to the other man. "I'm sorry sir, but I think I need to go back to Arun."

"I imagine we will all return to Arun in the morning," Heathcliff said, taking a step into Tetsuo's room and looking around. "Lord Corvatz plans on pushing hard to explore the new zone above the 25th gateway, and I'm told he plans on ordering our front-line clearers to permanently relocate there."

"That's not what I mean," Tetsuo said miserably. "I'm going to go stay with my friends. I don't want to be here once Corvatz remembers that I exist."

"Ah," Heathcliff said, tilting his head forward in acknowledgment. "I think I see the issue. You fear reprisals from a man who was harsh to you before, now that he is our leader."

Having his fears laid bare so bluntly did nothing to alleviate them. Tetsuo flinched at the mention of Corvatz's name, and nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty much it. Harsh? Come on, sir, the guy hates my guts. He all but threatened to kill Sasha if she wouldn't cooperate with us, and then it turned out the Caits and Sylphs hired her to help take the last boss. You remember what happened to a lot of the beta testers when Kibaou was leader? Well, Corvatz was one of Kibaou's people. What do you think will happen to me once Corvatz gets around to settling scores?"

"Nothing, I suspect," Heathcliff said with an almost infuriating calm. "Corvatz may have agreed with Kibaou's racial worldview, but he is not the fool that Kibaou was. He is, whatever his other flaws, a professional soldier. You are a valuable asset to my clearing group, Tetsuo. If you continue to be one, I doubt he will do more than glare in your direction. Especially since he will be quite busy with his new responsibilities."

"A soldier," Tetsuo repeated, finding the word uncomfortable to say now. "Is there going to be war again?"

The tall, solidly-built man continued to pace around the room, hands clasped at the small of his back. He stopped in front of a surrealist painting that had been part of the room's original decor; Tetsuo had never really cared enough to take it down or replace it. "I don't believe our leader has any immediate plans to renew all-out war against our neighbors, but I would expect there to be changes in our rules of engagement. Lord Corvatz makes no secret of his disdain for certain aspects of the Treaty of Arun." He shrugged. "If war comes, it will be fought. If not, then we will continue to clear. Either way, we shall do our duty."

"No sir," Tetsuo said to Heathcliff's back. "You'll do your duty. I don't feel like my duty includes killing people who aren't trying to hurt us."
"I see," Heathcliff mused, canting his head to look over his shoulder. His expression was inscrutable. "Duty, Tetsuo, is a very personal thing. It is not something that can be imposed upon a man from the outside—it is something that a man takes upon himself by choice. It means something different to all of us, and sometimes that meaning and its implications for the path before us are the most private thoughts we have."

Tetsuo wasn't sure exactly what Heathcliff was trying to communicate to him. There were times when he enjoyed his group leader's air of enigmatic mystery and penchant for speaking philosophically, but now was not one of those times—now he just wished he could get a straight answer. "So what do you suggest I do?" he asked, looking down at the open trunk and all of the gear still neatly stowed within it. He thought about closing his menu; the way it hung before him was distracting. But it was also ready in case he needed it.

A few footsteps brought Heathcliff over to where Tetsuo was standing, and he felt a strong hand rest briefly on his shoulder. "Whatever sense of duty you feel, and to whom, I suggest that it remain as I said: personal. The world does not need to know what dreams or loyalties drive you forward until your efforts are ready to bear fruit. More often than not, Tetsuo… the world, and those in it, will not understand."

"In other words," Tetsuo said with a touch of bitterness, "you're telling me to shut up and keep my head down."

One of Heathcliff's gray eyebrows rose a centimeter. "Take it as you will," he said. "But consider this: if Corvatz is relocating the clearing groups permanently to Arun, does that not bring you closer to your friends anyway? And with the inability of a faction leader to safely leave their home city, what do you suppose that means for you? Chances are you will see less of Corvatz than you ever have before; he will no longer be present on raids." Heathcliff looked down at his hand and let it drop from Tetsuo's shoulder, turning towards the doorway. "I will leave you to your thoughts. I hope that when we return to Arun, you will do so as a valued member of my group, rather than as a boy fleeing the shadows of the past."

Tetsuo wasn't sure quite how long he stood there before going to close the door to his room. When he did, he leaned back against it, his thoughts awash with conflict. He knew that every second he spent here was further opportunity for his fears to be confirmed, and despite Heathcliff's assurances he didn't know how he could bear living with that sword hanging over his head. The temptation to simply quit was overwhelming.

He knew that if he asked, Sasha would give him a place to sleep, and he could spend all his time going out with Sachi, Keita, and Sasamaru—at least, to the extent that the latter two could escape the obligations of their own clearing groups. They were his friends, his real-life friends, and he missed them terribly.

But they weren't his only friends. For all the teasing and gruff humor that passed between the members of his clearing group, they were the people he trusted with his life almost every day—and they trusted him with theirs. They'd fought at each other's sides for most of the last six months, and at this point he almost knew them better than he did his friends from riaru.

He could abandon the Salamanders. He could abandon Corvatz. But when he thought about abandoning Heathcliff, Denkao, Kagemune and the others in his group, the cold embrace of shame washed over him.

With the heavy weight of a final decision, Tetsuo slowly began dragging items from his inventory menu back to his storage trunk.
With a flanged screech the last mob burst into a twinkling cascade of evanescent blue fragments, which fell like colored snow to either side of Yuuki's extended sword. As soon as she unfroze from the end frame of her technique, she grinned and beat one set of wings to spin herself in the air and face her party members, flourishing her longsword with a sweep and a slash that Kirito thought looked awfully familiar. "Told you," she said.

"Okay," Kirito allowed with a grin of his own. "Three hits."

"It should've only taken one," Asuna said, her own wings bearing her from her support position up to where Kirito and Yuuki were hovering. "Aren't either of you even a little curious why? These are Rainbow Valley trash mobs. They shouldn't even con to us. Why are we even getting EXP from them at all?"

Kirito shrugged. He'd wondered that himself the last few times they'd had to stop to clear an aggro mob along the way, but he hadn't really thought much of it. "I haven't spent much time in this zone since the beginning of the game," he admitted. "And I haven't explored the entire thing. It didn't seem odd to me that there would be higher-level mobs spawning in places."

"Well it is," Asuna said, sheathing her rapier and reaching up to dismiss the window that had popped up at the end of the battle. "Our clearing group makes this run all the time, and we rarely have to stop and clear anything until we reach the Yggdrasil Basin."

"A raid group probably has enough combined character levels in it to scare off any trash mobs that might aggro a smaller group," Kirito replied, settling to the edge of one of the nearby massive brown mushrooms that littered the valley's cliffside. It was a welcome excuse to get out of the midday sun and rest his wings.

Asuna settled down to sit on the edge of the same giant fungus, pulling her legs up and hugging her arms around her knees. "Maybe," she said. "I just don't remember seeing that particular named mob here before."

"ALO is a lot like a living world sometimes," Kirito said, making a routine check of his equipment durability. "It supposedly has a pretty complex system handling everything on the back end, monitoring the economy and the mob ecosystems and keeping them in balance. It wouldn't surprise me if areas changed over time depending on the player activity there. Maybe it's adjusting in some way to the average character level of the people that spend time in this zone?"

Asuna hummed thoughtfully at the conclusion, scooting over to make room for Yuuki as she joined them. "I wouldn't really know about that sort of thing," she said. "I'm not really a computer person. I mean, I'm no dummy, I can use one just fine… I just don't really understand what goes into making a game like this."

"A whole lot of time and dedication," Kirito said with a grim set of his lips. "Kayaba devoted all of his free time for years to making Alfheim a reality. It was his life's project." At Asuna's odd look of skepticism, he hastened to explain. "I used to read everything I could about him. The few interviews he gave, the books he wrote, stories of his life, even the Nerve Gear specs and white papers."

"I don't know what those are, but okay."

"Technical specifications," Kirito said, trying to clarify the jargon he'd used without dumbing down the explanation so much that she might be offended. "I was kind of obsessed with the technology and with the man behind it." He closed the last status window he'd opened, satisfied with the
condition of his gear. "Anyway, I guess I probably know as much about him as anyone here. This
game, this world, was what he did. This was all he did."

"Such a waste," Asuna said quietly after a few moments.

Kirito didn't really understand what she meant by that, and it must have showed on his face.

"Do you have any idea what a miracle this is, Kirito?" Asuna made a broad gesture around her.
"We're completely shut off from our real bodies, and we're experiencing a different world that
doesn't really exist. There are so many things Kayaba could've done with this. Even just making it a
normal, everyday game for one player would've been incredible! So why... why did he choose to
do this? Why this death game, pitting everyone against each other like this?"

Kirito—at a loss for what to say—remained silent. Asuna looked back at him, and even if he hadn't
seen a glimmer of wetness in her eyes, he would've known how upset she was from the way her
voice cracked there at the end. "It's just such a waste," she said again, as if reinforcing the line of
thought that wouldn't leave her alone. "A waste of all that creativity, of all these lives, of all this time
and potential... why? What does he want? Is this just some big horrible social experiment to him?"

"I don't know," Kirito said finally. "But I think maybe he just wanted to see what happens. Didn't he
say something like that during the tutorial?"

"I didn't really notice at the time," Asuna admitted, a slight flush coming to her cheeks.

"He said something about how his goal had already been achieved—that what he wanted was to
create this world and then interfere in it."

"But why?" The question was so plaintive, it sounded like having Kayaba's scheme make sense to
her was essential to her peace of mind.

Kirito shrugged. How could he explain it? For all that she'd adapted incredibly well to her
circumstances, Asuna didn't really seem to be a gamer—at least, she hadn't been. She probably knew
the word *gamemaster*, or had at least heard it, but he doubted she really understood what it meant—
what kind of mentality went into the desire to create a world, run a campaign, and make an adventure
immersive and exciting for the players.

If anything, what bothered Kirito was that he thought he understood Kayaba just fine. He himself
had played countless RPGs and sandbox games, both local and multiplayer. He understood all too
well that desire to create a world and make it real, and if anything he was surprised at how little direct
hand Kayaba seemed to have taken in his own creation ever since launch day. As far as Kirito knew,
the man wasn't actually running quests or manipulating the world in any obvious way—there was no
way he could be everywhere at once. If he was actually playing the game as a player, he was
keeping a low enough profile that no one suspected his true identity. Kirito knew that if it had been
him instead of Kayaba, he'd have wanted to be personally running the most important quests and
playing one NPC or another, pushing his multitasking skills to the limit.

What he didn't know was how to explain that mindset to someone who'd never touched a roleplaying
game in their life—not without making himself sound like a sociopath.

When no reply seemed to be forthcoming from Kirito, Asuna glanced over at Yuuki and poked her
in the side, making the younger girl squirm. "You're awfully quiet. Actually, you've been pretty quiet
today in general. Everything okay?"

Yuuki's own shrug was not exactly an answer; she tried on a smile to accompany it. "I just don't
think that guy's reasons really matter. I mean, why should we care what he wants?"

Kirito noticed that Yuuki hadn't actually answered the question she'd been asked. She had been unusually quiet ever since the incident with Prophet's gang, although he supposed that wasn't really that surprising—as far as he knew, that would've been the first time since the Salamander invasion that she'd been exposed to murder first-hand.

For all of her strength and vibrancy, Kirito had to remind himself that Yuuki was still a twelve-year-old girl. If he and Asuna were both cracking under the weight of everything that had happened, he couldn't even imagine how Yuuki must feel or what she must be dealing with. But when he looked at her again, she was wearing a genuine smile, albeit one tinged with sadness.

"It doesn't matter to me what Kayaba wanted," Yuuki said, a solemn note slipping into her voice. "All I can really do is keep my faith and be true to myself."

Asuna put an arm around the girl's shoulder. "It's that simple, is it?"

Yuuki leaned over far enough that she could look past Asuna and see Kirito, making sure he was included in the conversation while responding to her. "Isn't it?"

"I suppose you're right," Asuna said. "I guess in the end, I just want all of this to mean something. I can't bear the idea of treating it like a tsunami or some other natural disaster. I want to believe that there's something more to this world and our imprisonment here than the fact that it exists."

"It already does mean something," Yuuki said, leaning against Asuna's shoulder. "In this world I can be strong; I can do and see things I would've never had the chance to in the real world. And I met some wonderful people here." There was a brief pause. "I feel really bad that people are dying and everyone's trapped in here, but I'm glad that I get to be here with both of you. I think we should just try to help as many people as we can, and make the best of every day we have left."

Kirito himself was leaned over a little and looking in Yuuki's direction, so he was in a good position to meet Asuna's eyes when she turned to him. Her arm was around Yuuki's shoulders, but something in her smile seemed directed at him. "I like that idea."

There was an unfamiliar and slightly uncomfortable feeling in Kirito's chest, like it was going to swell up and burst if this kept up. He rubbed at the back of his neck, feeling a bit of heat on his cheeks. "Don't worry, Yuuki," he said. "One day we'll clear the game, and then no one will be trapped anymore. Then we can be friends in the real world, too, okay?"

The smile abruptly, unexpectedly, vanished from Yuuki's face as if a switch had been flipped. "Yeah," she said quietly. The smile returned just as quickly, but it had a certain forced quality to it now. "That'd be nice."

Before Kirito could ask what was wrong, Yuuki let herself slide off the edge of the giant polypore and caught herself with her wings as naturally as if she'd been getting up from a chair. "We should probably get going," she said, facing Asuna. "Kirito and I both have long trips ahead of us, and I'd like to get to Everdark before it gets too late."

Asuna opened her arms as Yuuki swooped in for a big hug, the two girls rocking back and forth for a moment. Yuuki gave her a kiss on the cheek and drew back, wearing that same half-wistful smile. Then Kirito had to brace himself as the younger girl flew up and gave him the same treatment, the sound of her wings briefly loud in his ears while she embraced him.

"We'll all keep in touch by PM," Asuna promised. "Come straight back to Parasel if you need
anything or it's not safe, okay?"

"I'll be fine," Yuuki said, drifting slowly backwards without turning away from her two friends. "It
isn't like the first month when the Sallies attacked… Everdark's a safe zone for me again. I just think
it'll be easier to find clues and get people to talk if it's just me—if I'm just another Imp in the city."

"Mata na, Yuuki," Kirito said, bidding her farewell without making it into a goodbye. He was still a
little puzzled by the reaction he'd elicited, but like most of Yuuki's such moments, it seemed to be a
fleeting thing. "We'll all meet up again soon, hopefully with good news and information to share."

When Yuuki's bright violet flight trail faded, it left Kirito and Asuna alone on the edge of the large
colorful mushroom, looking out across the mouth of the Valley of Rainbows where its waters spilled
into the low wetlands that sprawled across Undine territory. The moisture which likely fed the
fungus growing in the shadows of the cliffsides also fed the valley's namesake optical effects, and not
for the first time Kirito found himself struck by the beauty of some of Alfheim's sights. He'd seen
photos of impressive waterfalls and rainbows on the Internet back in the real world, but even the best
of them seemed like pale, desaturated imitations of this place. Every color was more vibrant, every
geographical feature taken to an almost caricatured extreme designed to awe the mind.

All things considered, he was reluctant to do anything to disturb this moment of peace.

Asuna was quiet for a time as well, though Kirito couldn't be sure if she had been as enraptured by
the same sight or if she was bothered in some way by the abruptness of Yuuki's departure and shift in
mood. Perhaps she—like him—was also content to soak up the peace that surrounded her and bask
in a silence that was broken only by the distant roar of waterfalls and the intermittent cries of
simulated wildlife.

Unfortunately, peace was not the only thing that was soaking into Kirito—all the mist in the air that
helped give the valley its name was starting to dampen his clothing; it was getting a little chilly here
out of the direct sunlight. And as little as he wanted to leave, Yuuki had been right—he had a long
journey to Spriggan territory in the northeast, and he'd be wise to cut across the northwestern edge of
Undine lands as quickly as possible so that he didn't have to explain himself to any unfriendly parties
he might meet.

Asuna started slightly when he stood, looking up at him and then coming to her feet as well. "I guess
you have to leave now, too."

Kirito nodded. "Spriggans aren't welcome in your territory, let alone in Parasel itself—it'd just be
asking for trouble if I came with you."

Asuna's face clouded. "I'll talk to Diavel about that again while I'm there," she promised.

"It's okay, Asuna," Kirito said, not wanting to tread this ground again. "It'll be quicker if I head
directly northeast instead of going east with you and then hooking north, anyway."

"It is not okay," she said crossly. "It's hypocritical to talk about how fake the racial divisions are and
then turn around and ban an entire faction from your city, and I'm going to tell him so. It's not fair to
you—to any of the Spriggans who aren't like your leader."

"All right, all right," Kirito said with hands raised in surrender, unable to stop himself from smiling a
little.

"What's so funny?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, really… I just think it's interesting how nothing seems to get you riled
up more than the idea of protecting someone else."

Asuna raised a single delicate blue eyebrow. "Is there something unusual about that?"

"Not at all," Kirito said, again giving her a smile that was sincere, if a bit bashful. "It's actually something I admire about you."

To Kirito's surprise, Asuna simply reached out and put her palm against his chest, holding it there for a moment. As heat rose to his face and he tried to think of how to respond to this unexpected gesture, she took a single step forward and leaned her forehead against his shoulder.

"Don't drop the party," she said.

"Asuna?"

She straightened a little, and when she looked up at him, Kirito found that her face was uncomfortably close to his. "Don't leave the party we're in, okay? I want the three of us to stay partied while we're apart like this, so we can all see each other on the map and know each other's status."

Another time, months prior, Kirito might have objected to this request—the loner in him would have chafed at the idea for sure. It wasn't as if he expected to need to join another party before the three of them were reunited, it was just… well, that was really the problem—he couldn't think of any reason not to do it. And he could think of more than a few reasons to agree, especially now.

"Okay," he said with a slow nod. "I'll send you a message once I'm done in Penwether. Then we can decide how to meet up again, and where to go from there."

The parting was like a slow-motion playback of someone slowly losing their grip on an edge—but without the panic of falling. Asuna slowly, with obvious reluctance to relinquish the contact, started to allow her hand to slip away from where it had rested on Kirito's overcoat, eventually hooking a finger behind the strap of his scabbard where it diagonally crossed his chest. She looked down and watched while the weight of her limp hand started to pull it down the length of the strap and away, as if mesmerized by the physics simulation that went into making the movement happen. When her hand dropped, she quickly caught his with it, and held it loosely while she began to back away. Each slow backwards step raised the tension between their hands, turning their arms into a rising suspension bridge spanning the growing gap between them, until the moment when only their fingertips still sustained the connection. When those too slipped away, their arms finally fell to their sides.

Kirito remained completely still throughout this, mind and heart both racing. He felt like he didn't dare move or speak, no matter how confused he was. He couldn't manage to come up with words that didn't sound lame in his head, and he was still in that state when Asuna raised her eyes and smiled at him.

"See you soon," she said. She took one more step back, off the edge of the mushroom and out into the open air, gracefully twisting as she tipped backwards and materializing her wings with an electric blue shimmer. The sweet, high-pitched sound of those wings lingered in echoes for a short time in her wake, leaving behind the fading blue afterimage of her flight trail arcing to the east.

Long afterwards, Kirito imagined that he could still feel the warmth of her hand where it had touched his. He flexed it a few times, almost expecting to see a colored glow there when he inspected it. The sensation lingered for some time, and only once that, too, had faded did he take to the sky and begin his own journey.
第2幕の終わり
END OF ACT 2
The defeat of «Hrungnir the Impervious», the 25th Gateway boss, was a turning point—and so were Loki's emergence as an antagonist, Sakuya's acquisition of the Sylph leadership, and the discoveries unlocked by Sasha.

Alfheim is changing in ways both expected and not. The trio of Kirito, Asuna and Yuuki have gone their separate ways for the time being, each with their own individual quests.

Prophet is still out there... somewhere.

ACT 3

"While shared public spaces such as the streets of a city can be relied upon to have the same default set of permission as any other «Safe Zone», the rulesets of owned or rented spaces operate differently. Zones with secured access such as homes, workshops, or inn rooms can be modified at any time within the «Zone Permissions» submenu of their keyed owner(s) while that player is inside the zone. The settings which can be altered vary from location to location, and range from allowing or prohibiting duel requests or spellcasting all the way up to permitting PvP or PvE combat. For the purposes of game balance, any ruleset changes are immediately broadcast via system notification to all players currently within the affected zone..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Zone Permissions»

6 May 2023
Day 182 - Morning

Sakuya liked her life neat and tidy; chaos was death to her ability to focus. In the beta she had eventually conditioned herself to deal calmly with the haphazard spectacle of combat, and her six months trapped in the death game had gone a long way towards turning it into just another job—but she still found disorder and noisy crowds unpleasant at best.

There was a reason for this. In college she had been paired with a roommate who was something of a clutterbug, and no amount of gentle prodding or acerbic comments would get Marisa to pick up after herself. The disarray made her feel out of control of her environment in a way her family's well-ordered home never had, and that feeling built up stress and made it impossible for her to fully concentrate on her studies. The next roommate had exchanged one type of chaos for another; that one had been a social butterfly who liked to bring her friends back to the far-too-small dorm room to hang out—loudly.

So when she graduated and moved on, she committed herself to never living with a roommate again; she'd learned her lesson. Her apartment back in Japan was a study in minimalism, nearly devoid of unnecessary things beyond her penchant for expensive clothing. Said clothing was, like everything else she possessed, neatly and carefully put away in its place at all times. Having everything around her quiet and in good order was calming.

However, she had learned one more lesson from the second roommate: there came a point where the surrounding noise and chaos became so overwhelming that it circled back around on itself and elevated her to a state that was almost zen-like. It was not a state of peace, precisely… it was a state of detachment, like that of a person who has endured so much that they become numb to it. Her sister
had once colorfully referred to it as *having no fucks left to give.* The phrase was in English; she'd had to look it up on the Internet and had been very amused at the explanation and the sheer volume of accompanying pictures.

It was that state in which Sakuya now found herself, and there was nothing at all amusing about it. The cacophony of distraught and insistent voices which followed her attempt at explaining the situation had grown to a point where it became a dull buzz in her ears, and eventually she closed her eyes and tilted her head back, letting it wash over her as she tried to reclaim her calm. She could feel the warmth of the sun on the left side of her face, and she imagined that warmth seeping into her and purging her of fear and agitation.

When she opened her eyes again, she spoke only one word—and she spoke it so quietly, so softly, she doubted anyone heard it over their own voices. "Enough."

Ironically, it was that low utterance that got results where nothing else had. One by one the multi-sided arguments and demands trailed off as the speakers realized that she'd said something, and that they hadn't heard it. A dozen pairs of eyes in various shades of green and brown turned towards her if they hadn't been on her already, and a few beats of silence settled in the room. Sakuya stepped into that silence before the questions could begin anew.

"I realize that you're all upset. But use. Your. *Brains.* Now look." She drew an invisible line in the air with her right hand to open her system menu, the motion causing several Sylphs to flinch as if they feared she was about to do to them whatever she'd done to Skarrip. The new administrative option in her menu threw her for a moment, but she disregarded it and deftly navigated until she reached the *Zone Permissions* submenu, setting it visible and spinning the display so that it faced the others.

It had been a calculated risk, since she hadn't actually had the chance to check what the settings for this room were. She was prepared to wing it no matter what she saw; there were arguments she could try making either way. But there it was in the plain block lettering of ALO's UI. «*PvP Combat: Disabled*.» Skarrip had had the authority to change that setting for a room that he owned, and a faction leader owned their own office. He hadn't changed it—she would've been notified if he had. The result still confused her for a moment; she was fairly certain she remembered losing a little bit of HP during her struggle with Loki. She pushed the stray thought aside quickly.

"Look," she repeated, panning her eyes across everyone present, and tapping her finger at the air right behind the translucent window. "Take a good, hard look and *think.* This room is a Safe Zone. It is completely, utterly, and totally one hundred percent *impossible* to reduce another player's hit points in this room outside of a duel."

"Then how—"

"I'm getting to that," Sakuya said, interrupting Chimiro and pressing onward. She knew that the administrative assistant had truly liked his faction leader, and that the day-to-day organizational minutiae of the faction had been his responsibility, not Skarrip's. He was well-respected; she was going to need him—and that meant she had to get him on her side.

"It is impossible for a player's HP to go down in a Safe Zone outside of a duel," she repeated for everyone's benefit, driving the point home. "Yes, I killed Skarrip. I challenged him to a duel because he committed a horrible crime, and he let me do it."

"Why—"

The question had come from what seemed like everyone at once, and she held up a hand palm-out.
"Why? I don't know. I honestly do not know what the fuck was going through his head. Maybe he was trying to atone somehow, retain some shred of honor. But the fact is, I could not have done it unless he allowed it to happen. Does anyone here think there is any other possibility?"

Her father was an attorney, and there was a phrase Sakuya had heard more than once from him: *never ask a witness a question to which you do not already know the answer.* She was taking another risk here by inviting them to use their imaginations, but she wanted them to really think this through—to stop reacting emotionally and think.

Her answer was more silence—some of it sullen, some of it thoughtful, but all of it uncomfortable. She nodded. "That's what I thought. Now—"

"What was his crime?"

Chimiro again. The short, stocky man was among the sullen ones; he was not going to be easy to win over. She met his eyes. "I will discuss that with you privately," she said. "Because you do need to know. But it is something that is not ready to be public yet—it could have enormous political consequences."

Politics were something Chimiro understood; she could see his expression change slightly at this revelation. He nodded slowly, and turned to face the small crowd just inside the doorway. "I'm very sorry," he said. "I know you are all upset and desperate for answers, but could I ask you to please give me a few minutes alone with… with Lady Sakuya?"

"Are you going to be safe alone with her?" That idiotic question came from a young woman near the back; Sakuya couldn't see much more than her face and the twin blonde ponytails that draped behind her ears. She fought back the urge to roll her eyes.

Chimiro glanced once at Sakuya, making her very glad that she'd resisted the urge. "As I am unlikely to consent to a duel invitation, Gwellen, I think you need not worry. No matter the circumstances, we must all live with the fact that Lady Sakuya is now the leader of the Sylphs. Even if she could harm me, I don't see what she might gain from doing so other than provoking further animosity. Now please, leave us for now—and try to avoid spreading rumors until we know the facts. I'd appreciate it if you all kept the details to yourselves for now."

*I'm sorry I ever thought of you as a witless bureaucrat,* Sakuya thought to herself. She glanced around the room from corner to corner, and then briefly regretted it as she looked to the east and was badly dazzled by the morning sun. She quickly faced the opposite direction and waited for her vision to clear while Chimiro ushered the others out, frowning at the spots and distortion in her field of view. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut for a moment, then relented when she realized that it wouldn't have any effect on what was essentially an optical effect applied to her avatar.

At last Chimiro slid the door shut behind the last Sylph to leave the room; he paused there for a moment with his fingers on the handle, head bowed slightly. When Sakuya was about to speak, he turned and looked over his shoulder. "Wait please," he said quietly.

Sakuya held her tongue. Perhaps a minute passed; when it did, he faced her and took, then let out, a deep breath. "They're gone," he said, walking slowly towards her until only a few meters separated them. "But you can't put them off forever. Five minutes ago, every Sylph in Alfheim will have received the same system message we did. Rumors will spread—are undoubtedly already spreading. And whatever the truth is, the rumors will be far worse."

Sakuya couldn't stop herself from wincing. "I know."
Chimiro tilted his head up to look her in the eyes. His gaze was unwavering and hard. "Yes, I expect you to do. So tell me what it is Lord Skarrip did that compelled you to murder him, Sakuya."

This was not the time for hesitation or hedging. There were things that she knew she couldn't tell Chimiro—things that would brand her as insane at best. *Loki.* The thought came and went; she banished it from her mind, lest she let any part of it slip. But there was plenty of truth to go around, and those truths ought to be enough on their own merits. "Skarrip," she said, refusing to grant the man the pretentious title he no longer held, "hired assassins who murder children."

"Preposterous," Chimiro snapped immediately.

"I wasn't finished," Sakuya said, folding her arms under her bust. "There's a Puca woman in Arun named Sasha—"

"Yes, she runs the orphanage. Lord Skarrip spoke of her."

Sakuya tried not to be irritated at yet another interjection. "She has somehow decoded the language that is used for magic spells in ALO. For reasons I don't fully understand, Skarrip wanted her dead. He said something to the effect that what she'd discovered was *too useful*—his words, not mine—that he wanted no other faction to gain her knowledge or assistance. So he hired an assassin to take her out. Except that she wasn't where he'd expected her to be—at the last minute, the Caits brought her along on the raid. So instead of her, Skarrip's assassins killed one of her children—a ten-year-old Salamander boy named Robert."

Chimiro's mouth jogged soundlessly before he found his voice. "But that… no… Lord Skarrip would not have… I mean… surely a child's death was not his intent—"

"It doesn't *matter* what his *intent* was, Chimiro!" Sakuya said, voice rising before she got it under control again. "Don't you get it? He hired *assassins.* He hired them to kill a woman whose only offense was being smarter than you and I put together. That in and of itself is bad enough! And surprise, surprise—when you hire killers, they end up *killing someone.* Do you think the collateral damage mattered to Skarrip, as long as the people dying weren't Sylphs?"

This time when Sakuya paused to gather her words, there was no interruption. Chimiro's face was devoid of expression in the way only someone who is tightly controlling themselves can be. "So yes, Chimiro, I killed Skarrip. I killed him because what he did was not only horrible and amoral, it's put all of our lives at risk. What do you think is going to happen if Mortimer finds out that the leader of the Sylphs hired a Spriggan to kill a Salamander child? What do you think would happen if the rest of the factions found out?"

Chimiro's expression was no longer under control—he had gone completely pale, something that was impossible to miss in the harsh sunlight beaming in through the eastern bay windows. Even if none of her other arguments had penetrated, she was sure that the political angle would get through to him. The possible consequences scared the hell out of her, too.

"I…" Chimiro's voice was slightly hoarse; the man's brown eyes dropped towards the floor. "This is difficult to believe."

"I have witnesses," Sakuya said, pressing the advantage while she had it. "Clearers from three different factions drove off the assassins before they could kill anyone else. Sasha herself will attest to the incident."

"But what of Lord Skarrip's involvement?"
"I'm glad you asked," Sakuya said, leaning back and seating herself on the front edge of Skarrip's—no, her—desk. This was her final play, and she was painfully aware of just how big of a gamble it was. "You see, I'm not the only person who learned about Lord Skarrip's crimes—nor was I the first. There is one other who knows, and it is someone whose testimony you will find impossible to dismiss. Someone who told me the truth when he found out, and did so at great risk to himself."

She turned and looked towards the western end of the room then, smiling with acidic sweetness at an extremely faint, shimmering outline that she had spotted earlier and could now make out much better than when she'd been waiting for her sun-dazzled vision to return to normal. "Isn't that right, Sigurd?"

The effect concealing the hidden figure began to disappear in rapidly-eroding patches, revealing the avatar underneath as if the transparency was water evaporating quickly from the surface. Sigurd's footsteps brought him within a few strides of Sakuya and Chimiro as the last of the effect dissipated, and he looked alternately at each of them with an expression that was somewhere between wary and furious. "How," he seethed, "did you know I was there?"

"Transparency isn't invisibility," Sakuya said, one hand planted on her hip as she regarded one of her least favorite people in the world. "It caps out at what, somewhere around fifteen percent opacity? Most of your texture was lost against the background, but I could still see a distortion around the edges." She allowed herself a slight smirk, relishing the look on his face. "As for knowing it was you… even if I didn't recognize your profile, you had to have been there for at least three or four minutes, and you weren't in any hurry to get out of here so you had duration to spare. That means incanting the spell at mag seven, minimum. I don't know many people with Wind that high who were hanging around here."

"I get it," Sigurd said with a hint of a glower to his tone. "You never were stupid."

"No," Sakuya said. "Nor am I a murderer." She tilted her head to regard Chimiro, who was only then managing to suppress his shock and surprise. Although she directly addressed the administrative assistant, her words were meant for Sigurd's ears as much as his. "I didn't come here planning to kill Skarrip, Chimiro. I came here to confront him. But what I said to you about him hiring assassins who killed a child is the truth. And Sigurd knows that as well."

When she turned back to the other Sylph clearer, she fixed her eyes on his and held that gaze, purging even the slightest trace of weakness or uncertainty from her face by effort of will. His lips were pressed into a fine line, but she could see his jaw working around slightly—as if he was having a hard time not saying the things that came to his mind.

**Be smart, Sigurd,** she thought fiercely. **For once in the time that I've known you, show some goddamn sense. I could've easily thrown you under the bus here.**

"Is that true?" Chimiro asked, his round face still ashen. Sakuya could sympathize; his world must be falling apart around him as much as hers had.

Sigurd's gaze did not leave Sakuya's for some time—long enough that she wasn't sure if he was even going to answer Chimiro. The longer the staring contest went on, the more she began to worry that Sigurd was going to be stupid enough to deny it—whether out of allegiance to a man he thought dead or simple hatred for her; it was impossible to tell. At last his narrowed eyes drifted to the side where Chimiro was standing. "It's true," he said with obvious reluctance. "Lord Skarrip did order this thing done."

It took every bit of self-control Sakuya possessed to not sigh in relief then. Chimiro, on the other hand, looked as if he'd been struck in the forehead with a polearm. His knees wobbled slightly, and
he very nearly went to them before straightening himself and swallowing audibly. "If I…" He
coughed slightly. "If I had not known both of you for half a year, I'd suspect the two of you of
colluding in Lord Skarrip's murder in order to seize power. I am still not entirely convinced. But
Sigurd has always been loyal to our leader, and I cannot imagine him admitting that trees have leaves
if it was you who'd asserted it so—or vice-versa. For the two of you to agree on anything…"

"Yes," Sigurd said darkly, forest-green eyes flitting back to Sakuya. "It is quite the singular event."

"Chimiro," Sakuya said, reaching out and briefly resting a hand on the shorter man's shoulder. "You
respected Skarrip, and this all must be a terrible shock to you. I need you to know that I didn't come
here with the intent of killing him. The fight that ended his life was his choice—if it hadn't been, it
could never have happened at all in a Safe Zone."

Chimiro nodded, the motion jerky. "I accept that. It's just…"

"I know," she said. "But now I need you to move past what's happened and pull yourself together. I
need you out there right now doing damage control."

"I have to tell them something," Chimiro said. "But if word of what Lord Skarrip did gets out…
you're right; it would put all of us at risk."

"Skarrip was a larper," Sakuya said, drawing and ignoring a frown from Sigurd. "I know that there
were plenty of rumors about how much of a grasp he still had on the real world—rumors that not
many people took too seriously because it didn't seem to stop him from being an effective leader.
Start by telling the crowd outside… tell them that we learned Skarrip had been plotting to sabotage
the clearing efforts because he no longer wanted to leave the game."

Chimiro frowned. "As much as I fear the political ramifications of the truth coming out, I'm not sure I
find the idea of outright lying to everyone much more appealing."

A thought suddenly struck Sakuya right between the eyes. She couldn't understand why she hadn't
seen it earlier. What she's discovered is far too useful to allow it to spread, Loki had said when he
was still Skarrip. At the time she hadn't fully understood the comment, and had assumed he'd meant
he wanted to keep her research out of the hands of the other factions. But that had
been Loki talking. The interspecies psychodrama in this world has provided me with no end of
entertainment thus far, he'd said, and I desire that should continue… indefinitely.

Oh my God, Sakuya thought. "It's not a lie," she answered. "I think that was exactly why he wanted
Sasha dead—because her research could have helped everyone clear the game that much faster. Her
approach to magic was essential for beating the 25th gateway boss… and I don't think that will be
the last time we need her knowledge to progress, either." When she looked at Sigurd then, even he
was wearing a horrified expression. "I don't think Skarrip ever intended to leave the game—or for
anyone else to."

"Then why allow you to kill him?" Sigurd demanded.

Sakuya shook her head. "I wish I had an answer for you. My guess? Because he was off his rocker.
He's been getting worse, and you both know it. Maybe he was so delusional he didn't really think
he'd die. Maybe a dramatic abdication was exactly what he wanted for the role he was playing."

Chimiro absorbed this in silence. "Very well," he said once he'd gathered his thoughts and come to a
decision. "I will speak to the others. For the time being, I do not suggest leaving this room—let the
immediate uproar fade a bit. I will return and let you know what the mood of the city is like."
"Thank you, Chimiro," Sakuya said as she bowed low and remained that way without looking up. She did not raise her head again until she heard the door to the office slide shut once more.

With mild annoyance, she noted that there had only been one set of receding footsteps; Sigurd remained in the room with his arms crossed, an unreadable but dark expression on his face.

"You're still here," Sakuya remarked.

"How observant of you," Sigurd said.

"Why?" she asked as she circled the large wooden desk. Her weapon and its sheath shimmered on her back and then disappeared as she unequipped them before settling heavily into the swivel chair behind the desk. It had been large enough to conceal Skarrip from her view when turned away; it nearly swallowed her when she sat in it.

Sigurd didn't answer for a few moments. She could almost see the thoughts racing behind his eyes, although she couldn't begin to imagine what they were. "Your story," he said quietly, "doesn't add up." He took a few steps towards the desk and faced her across it, leaning slightly forward. "You lied to Chimiro."

Sakuya lifted an eyebrow. "Of course I did. The alternative was telling him that you were the one who hired Prophet on Skarrip's orders. Be grateful that the satisfaction I'd get from outing you for what you did is outweighed by your usefulness as the leader of our clearing groups."

"That's not at all what I meant," Sigurd said, eyes dropping to the mess on the desk. He flicked one of the overturned chess pieces with his forefinger, sending the pawn skittering across the desk. It almost landed in Sakuya's lap; she snatched it out of the air before it could. "You didn't defeat Lord Skarrip in a duel."

Sakuya busied herself examining the piece in her hands while she tried to figure out how to respond to Sigurd's challenge; it was entirely too perceptive and close to the truth for her liking. In real life, the wooden chess piece would've been scratched or even broken from the punishment it had taken. Its 3D model was unblemished; she doubted the item had enough durability to warrant a damage skin. Glancing back up at Sigurd, she saw that he was still staring at her intently, waiting for an answer.

"I'll humor you," she said, flipping the pawn back towards him. He deflected it disinterestedly with the back of his hand, not even looking as it clattered to the floor. While they locked eyes, she could hear the faint tinkle of the piece shattering as the last of its minimal durability was exhausted. "How else could I have killed him here in his own office, if he didn't consent to it?"

"I don't know," Sigurd said. The admission was almost stunning; it worried her that he was willing to make that concession. "But it wasn't a duel. There was no Winner notification in hanging in the air. That window doesn't disappear that quickly."

"I don't know," Sakuya thought, fighting to keep the alarm off her face. The idea of a duel had been the only thing she could come up with that fit within Alfheim's known game mechanics, but it was only afterwards—still in the middle of everything—that she'd begun to realize how many holes were in that story. She'd hoped no one who had ever actually seen a duel had been present; she was fairly sure Chimiro had never even seen PvP combat at all. "Fine," she said. "So what do you think happened?"

"I said I don't know!" Sigurd snapped suddenly, slamming a fist down on the desk and making all of the scattered markers and pieces jump. "Damnit Sakuya, what in the hell happened in here? There
was no duel, so don't bother trying to come up with an explanation for that. But it should've been impossible to PVP in this room otherwise!" He straightened and jabbed his index finger towards the entrance to the spacious office. "There were maybe ten seconds between the time that the system notification went out and the time that door unlocked itself. What the hell did you do with Lord Skarrip's Remain Light?"

It was at that point that Sakuya lost her composure. Of all the little details that had been so wrong about this entire encounter… she'd been so fixed on the way Skarrip had transformed into an NPC and then a mob, it hadn't struck her as out of place that he'd shattered into polygons rather than combusting into a Remain Light. Only players became Remain Lights, and whatever Skarrip once was… he hadn't been a player when she'd struck him. Her jaw hung open slightly, and for a few moments all she could do was stare at Sigurd, eyes wide.

Sigurd didn't give her a chance to recover. "You're hiding something, Sakuya. Something bigger than Lord Skarrip's murder. I didn't have to cover for you with Chimiro—who do you think he would've believed if I'd told him you were lying? The leader of our clearing groups, Lord Skarrip's most trusted field man? Or the woman who killed him?" Sigurd's lips twisted into contempt as he planted his palms on the desk and loomed over it. "You owe me. All I have to do is go to Chimiro and tell him that I only lied because I was afraid of what you'd do. And I will do it if you don't come clean about what the fuck happened in this room."

If there was one thing to which Sakuya had never responded well, it was blackmail. The threat put steel back in her, and she stood from the chair and fixed Sigurd with cold fury. "A word to the wise, Sigurd," she hissed. "Don't play your trump card at the beginning of the game. You might well be able to destroy any credibility I have left by telling stories to Chimiro. But now I'll know it was you who did it. In fact, if anything like that ever happens… you can bank on the fact that I'll simply assume it was you, whether it was or not. And guess what happens then?"

"Spare me your—"

"Shut up and listen," Sakuya said flatly. "I'll make this as plain and simple as I can: burn me, and you burn with me. Whether or not I have credibility, I still have the ability to exile you. And I will."

"Which sends an announcement to the entire faction," Sigurd said. "You will never be able to leave this city alive if you do that."

"Whereas you won't be able to enter it alive," Sakuya said. "Or even come close to it. Your cursor will be red to the NPC guards."

"Only until the next election," Sigurd said smugly. "You think the next faction leader won't reverse that?"

"I'm sure they will," Sakuya said. "But by then it won't matter. Because the next thing I will do is tell Argo that you were the one who hired Prophet and caused Robert's death. Perhaps no one here will believe me… but she will. And if that information goes out to The Rat's network… the whole world will know." She drew a finger across her neck in an unmistakable message. "You'll be a walking dead man, Sigurd. You won't be able to step one pixel outside of a Safe Zone without someone trying to take your head."

Sakuya then had the pleasure of watching Sigurd's smug expression evaporate immediately into stark fear before his face went blank. "You bitch."

"I'll take that insult as an admission of defeat," Sakuya said, slowly lowering herself back down to the seat so that the shaking in her legs wouldn't betray her. "Get a grip on yourself, Sigurd—it
doesn't have to play out that way. The only way I'm going to pull that trigger is if you fuck me over first. Do your job as a clearer and don't try to betray me, and none of that happens."

Never in the time she'd known him had she seen Sigurd as angry as he plainly was then. His fists clenched and loosened repeatedly at his sides, and his jaw trembled with helpless rage; his glare could have killed. "No," he said with finality. "I'm calling your bluff. You still haven't explained what went on in this room that ended Lord Skarrrip's life, and if I don't get an answer, I'm bringing us both down. Exile me and I'll send a message to Chimiro telling him you're a fucking liar and a murderer. Your victory will be short-lived and Pyrrhic."

"Tell Chimiro, and I exile you and get The Rat to sign your death warrant," Sakuya retorted.

"So be it," Sigurd said coldly. "This is your last chance, Lady Sakuya. You can give me the truth of what happened here this morning. Or you can keep your secrets and start a war that kills us both and destroys the Sylphs."

Sakuya wasn't quite certain how long they stared at each other after that, eyes locked. An avatar's eyes did not dry in the air; a player had no need to blink and no reflex for doing so. Most people did anyway out of a lifetime of habit, but those who knew it was unnecessary could hold a staring contest indefinitely. More than once she was tempted to open the Faction Leader's administrative menu and put an end to the mess that her world had become—to trade a future of walking on the edge of a blade for the certainty of closure, even if that closure meant her death.

She couldn't. And as the moments dragged on, she realized that it was pride as much as anything that was pushing her to that point. She couldn't tolerate the idea of giving in to Sigurd. It felt like surrender; the prospect almost nauseated her.

"You're not going to like this," she said slowly.

"Of that I have no doubt," Sigurd grumbled.

"You're not going to believe it either."

"Try me."

Sakuya leaned close enough to the desk so that she could reach across it, resting a fingertip on the white king—one of the few pieces still standing upright, untouched by the earlier struggle. A gentle push tipped it over, and in its place she stood up the black king. "Tell me, Sigurd," she said carefully, "how much do you know about Norse mythology?"

He scoffed, giving her a withering look. "More than you, I'd wager," he said disdainfully. "My name is taken from it."

Sakuya smiled up at him across the desk. There was not a shred of humor or warmth in the expression. "Good. That gives us a head start."

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Asuna had to force herself to slow down. It wasn't that she feared running into any aggro mobs that she couldn't handle… it was more a matter of dignity. A feverish sensation of embarrassment mixed with fear had filled her since she'd flown away from Kirito, and every time she thought about how she'd just behaved she wanted to squeeze her eyes shut to blot it out—but doing so only made the memory more vivid against the backdrop of her eyelids, framed by her HUD. For the last several minutes she'd cut a bright blue line across the sky at top speed, flying as fast as she could like a motorist who'd panicked and put their foot to the floor—perhaps in the hope that the chill of the wind
blowing past her face would cool her burning cheeks.

*What on Earth possessed you?* she demanded of herself. She'd been standing in front of Kirito, talking with him as they prepared to go their separate ways for the time being. He'd smiled in that genuine, boyish way of his, and just when she'd been about to take what he'd said the wrong way, he'd completely turned her around by telling her that the very thing about which she was getting defensive was something he admired about her.

And then she'd touched him.

Even now the thought filled her with embarrassment. It hadn't been a squeeze of the shoulder or anything modest like that. When he'd said what he'd said, it had caught her completely off-guard, and she'd felt an overwhelming surge of... something. A pull, almost gravitational in nature. Before she'd really known what she was doing, she'd found herself leaning against him, and from somewhere deep within her had come her plea for him not to drop the party.

Asuna at least had some idea where that plea had come from: fear. For a moment—one single, terrible, paper-thin moment—she'd felt an awful sense of foreboding, a dread of what would happen if Kirito left their party and something happened to him. Prophet was a Spriggan, and Kirito was headed to that territory—it wasn't completely out of the realm of possibility that they'd encounter each other there. She didn't think he could handle Prophet alone, but it wasn't as if him staying in the party would do them any good if that happened—not with her almost a hundred kilometers from Penwether.

There he would die... and she might never even know it had happened. Even now the stray notion filled her with such a sense of desperate aversion that she had to force herself to shift her train of thought away from it.

*That touch.* His avatar wasn't a real body, but beneath her palm she'd been able to feel warmth seeping through the lightweight gray leather breastplate that Kirito wore over his tunic, a simulated warmth from simulated body heat. She'd known it was time for her to go, but it had been an inner struggle to make herself do so. With each passing moment she'd managed to back away just a little bit, maintaining the contact as long as she could until at last she'd caught his hand.

On that touch, a parade of scenes had flashed through her mind—memories of times they'd encountered each other by chance, the few meals they'd shared, the things they'd accomplished together, the times they'd saved each other's lives... each scene had felt like a heartbeat that she would've sworn she could hear in her ears and transfer to him through her fingertips. The rational part of her knew this was silly—the simulation of their bodies didn't extend as far as imitating a pulse, and it had taken her a long time to get used to the omission of that simple detail.

In the wake of that momentary recollection, right before her fingertips slipped away from his, she remembered one thought clearly entering her mind—a thought that had come close to surfacing a number of times before, but which she'd vehemently denied and never allowed herself to consciously contemplate until now: *I'm in love with him.* The thought sent a shock through her from head to toe even now, one which at that time she'd been certain he'd notice. Before her resolve could break she'd looked up at him, brought a smile to her face that was actually genuine, and said goodbye.

And then she'd turned and fled as fast as she could, before he could see the heat rising to her cheeks.

"I'm in love with him," she repeated aloud to the air rushing past her, if only to hear it in her own words from her own voice.

It took her a beat to realize that the impact that stunned her next was physical, rather than the shock
of hearing those words come from her mouth. She spun and tumbled in the air, a small portion of her HP depleted by a collision with… something solid. Regaining control of her flight, she righted herself and spun around in a tight circle until she laid eyes on the humanoid avian mob that she'd run straight into while deep in her own thoughts.

*Stupid stupid stupid!* She didn't allow herself anything more than that brief mental recrimination, her rapier whipping clear of its sheath while she focused on the mob for the brief span it took to pop its cursor and name; the words «Bonemoor Harpy» hung above its head right below a light crimson diamond.

The sight made her frown for a moment. The cursor color indicated that the mob was lower level than her—but not by much; long practice let her estimate its level as somewhere in the mid-to-high twenties. This wasn't the first time today that they'd encountered mobs that weren't level-appropriate for the zone they were in, and the pattern was starting to worry her.

_Harpies are dungeon mobs_, she thought. _I've only ever seen them in this area underground, never in the open sky. And this outdoor zone caps out at level nine!_

Then she had no more time for analysis. The harpy swooped towards her, beginning to incant a Dark Magic spell in its raspy voice. Asuna's incantation was quicker; she held out her free hand and used the Defensive Shield spell in its maintained form for the brief moment it took to absorb the debuff, then clenched her fist to avoid wasting any further MP. Two sets of razor-sharp claws slashed through a space where she was no longer as she surged backwards in a burst of speed from her wings. In mid-dodge, she leveled her rapier in the opening motion of her «Piercing Barrage» technique; the system assist immediately reversed her direction while the mob was still frozen in its recovery frame. As she shot forward, her weapon arm turned into a three-hit blur that drilled glowing red holes in the harpy's chest, drawing an offended caw from the creature.

Now she was the one frozen in a recovery frame, but it was only half a second—and she'd been counting on the brief Stun status effect at the end of «Piercing Barrage» to compensate for her freeze time; she could see the icon momentarily appear beside the mob's status ribbon. In the short span while she was still locked in place, she started chanting: "**Setto yojikke wemzul dweren!**"

It was a trick that Jahala had taught her, and one that had saved her more than once. Most untargeted spells that affected only the caster did not require any specific gesture, only the required number of free hands—and the recovery frame of a weapon technique did not prevent a player from speaking. She didn't know whether it was an exploit or an intended game mechanic, but the upshot was that a quick-thinking player could cast one of a large variety of buffs and heals on themselves while they were waiting to be able to move again.

The spell she'd cast was an Offensive Shield; as soon as the spellcasting runes locked into place around her, the scintillating motes of Holy Magic energy surrounded her avatar and began delivering Damage Over Time to the mob that was in close proximity. It had the desired effect; rather than following up with a melee attack that she couldn't easily block at such close range, it screeched in pain and annoyance and beat its tattered feathery wings to get away from the proximity DOT, moving back to spellcasting range.

That was exactly what Asuna wanted it to do. Holy Magic had her most effective offensive spells; she quickly threw out a bolt of blindingly bright energy that unerringly homed in on the mob. Her wings carried her forward in the immediate wake of that Holy Bolt, chanting a Spiritual Armor buff to absorb damage while she moved her weapon arm into position for a Fire-based elemental technique. "**Setto zabukke datranyul dweren!**"

Fire was already licking up and down the length of her rapier's blade in anticipation of the attack, and
as soon as the last word of her incantation left her lips she sent the now-familiar surge of intent that unleashed the technique. Harpies were weak to fire; her «Cinder Thrust» technique struck with devastating effect. She accepted a taloned slash across her off arm in order to close with the creature as it continued to back away, letting her buff absorb the damage from the hit. A few more blows were all it took to reduce the rest of the solo mob's HP, and its shriek of defeat trailed off into the welcome shattering of glass.

That mob would've butchered anyone level-appropriate for this area who was unfortunate enough to stumble across it, Asuna thought worryingly as she examined and dismissed the Result window. Yet another thing to talk to Diavel about. Did someone train it out here from underground to try to MPK low-level players?

Carefully sheathing her rapier, Asuna grimaced at the thought; using a mob to kill another player was one of the lowest, most cowardly forms of PKing she could imagine. Since no one would get any EXP or items from a player killed by a mob, it meant that the PKing wasn't even done for personal gain of any kind—it had no purpose other than to commit murder.

It suddenly occurred to her that whoever had dragged the mob out from where it belonged might still be nearby.

Unnerved, she looked around and took stock of her surroundings while she hovered in place, determined not to make the same inattentive mistake as before. A densely-packed group of Alfheim's many floating land masses hung suspended in the air not far from her; she'd been lucky that she hadn't flown smack dab into the side of one at top speed—that would've hurt. Well, not hurt, precisely, but it would've caused her a lot of damage even at her level.

If anyone was around, watching and waiting for someone to stumble across their trap, there were plenty of places for them to hide; Alfheim was dotted with many thousands of such islands, singly and in groups, and she was close enough to a large enough gathering of them here that they blotted out much of the sky to the east.

Asuna had always found the skylands of Alfheim to be an enchanting sight no matter where they were—more than anything else in this game, they screamed fantasy world to her, reminding her of 20th-century fantasy novel covers or a few movies she'd seen when she was younger. And since as a general rule mobs seemed to get higher in level the higher you flew, they were popular with players who wanted to level up a bit further without venturing too far away from their home city. They brought back memories of her early days in the game with Yuuki, the two of them going out to spend all day leveling up and having a midday picnic on the highest point they could reach, eating together and watching Alfheim sprawl out to the limits of their vision far below.

The sight took on an entirely different feel for her now. The open sky at her back was now far more comforting than the clusters of drifting islands that ranged from rocks barely large enough for a single person to perch upon all the way up to miniature mountains that were named zones in their own right topped with regolith and foliage. She could at least see where the mobs were in the sky, and knew that nothing was going to suddenly appear there to stab her in the back. Now she felt like she didn't dare take her eyes off of the Shatterpeaks; for all she knew an entire raid group of PKers could be hiding just out of sight.

Stop it, she told herself forcefully. You're getting yourself worked up for no reason. Why would that many people—or anyone at all, really—waste time that they could be spending leveling up or farming items just hanging out here, not knowing when or even if anyone would ever stumble by or from which direction they'd be coming.

As her nervously wandering eyes settled on a distinctively-shaped cluster of grass-topped basalt
columns the size of a four-bedroom house, recognition struck and she realized exactly where she was in the Bonemoors: just about a kilometer due east of the entrance to the Valley of Rainbows, right at the western edge of the Shatterpeak Islands. The gravity-defying island of rough hexagonal columns didn't have a name of which she was aware, but it was a well-known landmark that all the clearers knew by sight.

It didn't make her feel any better about the possibility of PKers hiding in the Shatterpeaks, but now she at least thought she knew what to expect from the area. There were dungeons hidden here and there amongst the island chain, and some of them held some fairly high-level monsters compared to the surrounding zone—but Bonemoor Harpies usually only went up to level 12. At Asuna's level she could've sneezed at a level 12 mob and probably one-shotted it.

That harpy hadn't been level 12, though. At the very least it had been twice that; a mob more than ten levels below hers would've had a cursor so light it verged on pink. MPK attempt or not, there was simply no way a mob of that level should've been anywhere on this side of the mountain range ringing the Yggdrasil Basin.

Another uncomfortable thought struck her: maybe I shouldn't assume I know what to expect from this zone. I hope Yuuki and Kirito are all right.

Even though Yuuki was the youngest of them, Asuna was less worried about her safety—she knew Yuuki could solo mobs, and Imps could travel freely in Undine territory, although any patrols they ran into would probably keep an eye on their "guest" until the Imp reached a safe zone or was done with their business. Kirito, on the other hand, was going to be taking enough risks as it was. She didn't really think one of her people's patrol groups would seriously try to kill him if they happened across him—she doubted Diavel would ever approve of that. But that didn't mean they wouldn't attack or try to drive him off in some other way, and if he stumbled into an even tougher mob in the process, like that named scalefly they'd fought earlier...

I have to warn him. Eyes tracking around warily once more, she flew over and landed on one of the grass-topped hexagons of the basalt island, dismissing her wings to let them rest while she opened her menu and began composing a message.

「Something's wrong, Kirito,」 she wrote. 「I just ran into a dungeon mob that had to be around level 25—in an outdoor zone. I beat it, of course, but I'm starting to get worried. We've been running into mobs that just shouldn't be there again and again during the trip east. Keep an eye out—and not just for patrols.」

It took several minutes to get a response, but Asuna didn't mind. She'd been flying nonstop for at least half of her flight meter, and all the maneuvering during that battle had to have depleted it further; she was grateful for the excuse to sit and let her wings recharge. Still, she kept a watchful eye on the islands around her, and when Kirito's reply arrived she alternated between glancing down at it and looking around cautiously.

「Thanks for the heads up, Asuna,」 he wrote. 「I'm starting to think you were right to be worried. In an open-world MMORPG, just about anything can happen once. Twice is chance. But we're well past three examples of out-of-place mobs, and that means this is by design. Whether it's Kayaba's design or a new exploit by some player… I don't know.」

「Either is bad,」 Asuna wrote back. 「If this is how the game was made, it means it's probably only going to get worse. And if it's players doing it...」

She stopped there, unsure that she wanted to go any further. Somehow she felt that writing it out, admitting the possibility, was almost like permitting it to be real. Scolding herself for the irrational
notion, her fingers began dancing on the holographic keyboard once more.

「If it's players doing it, this could be Prophet's work. We don't actually know just how many
players he has on his side, or what they're capable of. For all we know, he could have a whole guild
of killers like him.」

「No,」 Kirito wrote back immediately. 「I refuse to believe that there are that many players in this
game who are willing to kill for the pleasure of killing. If he had that many people, he would've
brought more with him to the Sewers instead of a half-strength party. This is something else.
Although speaking of Prophet, I think I'd better try contacting Sakuya and see if she's learned
anything.」

Despite half a year spent living and fighting every day in Alfheim, Asuna was sometimes painfully
aware of how little she still knew about video games. She hated to admit it—and she knew, after
many nights spent thinking it through, that her insecurity over that fact was a large part of why she
was so hostile to anyone who made her feel self-conscious about it. But like it or not, Kirito was the
exact opposite; in the time he'd been alive he had probably forgotten more about playing games than
she'd learned during her time trapped in ALO.

She trusted him, and she trusted what he knew. And while there were a whole world of topics where
she would stand her ground and tell him off if she thought he was being stupid, she knew better than
to dismiss his judgment when it came to the VRMMORPG side of Alfheim.

「Okay,」 she wrote. 「Just promise me you'll be careful. Knowing what to expect from the zone
you're in is a basic part of surviving in this game. If we can't predict what kind of mobs we might run
into…」

「I know,」 came the prompt reply. 「I promise. You be careful too, Asuna.」

Asuna reclined until her head tapped lightly against the basalt column at her back, giving the area
one last scan before letting her eyes close for a moment. She no longer had the feeling of being
watched that she'd been verging on before, and she allowed some of the tension to leave her body in
the wake of the relief that she felt upon reading Kirito's final reply. When she felt a bit calmer and
ready to move on, she reached out and tapped Reply.

「I will. Kirito...」

She froze there, hands poised before her. I can't say it, she thought.

She didn't know if she'd ever be ready to tell him. She wasn't even sure that she was ready to accept
it herself. All the reasons she'd resisted that pull for so long, all the excuses she'd given herself for
why she couldn't let herself be involved with someone while they were trapped in this death game…
they were still valid. They still gnawed at her even now, even though she'd said the words aloud and
acknowledged her feelings for what they were.

I can't say it to him. Not now. Not yet. And even if I could... even if I felt ready to... I can't tell him in
a PM, of all things.

Asuna came to a decision, quickly backspacing over the characters she'd written and replacing them
with something far less dangerous. 「I'll be careful. See you soon.」
recipient does not accept messages from unauthorized senders."

It usually meant that the person to whom the PM was addressed had the «Accept Private Messages From Anyone» flag set to No, meaning that they could only receive PMs from people who were on their friends list or in their current party or guild. What made this response confusing was that he had exchanged a number of PMs with Sakuya just the night before, and they certainly hadn't friended each other.

Which meant that at some point between then and now—for whatever reason—she'd reset the flag back to its default value.

"What the heck, Sakuya?" He hadn't been intending to speak aloud; the words echoed off the inside of the hollowed-out, lightning-blasted tree in which he'd taken cover to rest his wings, and he briefly leaned out of the hole in the side to look around. Satisfied that there were no aggro mobs or Undine players nearby who could've heard his outburst, he ducked back in and resumed looking at the dialog window as if he'd expected its contents to somehow change in the interim.

It wasn't as if he knew Sakuya that well; she didn't have any obligation to accept his messages. But she'd agreed to go to her faction leader for help investigating and dealing with Prophet's group, and he'd been trying to follow up with her to see what she'd learned. It irked him to think that she might've just told him whatever he'd wanted to hear and then blown him off.

That possibility bothered him more than it otherwise might've. A loner himself, it wasn't that he begrudged her the desire for privacy. It was more that they still didn't know who in the Sylphs had been the point of contact for Prophet's group, or indeed if it had even been a Sylph for certain. All they had to go on was second-hand testimony of a comment by Prophet—a reference to his contact as a Keroppi, a Salamander slur for Sylphs.

But Sakuya was, in the compartmentalized organizational model of the Sylph Militia, arguably one of their most senior clearers. She would have the connections to learn more, and her word would be taken much more seriously by Skarrip than the word of a Spriggan—even a fairly well-known clearer like Kirito. It had been a stroke of luck for them to run into her after the joint raid between the Sylphs and the Cait Sith, and he'd hate to have to start again from scratch in that line of investigation. Especially since neither he nor any other member of his party were in a position to go to Sylvain themselves at the moment.

*The raid.* Not long after the thought crossed his mind, he realized what the reason for her sudden silence had to be. From what Sasha had said, it was Sakuya who'd gotten the Last Attack on the 25th gateway boss. As soon as word got out, she would've probably been deluged with congratulatory messages and similar spam from other Sylph players, and it was fairly likely that she'd temporarily toggled off PMs from strangers simply to get some peace. He relaxed, feeling a little better about the inability to reach one of their best possible leads in the Sylphs.

Which still left him in the position of needing to reach her somehow. He didn't know anyone in her party, and she'd probably dissolved it after the raid anyway. She wasn't guilded. And he definitely didn't have her on his friend list. So who—

Kirito snapped his fingers as the obvious solution occurred to him. Unsure of why it had taken him this long to think of a certain information broker who still owed him a favor, he swept closed the pop-up window and began typing a new PM to Argo. It only took a minute before he got the first response.

「Little busy here, Ki-bou. What'cha need?」
「Know anyone who's friends with a Sylph clearer named Sakuya?」 Kirito wrote back. 「She's toggled off outside PMs and I need to get in touch with her.」

Kirito could've sworn that the next reply took far longer than it should've; perhaps she'd been in the middle of combat with a mob. When at last he saw the notification in his HUD, the message that followed was bewilderingly cryptic. 「Heh. Doesn't everyone.」

Leaning back against the inside of the tree trunk and staring up at the sky, Kirito tried to make sense of that answer. While he was waiting, a second message came in from Argo.

「So what's the story?」

His reply took only moments. 「You first.」

「Not this time, Ki-bou. You were the one asking for information.」

Kirito grinned again, even though she wasn't there to see it. 「You owe me, Ratgirl.」

Argo's next response took him aback. Even for her, it was blunt and abrasive. 「I don't have time for this shit today. If you wanna know something about Sakuya, I need to know what and why. Spill.」

Kirito hesitated before hitting the Reply button. He hadn't yet told Argo about the situation with Prophet and his group's attempt on Sasha's life. What information he'd requested the night before had been carefully worded to avoid giving away too much about what had happened or why he wanted to know, and there was a very good reason for that: once Argo knew, everyone in Alfheim would.

It wasn't that he objected to broadcasting Prophet's crimes to the world—he and Asuna had spent some time last night debating doing exactly that. And doing so through Argo would give their allegations credibility; it was likely to trigger a massive manhunt, which would make it much harder for the man's group of killers to freely move around and operate. It was a reasonable, low-risk approach that could go a long way towards hindering Prophet.

But it would also drive him completely underground. And the deeper Prophet went into hiding, the harder it would be for Kirito and Asuna to find him and deal with him. It was a step that Kirito was prepared to take, if that was the best way to put an end to the threat Prophet posed—but once taken, it couldn't be taken back.

「Last night I asked you for information on unexplained reports of missing players,」 Kirito finally began to write. 「I asked because I'm trying to track down a handful of PKers, and Sakuya had agreed to talk to Skarrip for me and see if he could help us find them.」 He paused. That last bit came dangerously close to being misleading, and while he wanted to be careful how much he revealed to Argo, he didn't want to damage the trust between them. He backspaced over it and rewrote the sentence slightly. 「Sakuya had agreed to talk to Skarrip for me. Last night my messages were getting through just fine, but this morning she's not accepting PMs from strangers.」

「You're set Unfindable. Where are you now?」

Kirito pulled open his map long enough to confirm the position. 「About 25 km southwest of Spriggan territory, just outside the Valley of Rainbows. Trying to not have to explain myself to an Undine patrol.」

「Riiight. Never mind then. Okay, look: I do still owe you one. So here's a freebie. Things are a bit complicated in Sylvain right now. Sakuya apparently dueled Skarrip for leadership and won, which is probably why she's not accepting outside PMs anymore. You're not gonna be able to reach her. But I'm on my way to Sylvain right now, so if you wanna send her a message, I'll play courier. This
Kirito sat there for close to a full minute after reading Argo's last message, jaw slightly open as he tried to take in this news. No one dueled for faction leadership if they could avoid it—the outcome would usually be a foregone conclusion. Most of the faction leaders had held their posts since the beginning of the game, if not shortly after, and had had virtually no time to level up. A fight between them and just about anyone else in the faction would be over in a single blow; consenting to a duel would be little different than choosing to abdicate their position.

Why would Skarrip have agreed to that? He'd just been elected by popular vote. Granted, he and Asuna hadn't stuck around at the orphanage long enough to hear the kids read off all of the faction leader results, but he distinctly recalled that Skarrip's name had been the first one they'd announced—so this duel of Sakuya's certainly couldn't have been before then. It had to have been after the vote, then… sometime in the last few hours.

None of it made any sense at all.

But now that Kirito thought it through and put everything in this context, it occurred to him that Sakuya had, in fact, been acting a little strangely when they'd met the day before. He hadn't really spent any kind of time around her, so perhaps it had just been her way, but in retrospect she'd seemed in a real hurry to excuse herself from their company as soon as the subject of Prophet came up. At the time he'd assumed that she'd been upset by the emotional weight of Sasha's reaction, or by the discussion of PKing and child murder. Either had been entirely reasonable possibilities, and he hadn't held it against her.

Looking back now, he could see several alternative explanations. A few of which were very disturbing to contemplate.

「This is important,」 Kirito typed, carefully thinking it through. 「How well do you know Sakuya? Personally, I mean?」

「I don't, really,」 Argo wrote back after a short delay. 「She's Alicia's friend, not mine. I know a bit about her, and I'll tell you for 2500 Yuld.」

Kirito rolled his eyes. At least the amount was within the limit he could send in a PM; it saved him from having to owe her. 「Tell me everything you can. I need to know what kind of person she is.」

「Mid-20s, probably an OL. College-educated. A little OCD. Kind of a classic tsundere; she's a bit standoffish with people she doesn't know or trust, but loyal and friendly with those she does. She's had the same clearing party for the last four months, and she's respected in the Sylph Militia, so she's doing something right. Allie knows her from the beta and trusts her. Big hate-on between her and Sigurd, their lead clearer. She's run for Sylph FL a couple of times, and made a good showing, so she's got a base of support. What's all this about, anyway? I gotta get moving again.」

For a moment, Kirito considered trying to negotiate for more information in exchange for an explanation. He typed several different messages, erasing each one before they were halfway written, and chewed at his lip slightly while he tried to figure out what he could possibly say that wouldn't invite too many more questions. A tingle between his shoulder blades alerted him to the fact that his flight meter was fully recharged, and his menu bobbed in front of him as he came to his feet and brought out his wings.

「I don't know if I trust her,」 he finally typed, hoping that the sudden lump in his stomach was just the carefully-cultivated wariness of someone who'd survived over six months as a solo player in
Kirito’s wings bore him straight up and out of the hollowed-out tree, and for a short time he took up a perch on the widest part of the trunk's upper lip, using the vantage point to scan the area for threats. A green aurora flickered across his eyes as he activated his «Searching» skill, and pinpoints of colored light faded into view as the cursors of detected entities within a certain range became visible to him whether they were occluded or not. Slowly panning his head around until he was satisfied there were no players within a reasonable distance, he picked a route through the sky that would keep him from running into aggro mobs for as long as possible.

*Slightly east-northeast, he thought. At least for the first minute or so. Can't see anything further than that.*

It was a habit borne from experience in traveling solo. Unlike most magical detection spells, which were capped at a given range, he wasn't aware of any hard limit on the range of «Searching»—a non-magical sixth sense of sorts that most melee scouts or solo players regarded as an absolute must-have. It was a fair tradeoff, he thought, for using an entire skill slot on one ability rather than on a school of magic that was far more versatile. But practically speaking, there came a point where distant cursors were simply too small to even see, and the more time that passed after he'd used the skill, the more outdated the information was.

The skill required concentration; it wasn't easy to keep it going while in flight—it meant that there would come a point where he'd either need to land at a high vantage point and scan again, or accept a higher risk of running into something unexpected once he ventured beyond the range that he'd scanned. Between the unnerving message he'd gotten from Asuna and the risk of running into Undine patrols, it was time to try out a new spell that had just appeared in his spellbook when his skill hit 645 that morning.

"Matto famudrokke," Kirito began, the first half of the incantation familiar to him; after Sasha's explanations he could now recognize the words as the element and magnitude of the spell. "jetrovanul dweren." The incantation was spoken quietly, but there was no mistaking the brilliant golden runes that whirled around him with each spellword. As soon as the last rune locked into place, they fragmented into golden particles that clung to him and faded into his avatar. When he glanced up at the Active Effects portion of his HUD, he could see an unfamiliar new icon there; focusing on it confirmed that it was the «Assimilation» effect with just over four minutes remaining.

According to what he'd read in the spell description, it would make his cursor appear green to any players who might see him, and reduce the aggro radius of hostile mobs by 90%. It wouldn't stop an Undine patrol from *visually* recognizing him as a Spriggan, and if he was careless enough to run straight into a mob with a red cursor he'd still have to fight, but he reasoned that it should make traveling at speed across unfriendly territory a whole lot safer. At least any patrol who spotted his green cursor using their own Searching skill wouldn't have any reason to think he wasn't just another Undine.

The spell had a significant cooldown and he wouldn't be able to recast it right away; wasting no more of Assimilation's duration, Kirito kicked off of the treetop and shot northeast, quickly accelerating to his maximum speed.

Northern Alfheim had the season of spring in the same sense that Siberia did in the real world: which was to say, *not so much*. Granted, even the coldest reaches of Gnome territory were currently somewhat warmer than that frozen expanse of Russian territory, and in spring usually refrained from the blizzards that regularly buried Nissengrof in meters of snow during the winter—but *warmer* was
a relative term, and describing the season as "spring" was being generous when a person's legs still often sank to the knees in the deeper drifts. It made flying an essential ability.

Despite the fact that Sylphs lacked the innate cold resistance of the NCC member races, Griselda didn't mind the temperature or the snow—it reminded her of home. She'd grown up in the Hokuriku region of northwestern Japan, and she'd missed the cold winters and heavy snowfall after moving to Tokyo with her husband. She'd joined the game at his behest; had she known beforehand what kind of climate was associated with which races, she figured she probably would've created a Puca character instead.

*Moot point now,* she thought wryly as she trudged through the ankle-deep snow with her farming party while they waited for their wings to recharge. She used the blade of her hand to shelter her eyes from the midday sun reflecting off all of the white that filled her field of view, but still had to squint slightly. *I managed to end up here anyway.*

On the surface, Nissengrof looked from a distance like a thinly spread-out town encircling a massive open pit more than a kilometer across at its widest point. The appearance was deceiving; the vast majority of the Gnome capital existed underground in a sprawling network of tunnels and chambers. Even so, it was hard to miss—steam from the mining and refining facilities deep within the city rose through the open pit in a hazy column that reached towards the clouds, providing a beacon of sorts that could be seen from halfway across the Glitafrost Wastes on a clear day.

This was such a day. Although their farming assignment had taken them far from most of the hidden entrances that would've let them take the tunnels back to the city, Nissengrof's plume meant that there was no need to periodically check their maps to make sure they were headed in the right direction. She stopped for a moment and looked back to make sure there were no stragglers having difficulty keeping up, and held up a hand to call for a stop when she saw the distant figures of their Puca bard and Gnome battlemage a good thirty meters behind everyone else. As her party's footsteps stopped crunching through the snow, she could faintly hear the high-pitched tones of Yoruko's flute.

She cupped her hands to her mouth, the air fogging in front of her words as she called out. "Everything alright, you two?"

Neither yelled a reply, but Griselda saw Caynz wave animatedly; when she glanced at the party list in her HUD, she didn't see any negative status effects or HP loss from either, and there were no aggro mobs nearby. Giving them a wave in return, she smiled slightly and addressed the others. "Let's keep going. They'll catch up."

They always did. Griselda had a sneaking suspicion that there was something going on between the two of them, but she wasn't about to pry into their business or say anything to the rest of the team—it wasn't as if it was causing any problems. Yoruko was a nice enough girl, and her Song Magic was an invaluable addition to the party. As for Caynz… he took his larping awfully seriously, moreso than any other player she'd ever met. But it didn't do any harm, and Griselda found it sort of endearing; apparently Yoruko thought so too.

As they resumed their forward march, a flashing notification icon caught Griselda's eye, and she focused on it without breaking stride, suddenly excited when she saw the name of her husband's Leprechaun character at the top of the PM window. Her excitement faded slightly when she read the terse message.

「Where are you?」

Griselda let out a small sigh. It was so sweet, how much Grimlock worried about her when she was gone, but sometimes it could be a little wearying. She understood why—she knew it bothered him.
that as a crafter he couldn't go out on assignments or adventures with her, and that he thought he was supposed to be protecting her. She'd offered to help him level up so that he could, but he'd refused every time, insisting that he wasn't suited to combat and that his skills were needed by the NCC.

She slowed a little as she opened a window to reply, watching the ground ahead of her instead of her typing. 「Just west of Nissengrof, dear, and on my way back in. I should be home in about half an hour, maybe less. Do you need me to pick up anything from the market?」

「No thank you,」 he wrote back promptly. 「Come straight home when your business is concluded. I have exciting news to share.」

The response piqued Griselda's curiosity. She knew her husband had been working long hours recently, grinding supplies and upgrades for their clearing groups in the push to reach the 25th gateway boss. The Sylphs and Cait Sith had gotten there first, but as far as she knew, no one up here was particularly upset about that—rumor was that there'd been a few NCC members at the raid, and that it had turned into such a mess that the NCC clearers were just as happy to have not been the ones facing down the Salamanders.

That couldn't be the news. So what was it?

「You're not even going to give me a hint, are you?」

Griselda could almost hear the smugness in the text of his answer. 「Not a solitary one. If you're so eager to find out, you'll just have to pick up the pace, won't you?」

She was almost giggling as she typed back. 「You are a cruel and merciless man.」

「Flattery will get you nowhere, my dear. Hurry back now.」

She did. Curiosity occupied her mind during the remaining trip back to Nissengrof, and once her party had deposited the day's drops at the supply depot that Chellok ran, she bid her farewells and took off running. She very nearly sprinted all the way to the apartment she and Grimlock shared, wishing the whole way that she could fly underground like those Imps could. Grateful that she didn't have to actually take the housekey out of her inventory in order to open the door, she let her hand rest on the doorknob long enough for the system to acknowledge that she was keyed for entry. She took one deep breath to calm herself, and walked in.

"Tadaima,″ she said as soon as she'd taken the first step inside. "What's the news?"

Grimlock looked up from the kitchen table, sipping at his tea. He gestured towards the empty cup on the other side of the table; Griselda seated herself and filled it, letting it warm her hands.

"Notice anything different?″ Grimlock asked vaguely.

Blinking in surprise, Griselda looked around the tiny apartment. There wasn't much to look at, and she couldn't see anything unusual. Everything was where she thought it had been when she'd left. "Not offhand,″ she said, a little confused. "Should I?"

Grimlock sighed, looking mildly disappointed as he adjusted his round-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his long nose. "And here I thought you were supposed to be the observant warrior, dear. Try again."

Griselda didn't often look her husband in the eyes, but now she fixed hers on him. "Yuuji, please, you could at least give me a h—" She stopped there as her focused gaze popped his cursor and status ribbon. There was an icon next to the ribbon that she'd never seen before. "Did you... did you join a
"I created one," Grimlock answered with a smile. "Do you know what that means?"

"I'm not really sure," she said, a bit puzzled. "Does that really do anything for us that being married in the game doesn't already? You only need to have one in order to qualify for an NCC supply contract…"

"Yes," Grimlock said with a twinkle in his eye, resting his chin in one palm with his elbow on the table. "Imagine that."

Griselda's voice nearly rose to a squeak of delight. "Oh! Did you really get it? We've been trying for weeks to bring in enough drops to get on the list!"

"I know a few people," Grimlock said slyly. "I've done some work on Constructs recently for Agil, and I was able to persuade him to put in a good word for us with Chellok. That, combined with all of the mats your group has been bringing in, was enough to tip the scales in our favor. All that remained to hold us back from getting the contract was the fact that we weren't part of a registered guild… so I remedied that little detail while you were gone."

Griselda jumped up from her seat and threw her arms around her husband, laughing. "You're terrible! But I'm not going to complain about the favoritism now. You'll be inviting all of us, right? Oh, I've got to tell the others when we meet up after lunch!"

"In due time, dear," Grimlock said from his seat as he reached up and patted her back, voice muffled slightly by her hasty embrace. "Unequip your gear and let us eat."

Their lunch passed in relative silence, the kind of comfortable silence that had grown between them over the few years that they'd been married—the kind that settled when there was nothing that really needed saying. Every now and then she looked up from her bowl of curried manta stew and caught her husband's eyes; when she did, he smiled back at her in a way that made her blush and return her attention to her food.

When they were done, Griselda collected all of the dishes and returned them to their shelves, grateful that the way the game engine handled food meant that no mess remained. She did not at all miss doing all of their dishes in the real world; at least cleanup duty was simple enough to deal with in ALO. She opened her inventory and started reviewing all of her equipment, seeing if any of it needed attention before she went back out; as she did, she realized there was an important question she'd never asked.

"So what did you name the guild?"

The question came out of the blue, but Grimlock didn't miss a beat. "Golden Apple." He looked up at her with an eager expression.

"Golden Apple?" said Griselda, cocking her head slightly as one slender hand paused halfway to her game menu. The words ougon ringo tickled something in her memory, a faint recollection from high school—a life that now seemed even more distant and alien to her than her years of marriage in the real world. "I feel like you're making a reference and I'm not getting it."

"It seemed appropriate," Grimlock said, wearing that secret smile that he sometimes affected when he felt like he was being extremely clever about something and wanted everyone to know it. She'd always found it endearing, but occasionally now it rubbed her a little wrongly, and she wasn't quite sure why.
When no explanation followed, Griselda decided to try to a little trick that Sakuya had showed her while she was part of the Sylph militia. She knew her husband was waiting for her to prompt him for an explanation so that he could show her how clever he'd been, bless his heart, but she didn't really feel like playing that game today—so instead, she changed the game. She remained silent as she might once have at home—not out of deference now, but out of patience; while she waited she continued scrolling through her inventory, looking for the gear she wanted to wear out on the afternoon’s farming run.

It didn't take long. Grimlock cleared his throat slightly, drawing her eyes to the side just in time to see him adjust his glasses again. "Mythology," he said. "You know, of course, that this game is very loosely based on Norse mythology."

Griselda nodded, even though the question had been rhetorical—now giving him her undivided attention, albeit with her eyes again slightly downcast out of long habit.

"In Norse legends, the goddess Idunn cultivated golden apples that were the source of immortality for the Aesir. In our case, we farm and produce the materials that—in a manner of speaking, of course—are the source of immortality for our clearing groups. Farming guilds like ours are, if you will, the source of golden apples for the NCC. It's an important job." When he'd finished his explanation, Grimlock looked at Griselda expectantly, pride in his eyes.

"Very clever, dear," Griselda said obligingly with a demure smile, humoring his eccentricities as she always had. She doubted more than half a dozen people in the entire game would recognize the intent behind his choice of guild name. That aside, she did appreciate the careful thought that her husband seemed to put into even the littlest things, and she leaned over to kiss him on the cheek so that he'd know she meant it. "And speaking of that job, it's about time for me to go regroup with the others."

Something flickered across Grimlock's features at those words, something that briefly darkened his eyes and pressed his lips into a line for a moment. It was there and gone before she could really process it. "Yes," he said with a sigh, making it sound like a concession he was reluctantly permitting. "I suppose you must."

She could hear the beginnings of a now-tired argument in his words, and it was an argument she did not wish to rehash—not today; not now. "I should be back in time for dinner," she assured him, re-equipping her weapon last of all. The crafted longsword Grimlock had made for her appeared at her side with a shimmer of light, and she looked at him meaningfully as it did. It wasn't the one that she usually used in the field—she didn't have the heart to tell him, but she'd gotten a mob drop that was better—but she at least wanted him to see her wearing it as she left; she knew it made him feel better about not being able to join her in combat if he was able to supply her with his own two hands.

As she pulled her cloak around her avatar and ventured out into the subterranean tunnels lacing through Nissengrof, Griselda still felt something nagging at her—something about the guild name. She knew she'd heard the term somewhere before, and although she didn't really know anything about Norse mythology that she hadn't learned after being trapped in ALO, the sense of familiarity had settled into place even more strongly after Grimlock had mentioned the name's origin. Something else… something familiar from one of her classes years ago in high school. Greek? Roman?

She shook her head to rid herself of the stray thought as a gust of wind howled down the tunnel and buffeted her face. These were the kinds of little, irrelevant things that you just couldn't think about when you were outside of the safe zone, not if you wanted to stay alert and alive—that had been drilled into her in the earliest days of the game, and the deaths of several party members during the Salamander blitz against the Sylphs had made the lesson stick.
By the time that she reached the rendezvous point and joined her party members, she'd entirely put it out of her mind.
"Dismemberment can occur when a player takes sufficient damage to an unarmored body part from an edged weapon; unlike most status effects it is permanent until healed by appropriate means. To have this effect, a single direct blow must deal a percentage of the target's Max HP equal to twice the percentage of the total volume being severed from their avatar's center of mass in the game engine. For example, a typical avatar's hand is less than 1% of its total volume; a blow to the wrist which deals at least 16 points of damage to a character with 1000 HP would deprive the target of the use of their hand. Bisecting them at the waist could require taking nearly their entire HP in one blow, but removing their head from their shoulders would only require damage equal to around a fifth of their Max HP—which is not difficult to do, given that the neck is a critical damage location..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Dismemberment»

6 May 2023
Day 182 - Midday

Argo blinked the message window closed without replying this time, chewing on Kirito's last message for a few moments and not especially caring for the flavor. A hundred questions wandered through her thoughts, and it took a lot of willpower to not re-open the message window and start demanding answers.

"You can't just drop a bomb like that and fly off, Ki-bou, she grumped to herself. If there's something I need to know before walking into Sylvain, why doesn't he just tell me?"

Except that it wasn't that easy, and she of all people knew that. It never was that easy between them. Exchanging information had almost become a game between them at times, like two merchants who cared more about the haggling than the product. And Kirito had gotten good at the game after all these months dealing with her—better than Sakuya or even Skarrip had been. And she strongly suspected that if it was truly a matter of life and death, he would've just come straight out and told her. Kirito was just that kind of guy.

Skarrip. Her thoughts kept coming back to him, and to the panicked messages Sakuya had sent to Alicia not even half an hour after the incident that had started all of this. Argo had opened all of her messages long enough to imprint them so that she could review them while she was on the move, and there was so much contradictory information that at this point she wasn't really sure what to believe.

Since they'd stopped on the Sylph-Cait border to rest their wings anyway, Argo sank to a sitting position on the edge of a wedge-shaped chunk of granite jutting out from the hills that rose towards the Ancient Forest. Believe nothing, she reminded herself, as she had so many times before when confronted with situations like this where the truth was unclear. Belief is what you have when you don't have facts. Now what do I know?

Before she could start answering that question for herself, Thelvin's deep voice cut into her musings.

"Problems?"

Argo jutted out her lower lip and blew out a puff of air that made her bangs flutter and glanced up just as Thelvin turned away from her once more. He was standing a few meters away on the peak of the outcropping where it rose to a blunt point, head tracking slowly from one side to the other while he scanned the treeline at the bottom of the ravine below. The wind cut sharply across the peak of the hill, but the man's short, sleek black hair barely seemed to stir; Argo wondered how he managed that trick. She shifted her weight on the rock, and one of his feline ears twisted to track the sound.

"Argo?"
"Same shit, different hour," Argo said unhelpfully, and then changed the subject. "How are your wings doing?"

While a player's flight time was ruled by something commonly referred to as their «Flight Meter», the name was a bit of a misnomer; there was no such gauge visible in the player's HUD. Instead, players learned to infer their remaining flight time by signs such the way they felt; a depleted flight meter produced a feeling of weariness in the back, as if from exhaustion. Experienced players got quite good at doing so, and Thelvin was no exception. He briefly brought out his scalloped amber wings and craned his neck to look over his shoulder and examine their shine. "I could use a few more minutes," he answered. "So what was that all about? Looked like ill news to me."

Argo deliberately forced neutrality onto her face; Thelvin was entirely too observant sometimes. "More messages about Skarrip's ouster," she answered with a carefully-selected truth. "The more I hear, the less I know."

Thelvin nodded, a slightly skeptical look and a twitch of one black-furred ear hinting that he wasn't entirely fooled. The titanite alloy of his plate armor scraped on the stone as he carefully lowered himself to a sitting position beside her. "News can be like that," he said. "Especially with something big where everyone has their own perspective. Any certainty as to whether or not Skarrip is really dead?"

"From her messages, Sakuya seemed to think so," Argo said. "You don't freak the fuck out the way she did if you just had a friendly First Strike duel with someone." She hesitated, fighting with the habitual reflex of charging for any further details. This wasn't the time to be holding all her cards close.

*The hell with it. He needs to know, and I need a sanity check.* "No one else seems to agree on that, though," Argo continued. "I've got one source who says she was right there when it happened, and that his Remain Light was gone. Half a dozen others through my network who have twice as many theories on why Skarrip accepted the duel, and most of them think Skarrip went into hiding or something; rumor has it he did something awful. I can tell you one thing—his name is gone from my friends list."

Thelvin frowned, forehead creasing. "That can't be right," he said. "When a friend dies, their name goes gray. You have to manually unfriend them if you don't want a dead man on your friends list."

"Choir, preaching to," Argo said testily, kicking a tuft of grass free from the outcropping and watching it burst into rapidly-evaporating particles as it fell.

"Maybe he unfriended you?"

Argo gave Thelvin a *look*, ears flattening back against her head a little. "Why the hell would he do *that*?"

Thelvin shrugged with a fluid, uneven ripple of his shoulders. "Any number of reasons. If he's trying to disappear, he certainly wouldn't want any of his friends pinpointing his location."

"That's what the «Unfindable» flag is for. It blocks anyone from seeing your location on a map, even party members."

"I know," Thelvin replied, eyes still flicking from place to place as he watched the area around them. Occasionally he would glance back over each shoulder as well; Argo wondered exactly what he was looking for. "But perhaps he wanted to create exactly the kind of uncertainty about his fate that now exists."
"Goddamned larpers. "Skarrip had his drama queen moments," Argo allowed.

"Have you tried sending him a message?"

"Yeah," Argo said immediately, kicking loose another short-lived clod of dirt. "No dice; I get an error."

"That argues for him unfriending you," Thelvin pointed out as his gaze panned back in her direction on its slow circuit.

Argo shook her head firmly. "Wrong error message."

Thelvin stopped for a moment, looking over at her in confusion. "I don't follow."

"You know that message I keep getting when I try to PM Sakuya?"

Thelvin nodded. "I believe it's something to the effect of, 'the recipient does not...'" He paused.

"—'accept messages from unauthorized senders',' Argo finished, mimicking an operator's recorded voice. "Yeah. That's not what I get when I message Skarrip—it says «Message Undeliverable»."

"So he is dead."

"Again, wrong error message."

Thelvin turned up both palms, shrugging again. Argo went silent, returning to her thoughts. That niggling detail bothered her more than anything else about this whole debacle. If you tried to send a PM to a dead player, the error you got was «That player is not logged in.» It had amused her in a grim sort of way the first time she'd seen it; the error message was likely an artifact from when ALO was designed to be a normal MMORPG. She supposed that as far as the game was concerned, a dead player really wasn't logged in.

She doubted anyone else in the game would think anything of it unless they themselves had worked on the game's code— an error message was an error message. But Argo trusted her memory; she had never—not once in her life, not ever—seen or heard of the Message Undeliverable error. It sounded like something you'd see from a system failure rather than a player mistake.

This was something new. Something unknown was at work here.

Argo had to know what it was; her curiosity was killing her.

"You're being awfully forthcoming today," Thelvin said, interrupting her thoughts again. "Am I going to get a bill later?"

Argo snorted out a laugh. It was funny because it was true. "Nah," she said. "Alicia's not here, and I gotta have someone to bounce this all this crap off of. Taken as a whole, none of it really adds up to anything other than a big steaming cup of WTF."

"What about the mood on the street? It seems like that, above all, is most relevant to how we proceed from here."

"Well, the good news is there's no rioting or PKing of outsiders or anything like that—at least, not that I've heard. Most of the Sylphs are apparently as much in the dark as we are, and are kinda trying to go about their business while this sorts itself out."

Thelvin nodded at that. "At least that makes sense," he said.
Argo's gaze slid sideways; she was curious as to his reasoning. "What makes you say that?"

"Human nature," Thelvin answered, lacing his fingers together palms-out and stretching with a creak of his armor; Argo was amused to note that his tail quivered in a very catlike way when he did so. "People in general like stability, Argo. They like feeling that things are normal. When the unexpected happens, they try to place it in their own frame of reference and normalize it. Look at our own imprisonment here. Certainly the first day was chaos. There was panic. But even this new, unfamiliar world quickly became our new normal, as it were."

Argo nodded along; what Thelvin was saying was sensible. He continued after a moment. "We're human beings trapped in a virtual fantasy world, wearing virtual bodies that are not our own. We Cait Sith in particular have had to adjust to the feline traits of our new bodies, and now all of these things have become the baseline against which we unconsciously compare everything to determine whether or not it is unusual." Thelvin's sharp features wrinkled in a smile, and one ear twitched with amusement. "Compared to that adjustment, the ouster of a faction leader is a small change."

"You were the one who was so worried about me that you had to tag along," Argo pointed out.

"I wouldn't say worried," Thelvin replied casually. "Just being prudent. A trip through another faction's territory is something I would rarely recommend doing solo. Groups are predictable; individuals less so. Regardless of how peaceful things are in the city itself, there are always exceptions who may have… reacted poorly. And you're not a combat build; we saw that much in our last fight. You don't get to spend as much time leveling up or increasing your combat skills as we do."

"That's not really a fair comparison," Argo protested, feeling her tail begin to lash behind her in embarrassment. "That mob had no business being where it was. Some asshole aggroed it and ran away until it tethered there."

"Be that as it may," Thelvin said, rotating one shoulder and then the other to loosen himself, "the fact is that it was there, and would've given you trouble if you'd been alone." His wings materialized again in a shimmer of gold and glitter, and he gave them a cursory glance while he vibrated them for a few beats. "I'm charged. Ready to get moving again?"

"Yeah, jussec." Argo drew open her menu and spawned a New Message window with the blurred fingers of long daily repetition. As she had many times now, she put Sakuya's name in the To line, and in the body of the message simply wrote the word "ping".

Send.

«The recipient does not accept messages from unauthorized senders.»

Without the zone change notification that appeared at the top edge of a player's vision when they were closer to ground level, it would've been difficult to tell where Hroarr's Fens ended and Verdant Bay began. The sprawling wetlands yielded only slowly to open water, with hundreds of submerged hills peeking above the surface near the mainland and thick patches of algae and plant life giving the bay a splotchy appearance almost indistinguishable from the swampy landscape lining both shores. It
was only from the air that the dividing line between the two was visually distinguishable; the water of the Bay was a deeper blue-green than the greenish-brown of the shallower marshlands.

Asuna was flying too high to get a zone change notification in her HUD, but this was home territory for her. Even if she hadn't been able to tell when she'd left the mainland, from this high up she could clearly see the crescent shape of the Bay as it wrapped around the 600 square kilometers of Paracelsus Island, the swampy morass becoming sparser and sparser as the open waters reached towards the Stormsurge Coast.

As a low-level player, that zone change had always been a welcome one for her and Yuuki when returning home for the day; it meant that they'd crossed the threshold separating the newbie zones surrounding Parasel from the "serious" zones of continental Alfheim. It meant that they could breathe a little easier if they were running low on supplies, and that they could fly at full speed without worrying too much about what they might run into.

It had been a long time since Asuna had felt that kind of relief upon seeing her home city. It wasn't that she disliked returning there—quite the contrary. It was just that she'd long since outleveled anything in the area to the point where there was any real tension to relieve.

As such, it came as something of a surprise to her when she let out a breath that she hadn't realized she'd been holding as she passed over Verdant Bay and into the airspace above the island that was home to the city of Parasel. While most of the mobs that she'd encountered on the way had been what she'd expected from the Fens—newbie mobs so far below her level that their cursors were nearly white—twice more since passing the Shatterpeaks she'd had to stop and deal with something that aggroed her. Neither battle had been as hair-raising as her unexpected encounter with the Bonemoor Harpy, but by the end of the second one she'd started flying much more slowly, growing more and more concerned.

This isn't just a few isolated incidents, she thought as she began to descend towards the shore to rest her wings. *We fought several tough mobs in the Valley of Rainbows, including a named. Then the Harpy. And now the last two.*

Asuna’s wings faded from her back as she dropped herself onto a moss-shrouded log that stretched at an angle from the muddy ground. She then immediately brought them back out in a panic to catch herself as one of her feet skidded out from under her on the slippery surface; this time she carefully lowered herself to a sitting position on the log and made sure she was stable before dismissing them. Pride slightly wounded, she glared at the moss as if the near-fall had been its fault before returning to her pensive thoughts.

*Something is happening.* The vague thought began to crystallize into something more as she gazed back to the west. The sky was too overcast on this side of the mountains for her to see the World Tree, but she knew exactly where it would be if the weather had been clear enough to see that far. *I'm not sure what it is, but something new is happening. Alfheim is changing.*

The thought made Asuna shiver. In a world where almost every day confronted her with some element of a life-or-death struggle, her survival depended on the hard-earned lessons of the past which taught her where it was safe to go and what she would find there, when she should be wary and when she could afford to relax. If the mob populations were changing, that predictability was gone—rendering many of the accumulated experiences of the last six months useless.

No, she thought. *Worse than useless—dangerous. If I'd been flying thoughtlessly around Arun the way I was earlier in the Bonemoors, I could've run into something closer to my level... something that would've posed a real threat.*
As on edge as she was now, it was a further relief when every mob she passed on the island had an almost-white cursor was instantly recognizable as a kind that was appropriate for the newbie zones immediately surrounding Parasel. Lesser Drakeflies, Mirefrogs, small linked encounters of Stormcrows, and other animal and insect mobs were all she saw, and every last one of them refused to aggro her unless she walked right up to them. When she spotted a trio of player cursors in the distance, she veered in their direction and came in for a landing, waiting for them to finish AOEing down the crowd of Mirefrogs that they’d gathered. There must have been half a dozen mobs clustered around their tank, and the entire group was nearly obscured by the repeated maelstroms of flames that flared out from their mage.

"Good hunting, miss," said their apparent tank once he'd swept his victory window closed, a boy in light plate armor. He pushed up his visor to reveal youthful features that Asuna thought were around her age, perhaps a little younger. His keen dark blue eyes took in the equipment she was wearing, and he straightened his posture slightly, alternating glances between the mage and archer with him. "A bit overleveled for this area, aren't you?"

"As are you," Asuna said, holding back a touch of defensiveness—she was the one intruding on their farming grounds. "Have you seen anything unusual in this zone today?"

"Unusual?" The boy grinned suddenly. "You mean besides a clearer on this side of the Bay?"

Asuna couldn't help but smile, albeit thinly; she hadn't approached them to make small talk. "Besides that," she said. "I mean mobs where they aren't supposed to be, or any that are unusually tough."

The young Undine tank looked over his shoulder at the archer, a girl around Asuna's age with navy blue hair cut in a short bob. "Serah?"

"I don't know why you're looking at me, Raythe," the girl said, unslinging her quiver and checking the ammo remaining. "You're the forward."

"And you're the one who runs around and aggro a whole bunch of mobs back here for Tristan to burn down," Raythe said. "Seen anything like what she's talking about?"

"If I had," the girl said archly, peering at him over the fletching of her arrows, "we'd have fought them instead. Mirefrogs are gross."

"Yeah, but they're what drops the mats we need to bring back."

"I'll take that as a no," Asuna said, relaxing just a little. "Look, I'm not going to ask what your levels are, but… be careful. I ran into a level 24-ish mob in the Bonemoors, and two that couldn't have been much lower in the Fens."

There were a few beats of silence punctuated only by the chittering of swamp insects. "Bullshit," Raythe said. "Nothing that high pops on this side of the mountains."

The tall mage in the hooded blue-and-white robes who Asuna assumed was Tristan crossed his arms over the front of his chest. "Doesn't a clearer have anything better to do than troll a group of mat farmers?" he asked with narrowed eyes the color of the sky. "Like maybe clear the damn game?"

"I'm not trolling you!" Asuna said angrily, stomping a foot and immediately regretting it as muddy water splashed up around her ankles, drawing snickers from the boys in the group. "I'm trying to keep you idiots alive."

Raythe opened his mouth to say something, then stopped and turned his gaze upwards just as Asuna felt a raindrop on her bare shoulder. A few wet spots appeared on the steel of his chestplate.
"Well, that's just great," he said. "Look, thanks for the tip, but I think it's gonna start pouring here in a few minutes and I want to get at least one more round in while we wait for our wings to charge."

Raythe and Tristan both turned and started walking eastwards without a further word. Asuna's fists balled at her sides as she watched them go; the archer looked after them and back at Asuna with a conflicted expression on her slim face.

"Tell me truly," Serah said, sidestepping slowly in the general direction of her friends but not turning away just yet. "Are you screwing with us?"

Asuna looked the girl right in the eyes. There were times when she wished that you could impress your sincerity on someone with that alone, but she knew that it was rarely that easy. "I'm telling you the truth," she said earnestly. "Please be careful, and pay close attention to the cursors of everything around you. Do you have Searching?"

"Yeah," Serah said, looking at the retreating forms of the two boys briefly before back at Asuna.

"Use it," Asuna said. "Often. And if you see something dark red—flee."

"Yo, Serah!" came Raythe's shout.

"Coming!" the archer shouted back. Then, more quietly to Asuna. "I gotta go. Thanks for the warning."

Asuna nodded in silence, watching the girl hastily jog to catch up with her friends. Boys can be so stupid, she thought in annoyance. I hope they'll be okay, though. Maybe whatever's happening isn't happening to the newbie areas.

She passed a patrol group who were on their way out as she approached Parasel; none of them had seen anything unusual either. Asuna gave them the same warning, and although they didn't scoff at her the way the boys in Serah's group had, their reaction was still somewhat skeptical. She wished she could blame them—after more than six months of seeing the exact same mobs in the area with no exceptions, why would anyone imagine that would change?

Asuna was soaked to the skin by the time she reached Parasel, to the point where she stopped off in order to change at the rented room where she and Yuuki stayed when they were in the city. She hung the drenched tunic and skirt up to dry and donned a fresh outfit from her inventory—a thicker set of robes that were sealed against the weather, with a peaked hood to keep it out of her face and off her hair. Properly prepared, she headed back out for the short walk to the castle.

It was midday, and she found Diavel exactly where she'd expected to: in his office. "Asuna!" the Undine leader exclaimed delightedly, rising from his chair and beckoning to her with a wave of his hand. "I was just about to take lunch; please join me. Kuradeel, since you were offering to bring my meal, could I bother you to ask the chef to send up a second as well?"

The tall Undine at the doorway nodded once, throwing an odd look towards Asuna before stepping out and closing the door behind him. "I was just about to take lunch; please join me. Kuradeel, since you were offering to bring my meal, could I bother you to ask the chef to send up a second as well?"

"If you've just come from Arun, I don't doubt that," Diavel said, tilting his head forward in acknowledgement and giving her a warm smile. "It's a long journey. I trust it was uneventful?"

"It was nothing of the sort, I'm afraid," Asuna replied, causing Diavel's expression to sober slightly. "And that's the least of what brings me here."
Diavel gave Asuna a searching look, some of the warmth gone from him now. "This isn't a social visit, is it?"

Asuna shook her head; Diavel sighed. "I was afraid of that. I was worried enough when Jahala couldn't reach you for hours yesterday; he was ready to move on the 25th gateway boss."

"I left him a message," Asuna said with a frown. "I told him I was going to be in the Sewers and that he could easily find me there."

"That's a fairly large zone," Diavel pointed out. "But no matter. In retrospect, I doubt we would've made it there before the Cait Sith and Sylphs even if you'd been there—their raid was already under way by the time Jahala reached Arun, and it's just as well we didn't end up as the ones staring down the Salamanders. Tell me, what troubles you?"

Hesitantly, Asuna began to relate the story of how Kirito had agreed to help supervise the children in Sasha's raid group, and how she and Yuuki had joined him for that trip. The tale became harder and harder to continue when she reached the part where Prophet's group came in, and more than once she had to stop for a few moments to get her emotions under control. She left out the part where she had killed XaXa; she didn't want Diavel to know of her shame and didn't think she'd be able to keep herself together right now if she dwelled on it.

By the time she was finished telling him of Robert's death and their return to Arun, Diavel's face was pinched with sympathetic grief—grief that she knew was undercut with a righteous anger. His hand moved to open his system menu and then stopped there; he forced himself to put his palms on the desk with what looked like effort.

"If you don't want me to publicize this information yet," Diavel began, "why come and tell me?"

Asuna met the man's eyes. "Because I needed you to understand why I have to leave the clearing group for now."

A knock at the door sounded; Kuradeel entered with a tray bearing two steaming plates. "Leave the clearing group?" Diavel said, alarmed. "Asuna, that is out of the question. We need you now more than ever in order to push forward."

"And Kirito needs me in order to hunt down Prophet and his group," Asuna said tightly, face clouding up.

"Kirito?" Kuradeel spoke then, long dark blue locks trailing the motion as his head snapped around towards Asuna. "That Spriggan miscreant you've been partying with?"

"This conversation is none of your concern, Kuradeel," Asuna said coldly, firing off a glare at the gangly Undine clearer. "Nor is my choice of companions."

"My Lord," Kuradeel said, striding up to their leader's desk and splaying his hands in entreaty after setting down the tray. "I implore you to make Asuna see reason here. As one of our most respected clearers, she is in a position to set an influential example for the others. I fear what will happen if it becomes known that she has abdicated her responsibilities to go partying with a Spriggan mercenary."

"If Jahala's leadership is so weak that my taking a leave of absence will break up our clearing groups," Asuna shot back, "you've got bigger problems to worry about, Kuradeel. Your opinion is noted and filed in the appropriate bin."

"Enough of this bickering, both of you," Diavel said firmly, drawing an immediate silence. "Asuna,
with respect, I'm afraid that I share some of Kuradeel's concerns in this matter. A new zone has just opened within Yggdrasil, and initial scouting reports are that it is very, very difficult. And on top of this, you bring me news of this horrifying PK attempt. If justice is what you seek, I am more than willing to allocate one of our patrol groups to go hunting for this Prophet person—but you yourself are sorely needed where you are. As is Yuuki."

"And then there is the matter of this Spriggan," Kuradeel said sourly. "It is for very good reason that they are banned from our territory. They are soloers, mercenaries—they care only for themselves, and you cannot trust one to watch your back in the field."

"Spoken by someone who knows less than nothing about the subject," Asuna said rising to her feet so that Kuradeel would not loom so much over her. She still had to tilt her head up to lock eyes with him, but she felt less intimidated doing so. "You don't even know Kirito at all, Kuradeel."

"On the contrary," Kuradeel replied stiffly. "If you will recall, Jahala made the mistake of allowing him to join our clearing group for an outing. It was an unqualified disaster; he was nothing but a disruptive influence."

"Only because you wouldn't stop treating him like garbage!" Asuna turned to look at Diavel, who seemed to be gearing up to try to shut down their argument again. "Diavel, please. You yourself hired Kirito a few times early on, and you know he's saved my life more than once at the risk of his own. You were one of the people who was most strongly against these stupid racial divisions. You of all people should know better! Instead you've banned all Spriggans from our territory, no matter who they are or how decent of a person they actually are!" She jabbed a finger towards Kuradeel, who jerked his head back as if he'd expected her to strike him. "And this attitude is the result of that policy—your leadership on this issue has turned our faction into one of the worst when it comes to being bigoted against someone for what character they picked at the beginning of this game!"

Diavel looked genuinely pained at the accusation. "Asuna, surely you understand that I'm only trying to keep us all safe. It's a responsibility that sometimes means making unpleasant decisions that I hate making." He rose as he spoke, coming around the desk and seating himself on the edge of it near where she stood. "In the first days of the game, I let my emotions make decisions for me and granted the Imps «Ally» status in order to give them shelter from the Salamander invasion. That leniency resulted in the murders of a number of Undines at the hand of Imp PKers. Those deaths were on my shoulders, Asuna… I told everyone to welcome them with open arms and treat them as friends."

Before Asuna could protest, Diavel went on, his tone gentle. "The Spriggans refused to sign the Treaty of Arun," he said. "At first I took a wait-and-see approach, expecting Yoshihara to be unseated in the next election. Instead, she keeps getting re-elected over and over again. The Spriggans as a whole have spoken, Asuna: they want a leader who won't rule out killing someone if it suits them. Now, before you say anything, I know Kirito is a better person than that." He glanced meaningfully at Kuradeel. "Even if some among us do not. But Kirito is one Spriggan, Asuna. He doesn't speak for the others, and he clearly doesn't outvote them. You and I know him, but how is anyone else to tell him from any other Spriggan?"

"But that's just it," Asuna said, turning from Kuradeel to plead directly to Diavel. "He's an individual. They're all individuals. Try seeing them as such instead of treating them like nothing more than icons in your HUD."

Diavel turned and looked at Kuradeel, who was scowling darkly at Asuna's words and looked like he was about to speak. "Kuradeel, please leave us for now. I will call if I need your counsel."

As the door swung shut behind the other Undine clearer, Asuna faced her leader once more. "They're individuals," she repeated. "You can't judge one by the whole, or by their leader!"
Diavel worried at his lip for a few moments before speaking once more. "No," he said sadly. "You can't. But sometimes you have to anyway. How are any of our people to tell the good from the bad... until it's too late? How many must die unnecessary deaths in the name of tolerance?"

"Will you listen to yourself?" Asuna said, voice rising. "You said our people. You've accepted the us-versus-them mindset that you fought so hard against at first. Where's your sense of justice now?"

When Diavel didn't immediately respond, she pressed him. "This isn't fair, Diavel. It's not fair to all the good people who just happened to pick a Spriggan before they knew this was a death game."

"No, it's not," Diavel agreed, a heavy burden of guilt on his face. "It's not fair at all. But it's necessary." He paused, looking away from her and out of one of the rain-streaked windows. "I want to show you something."

With a practiced swipe of his fingers, he drew open his game menu and set it visible, then opened a section that Asuna had never seen before—the Administration interface available to all faction leaders. It was not a single window, but rather a large collection of them that spread out to almost fill a player's immediate field of view. A few touches brought one to the foreground, and Diavel reached up and tapped at a number in a large font at the top of a scrolling list of names, tilting the menu so that Asuna could see it clearly.

『Roster Total: 2,472 (1,812 Alive, 660 Dead)』

"Six hundred and sixty," Diavel said, his voice anguished. "Almost a third of those in the first month, and most of those to PKs. Most of which I could've prevented if I hadn't allowed sentiment to push me into a hasty decision. That number was six-fifty-eight this morning, Asuna. Every day I open that menu and find one or more new names that have gone gray... names that belonged to a person. A person whose life was my responsibility to protect. That is why I ended my hasty alliance with the Imps, and that is why I banned Spriggans from our territory."

As Asuna stared numbly at the numbers on the window, Diavel rested a hand briefly on her shoulder. "Undines are not naturally gifted with combat magic, Asuna. We can heal, yes, and that's huge—but offensively we are among the weakest of the races. I wish I had the luxury of judging every Spriggan as an individual like they deserve. I truly wish I could tell everyone to give Spriggans the benefit of the doubt unless they're attacked by one. But I can't. Not until the majority of them elect a leader who respects the value of human life and is willing to deal with cancers in their ranks like this Prophet. Until then, I have no choice but to order our patrol groups to drive them out of Undine territory whenever they are discovered."

"Some of the other factions have found ways around that problem," Asuna insisted. "The Sylphs and the NCC have an application process that lets any player from another faction qualify for Safe Zone protection. You, as a Faction Leader, have the ability to give players from other factions a green cursor on an individual basis—it's what you did for Yuuki, and nowadays nobody even bats an eye at her. Wouldn't that provide an easy, obvious way to tell a 'good' Spriggan from a so-called 'bad' one? Kirito at least deserves a green cursor in this territory if anyone does. He shouldn't feel like he has to hide from our patrols."

The intensity of the rain picked up in the lull that followed Asuna's suggestion; the dull, low-pitched white noise of it drummed against the outer walls of the castle and beat more loudly against the window. Diavel stared thoughtfully out at the gray sky once more, and Asuna gave him all the time he needed to consider her argument.

"I'll think it over," Diavel said finally, turning back to her. "That's all I can promise for now—I'm not going to make a decision like that again on the spur of the moment, not without carefully considering all the possible consequences. Not with the lives of almost two thousand people at stake. Is that fair?"
Asuna nodded, aware that this was the extent of what she was going to get out of him for now. At least it was progress. "Fair," she said. "Just please… try to remember the things you said to us, all those months ago. About how these racial divisions are artificial. Try to remember who you were."

Diavel inclined his head towards her, then looked down at the tray that Kuradeel had brought. The plates were no longer steaming. "Our lunch is getting cold," he said, unseating himself from the edge of the desk and returning to his chair. He raised his eyes to her as he tested the roasted fish with his fork. "I won't stop you from going on your hunt for this murderer, Asuna. I don't think I could if I wanted to, and if he's done what you say he did, he needs to be stopped. Just be careful."

The fish was good, if a bit cold now. Asuna ate in silence, listening to the rain and letting the sound drain some of the tension from her. After a few minutes, Diavel resumed their conversation in between mouthfuls.

"You said something earlier about how your journey was far from uneventful. Was there something else you wanted to discuss with me?"

The mobs. In the midst of her argument with Diavel and Kuradeel, she'd completely forgotten about the most recent troublesome news she'd come here to bring to his attention. Chasing her last bite with some water and dabbing at her mouth with a napkin, she nodded. "Yes, there was," she said. "Before I leave, there's a warning I want you to broadcast to the entire faction—especially to the farmers and low-level players who usually go out in the nearby zones."

"A warning?" Diavel echoed, worry once again creasing his forehead.

"A warning," Asuna confirmed. "I hope this is just a few isolated incidents, and not a permanent change in how mobs spawn. But if I'm right… every player who sets foot outside of a Safe Zone could be in a lot more danger now. And they need to know before they find out the hard way."

Diavel returned her gaze with grim focus. "You have my attention," he said. "Continue."

Gliding in for a landing, Yuuki dismissed her wings from her back with a twitch and gracefully touched down at a jog. Her knee-high black boots barely stirred the loose stones on the winding path that led up through the hills towards the Everdark Mountains, and a long purple skirt gradually ceased fluttering behind her and settled just above her ankles as she slowed to a stop and looked around carefully.

Asuna's PM had confirmed what she'd begun to suspect: the stronger mobs that they'd encountered on the way east weren't any kind of a coincidence. Yuuki had run into a few herself after she cut south through the Bonemoors on a beeline for Everdark, and while they hadn't given her any trouble at all—they'd actually helped break up the monotony of the trip—she was worried about what might happen if someone lower-level ran into them. Yuuki had made a point of hunting down every mob she could detect along the way that had a cursor which wasn't white, even when it meant stopping and going out of her way. The alternative was leaving them there for someone else to stumble into, and she couldn't let that happen.

The unusual change in mob spawns wasn't the only reason for her unease, though. This was the first time she'd been back to Everdark since… since that day.

Yuuki's expression was solemn as she looked up at the sharply rising incline before her, her thoughts a whirlwind of recollection. She was trying very hard to work up the courage to go any further, trying very hard to suppress memories that threatened to bubble up and overtake her. The last time
she'd stood in this spot, she'd been running in the other direction—lost in an exodus of Imp players who were fleeing the Salamander blitz. It had been a time of terror, a time that she would've sooner forgotten if she could.

Even now, if she squinted slightly and let her vision unfocus, she could remember what it had looked like when she'd taken one last look back at the cave entrance. A vivid memory flashed past her in a moment—a memory of being knocked down by someone who wasn't looking where they were going or didn't care who got in their way, and of being hauled to her feet by a woman who screamed at her to get moving before she got trampled. Some of the refugees had known how to fly; they'd summoned their controllers and quickly outpaced everyone who was on foot. She hadn't been sure if she could do that herself with only one hand; and even if she had it would've been her first time. She'd spent the whole afternoon that first day having fun running around the city and exploring the tunnels with—

_No_, she thought, stopping herself there before it got away from her. It had been six months, and she still couldn't think about it without a rush of anguish that brought tears to her eyes. Not that she hadn't tried—she'd done her best to inoculate herself against the pain by forcing herself to face it, by forcing herself to remember and think about it. It didn't help—nothing ever did. Not even the certainty that her sister was with God now was enough to dull the pain of her loss, and there were times when she questioned the strength of her faith if it wasn't enough to bring her peace where she most needed it in her life.

Swallowing in an attempt to get the lump out of her throat, Yuuki took a hesitant step up the path, and then another. One by one she made her feet move, and when the pair of Imp guards at the cave entrance greeted her she barely heard herself answer. Eventually her pace quickened back to normal, and she started making her way through the tunnels, following the handmade signs that pointed the way towards the city.

There were no lights in these tunnels, but as the dim glow of the sky faded with each turn she took, her eyes began to adjust and the innate night vision of her race brought the outlines of the tunnel walls into sharp clarity. As her cautious journey took her closer and closer to the city itself, she occasionally ran into other Imps; most of them simply nodded politely or gave a ritual greeting which she returned in kind. Gradually Yuuki began seeing areas that tickled some sense of familiarity, places that she thought maybe she'd seen before.

At last the winding path opened up on a rough rectangular chamber the size of a house. The whole room was dimly lit with the pale blue glow of orelight; branching side passages were labeled with more carefully-crafted permanent signs above them, and the larger central path continued onward. The sense of familiarity was stronger now, and with it came a rising apprehension that Yuuki couldn't quite pin down.

That uncertainty vanished when she reached a widening tunnel just outside of Everdark itself, and the system message announcing that she'd entered the Safe Zone briefly appeared at the top of her HUD. A distinctive double row of orelight sconces lined the main eastern entrance, and as she passed through them and laid eyes upon a darkened side passage labeled «Quartermaster's Office», Yuuki grasped for something to hold herself up; her vision blurred and she felt her knees go weak. She was only faintly aware of other Imp players staring at her as she sank to the ground with her back against a wall, trembling as flashes of memory played through her mind.

_Here_, she thought, trying in vain to get control of herself as she spiraled into a desperate and terrifying hole in her mind. _This was where it happened._

She felt vertigo overtake her, as if she was in an uncontrolled fall.
"Come on, kids," the leader of the Salamander party said to the assembled crowd with a bored drone, waving them along. "Everyone go line up in the city square."

"You're just going to kill us like you did Freikel and the other defenders!" someone screamed.

"Not unless you're dumb like they were and try to fight," the Salamander said with exasperation, giving his companions a long-suffering look. "Now will you please get a move on? We don't have all day, and the boss is gonna have my head if we have to drop anyone else. All we're trying to do is get everyone in one place so we don't have to repeat ourselves a thousand times when we tell you what's happening from here. Not like we can just email all of you."

Yuuki rubbed at her eyes, shivering. Someone was leaning over her and speaking urgently, but the flashes of memory were too vivid now for her to tell what was being said to her. She felt a hand shake her shoulder, and gasped as another blinding spike of the past struck her between the eyes.

"Well I'll be damned," said an older Salamander. "Twins."

The man's companion shrugged. "Maybe. Who knows if that's what they really look like? For all you know they could be dudes back in the real world."

"You must've been asleep for the tutorial when we all got turned back to our riaru appearances, Trey."

The Salamander named Trey let the rest of his group go on ahead with a curt sweep of the hand. He regarded the two Imp girls where they huddled together, backed into a corner in the sparsely-decorated office. Something in his gaze softened slightly. "What does it matter anyway? Prisoners are prisoners. We just need to get them to the city center in one piece so we can go home."

"Can I at least keep one of them?" said the older Salamander as he gave the two girls a speculative look that made Yuuki's skin crawl. "We're bringing some of them back to Gattan as good behavior hostages anyway, and it's not like there's anyone to stop us from doing whatever we want. No laws here. No safe zone. And no one has to know."

"Are you fucking stupid, Gitou?" snarled the other Salamander, staring at his party member. "Have you even heard of the anti-harassment code?"

"Yeah, I have," said Gitou. "And from what Charkol said, the other player needs to press a button to activate it." He looked down at Yuuki, and then over at Aiko. "I hear hands don't take much damage to disable."

The other Salamander threw up his hands in defeat. "The code doesn't work that way, but you know what? I give up. You're a sick fuck and you are not my problem. Have fun explaining to Kibaou why you got your stupid ass teleported to the Imp jail."

"Take the other one with you," Gitou said, giving Aiko a rough shove towards the younger Salamander. She and Yuuki both cried out, arms held out to each other; Gitou grabbed Yuuki's shoulder in a firm grip with one hand and drew a gleaming short sword with the other. The blade flashed towards her outstretched arm, and an awful numbness replaced all the feeling in her right hand. Yuuki watched in shock as the hand fell away and burst into sparkling blue lights, and she started shrieking—louder than she ever had in her life.

"Now you've done it," Trey said with annoyance as Aiko erupted into rage, throwing herself at Gitou. The younger Salamander stuck out a foot and tripped her; she went sprawling to the ground. He planted one booted foot on her back to keep her from getting back up. "The hell did you expect to
happen, you idiot?"

The older Salamander shifted his grip down to Yuuki's undamaged wrist, twisting her arm around and forcing her to her knees in front of the stonework desk. "Will you get that one under control, Trey? She's your prisoner."

"And you're the one who pulled aggro—"

"Watch it!"

The warning came just as Aiko managed to get her dagger free of its belt sheath. She awkwardly bent her arm behind her back and plunged it into Trey's ankle; the Salamander's leg buckled under him and he went toppling backwards with a yell.

Gitou threw Yuuki aside, stunning her as she slammed against the wall and brought down a shelf filled with bento-sized lockboxes on top of her. "Why you little bitch!" He moved his short sword into a particular stance, and orange light began racing up and down the length as a high-pitched whine sounded. "Say good—"

As Yuuki used the trembling index finger of her remaining hand to touch the Yes button on the prompt hanging in front of her, a flare of blinding blue light surrounded Gitou. The end of his sentence disappeared in the noise of the teleport effect, and a moment later he was simply gone.

While Trey was staring in shock with his mouth hanging open, Aiko leapt to her feet and tackled him, palm at the pommel of her dagger. A small slice of the Salamander's HP gauge ticked down from the attack, and the two of them fell to the ground in a heap. The sounds of heavy footsteps and alarmed yells echoed down one of the passageways—the one that led back to Everdark.

"Run, Yuuki!" Aiko screamed, weapon arm rearing back for another stab. The Salamander caught her wrist with his free hand, and with his greater strength twisted the knife free of her grip.

"Oneesan!" Yuuki reached for the dagger at her own waist, but her fingers closed around empty air. It was gone—it had been lost somewhere in the struggle. Her eyes darted around in the mess of boxes frantically. It had to be around here; where was it?

Aiko's screaming was hysterical now as she clung to the Salamander named Trey, weighing him down and keeping him from getting up. The man's sword came awkwardly clear of its sheath. "Run!" she shrieked, grabbing Trey's sword arm with both hands. "Run and don't look back!"

Tears were streaming down Yuuki's face, obscuring her vision and making it hard to see anything but a blurry struggle. She gave an anguished cry and turned away, sobbing as she broke into a full-tilt run as fast as her legs could carry her.

She was screaming. She knew that much. It took her some time to realize that it wasn't her screaming in the memory… that the sound was coming from her own mouth, here and now. Gradually she managed to force down a bit of the panic, to suppress the scream into a dull moan and still some of her shuddering. A hand touched her shoulder once more, and she flinched away sharply; the person did not try to touch her again.

"Panic attack," she heard someone say; a man's voice. "I've seen it before. Something triggered her."

A woman's voice gave a heavy sigh. "No shortage of triggers around here for some of us. Okay people, enough gawking." There was a sharp clap of the hands. "Come on, you inconsiderate jackholes, move along; this isn't PTSD theater. Give the poor girl some space."
Yuuki slowly opened her eyes. She was slumped against the wall of the tunnel that led to the Quartermaster's office, knees drawn up in front of her. Other players were slowly dispersing, giving her looks that ranged from pity to confusion, and there was an Imp woman crouched in front of her about a meter away. The woman was very pretty, with curly black hair framing a slim face that would've been elfin even without the bias of her fae avatar.

"What's wrong, honey?" the woman asked softly. "Are you okay?"

Yuuki blinked heavily and looked up at the blue-haired woman whose small party had found her wandering in the southern Fens. The question took some time to penetrate; she was still numb with shock even after all of the hours she'd spent going whichever direction she needed to go in order to avoid mobs. She looked down at her right arm, cradled close to her belly by her left, and slowly unwrapped them from around herself. Gasps rippled across the four party members.

"Who did that to you, hon?" demanded the woman, reaching out and carefully lifting Yuuki's right arm before her. Yuuki jerked her arm back at the touch, and the woman exchanged glances with her companions.

"Hold still, okay? This won't hurt, it's a healing spell." said the woman, shifting her shield to her back. She held out one hand vertically before her, palm to the left and fingers straight. "Zu shaja yasun." With each word a set of golden runes spun around her, and when the three locked into place they gathered into blue light in the woman's palm. She lightly touched Yuuki's arm; a comforting warmth spread up the length of it, and the numbness ending at her wrist disappeared as her avatar's hand reformed.

Yuuki started crying.

"I'm gonna find the Salamander son of a bitch who did that," seethed the older man standing next to her. "Young miss, can you fly?"

Yuuki sniffled and tried to remember what she'd seen the others do; she held out her left hand in front of her. The woman with the electric blue hair who'd healed her reached out and gently moved Yuuki's hand into a different position; after a moment something that looked like a video game joystick appeared in her hand. She closed her fingers around it and looked up at the woman questioningly. She could feel a tingle in the middle of her back, and an extremely faint sound from behind her—like distant wind chimes.

"I'll show you how, okay?" said the woman. "Then we can fly together to Parasel."

"P-Parasel?" Yuuki framed the unfamiliar word with her lips, throat slightly raw from all the screaming she'd done earlier in the day.

The woman nodded. "Parasel. It's the Undine home city. That's what we are—Undines. You'll be safe there; our leader said so."

"Safe?"

"That's right," said the Imp woman with the curly black hair, still kneeling before her. "You're safe. It's May 6th, 2023. You're here now, not there wherever or whenever you were before. Whatever hurt you isn't here."

Yuuki's rapid breathing began to gradually slow. The world faded in around her, and some of the lightheadedness and the sense of incipient panic began to pass. Watching her as she started to calm down, the woman nodded approvingly. "That's good. Your avatar doesn't need to breathe, but you
can use your breathing to calm yourself. Do that. Take all the time you need."

Nodding slowly, Yuuki made herself look around. Everything was different—this wasn't then. This wasn't the day after Launch. She wasn't a crying child, she was a clearer—one of the strongest players in the game. If one of the Salamanders had tried now to do what they had then, she could've beaten them easily.

It helped—a little bit.

"Was that the first time you've had a panic attack?" the other Imp woman asked gently.

Yuuki shook her head. "N-no," she said, voice soft. "B-but it's the first time it's ever been that bad. Usually it's just a quick flash of memory, and then it's gone." She pushed herself a little more upright against the wall, and looked around her. "This is the first time I've been back here since... since..."

"Since the Salamanders," the woman said. It wasn't a question; Yuuki could see it in her eyes—she knew. "Oh love... you're not alone in that." She slowly stood up, and extended a hand to Yuuki. "Do you think you can stand?"

Yuuki regarded the hand blankly, as if trying to figure out what it was. Then she reached out and clasped it.

The woman started to pull; Yuuki pulled as well. With a yelp, the woman jerked forward and almost hit her head on the wall; at the last moment she brought out her wings and surged backwards hard enough to stop herself. "Holy crap, girl, what kind of STR stat do you have?"

Yuuki couldn't help it—it was too absurd, too funny. She giggled slightly, a weak little sound that made her feel like some of her life was returning to normal. "I use a longsword," she said as she carefully stood, wobbling a little bit before she got her bearings. "It's a STR weapon."

"I know that," said the woman with a slightly amused look. "But you pulled me over like it was nothing, and I'm a clearer."

"So am I," Yuuki said proudly.

The woman's gaze sharpened slightly. "Young lady, I know you've been through a terrible thing, but please don't go telling tales. It's not something for which I have much patience. I happen to know all of the Imp clearers, and you are not one of them. What's your name?"

"Yuuki," she said.

The woman nodded. "I'm Kumiko. And I guess if this is your first time back here in that long, it's no surprise I don't know you. Do you work out of Gattan, then?"

Yuuki shook her head. "Parasel."

"Para—" Kumiko stopped with her mouth half-open. "I know who you are now," she said. "At least, I think I know of you. I'd heard there was a young Imp in the Undine clearing groups, but we've never met." She smiled warmly. "I think Lord Haydon would be very interested in meeting you."

Yuuki blinked in surprise, and then laughed. "Well that's good, Miss Kumiko," she said, smiling happily. "Because he's who I came here to talk to."
Name to the contrary, there was nothing at all sinister about the main thoroughfare that switched back and forth down the inner southern wall of the Great Cauldron, directly linking the surface level of Nissengrof with the vast honeycomb of tunnels below. It was the nearly perpetual wind that gave it the name of Howling Boulevard, a chilly arctic wind that blew in from the coast and played the mouth of the tunnel like a man blowing at the opening of an empty bottle. The hollow whining sound could be heard all the way down to the lower levels when the wind was hard enough, and after a while the residents who were too close to the Boulevard learned to simply tune it out—or at least regard it as just another part of the city's ambiance.

Lisbeth had never been able to do either—in point of fact, she found it irredeemably creepy. That irregular, haunted drone had been a large part of why she'd chosen to live in Arun, only returning to the heart of the Northern Crafting Combine once every few weeks to visit friends in Nissengrof and exchange recipes and knowledge with the large community of crafters who lived there.

Still, she maintained a residence and a workshop in the Gnome capital city—on the other side of the Cauldron from Howling Boulevard, thank you very much—because there was really no reason not to. Not when she had what amounted to a permanent lease on the location, just short of outright ownership. It meant that when she visited, she didn't have to impose on her friends or try to compete for inn rooms in the busy city, and it allowed her to do a little bit of side business while she was there.

She'd get to that soon enough—but first, she had professional obligations to attend to.

The thought almost made her snort. She was fifteen years old. There were times like this when it occurred to her just how absurd it was that she'd become a reasonably well-known blacksmith in this fantasy world—a businesswoman, when it all came right down to it. Someone with responsibilities, clients, and even property. Sometimes, in a fit of self-consciousness, she wondered if she ought to be letting herself get too comfortable in this role that she'd fallen into… if perhaps one day soon they were going to all find themselves abruptly and unexpectedly logged out, and she was going to have to figure out how to be a student again—a teenager who wasn't worth any adult's time to take seriously.

Worry about it when it happens, Rika, she reminded herself as she turned the corner on her way towards the Central Supply Depot of the NCC. For now, you've got stuff to pick up.

The hallway leading to the Depot was larger than most in Nissengrof; it was easily twice the height of a normal man and wide enough for five to walk abreast without bumping elbows—Lisbeth felt like a gnat whenever she walked down it. She guessed that it had been designed that way for a purpose: to allow even the largest goods to be brought in, items much too large to be carried in a player's inventory. She'd never seen anything big enough to need the tunnel, but it had to have been made that way for some reason, and the players sure hadn't done it.

Unfortunately for her, the tunnel also ran all the way out to the Boulevard, which meant that in this part of Nissengrof the deep howling sound of the wind blowing across the topside entrance was joined by the smaller and less-frequent sound of gusts flowing past the Depot's access tunnel. She was quite relieved when the double doors closed behind her, shutting out the sound of the wind in the hallway—until she noticed that the sound had been replaced by a different kind of whine. A small group in what looked to her like farming gear was milling around in the foyer: a couple of Gnome boys, and a Puca girl somewhere around Lisbeth's own age.

The girl was playing a flute.

Lisbeth stuck a finger in her ear and wiggled it as if trying to dislodge something, grimacing at the way the high-pitched noise echoed off the walls of the far-too-cozy waiting room. She started to
open her mouth to ask the girl if she could maybe not do that in a damned enclosed space like this, and then shook her head. Her friends didn't seem to mind, and there wasn't any point—she was just passing through. Unlike this group, she was keyed for access. She waved at the fellow Leprechaun who was sitting inside the barred receptionist's room—a man who looked about as thrilled at the serenade as she was—and walked purposefully over to the locked door that led inside, giving it a moment to register the fact that she had the right key in her inventory before pushing it open.

"Agil!" she called out down the hallway leading to the main warehouse, cupping her hands to her mouth. "Chellok! Anyone home?"

Agil's deep voice filtered out from a side room near the end of the hallway. "That you, Liz? I'm in Receiving C, just finishing up with a farmer."

Jogging the rest of the way with tools jingling in the pockets of her apron, Lisbeth slowed to a stop and peeked around the corner into the named room. The massive bald Gnome who organized most of the supplies for the NCC clearing groups was standing next to a table that had a large number of crafting components spread out on it, and when he turned aside she was startled to see yet another familiar face hidden behind his bulk on the other side of the table.

"Griselda?" Lisbeth said at roughly the same time that the Sylph woman said her own name. Agil's dark brown eyes drifted between the two of them in polite confusion.

"I thought that sounded like your voice," Griselda said, waving in greeting.

"I didn't know you were farming for the clearing groups now," Lisbeth said, grinning and stepping into the room with both fists planted on her hips. She focused on Griselda for a moment to pop her cursor. When her friend's status ribbon appeared, she could see something that had never been there before: a guild symbol that looked like an apple, set in gold on a green background.

"We just got the contract today," Griselda said happily. She clasped her hands behind her back and leaned over the table, cheeks dimpling with her smile. "This afternoon was our first run as a guild. We're getting results, as you can see."

"So I see," Lisbeth said. She eyed the spread of components that the Sylph farmer had unstacked and manifested, whistling appreciatively, then elbowed Agil in the side. "You coulda told me, you big lump."

"Told you what?" Agil said with a laugh. He reached over and ruffling Lisbeth's hair into disarray with a hand that could've nearly covered her face; she squawked in good-natured protest.

"That Griz was farming for us now," Lisbeth said as she gave a backhanded smack to Agil's arm and tried in vain to put her hair back in order.

Agil absorbed the blow without so much as a twitch. "I didn't know the two of you even knew each other," he said. "To be honest, I've only met her once or twice before today; it's her husband who I've been working with."

"Liz takes care of some of my upgrades whenever she's in town," Griselda explained, coming around the table and throwing an arm around her shoulder. Lisbeth let herself be squeezed for approximately half a second before ducking under the arm and flicking away the stupid harassment pop-up.

"But she spends most of her time in Arun," Agil said, visibly trying not to laugh at the antics in his workplace. "There have to be hundreds of smiths in Nissengrof who could do that for you in the
meantime. Like your husband, for example. He's a fine craftsman."

Something flickered across Griselda's face, momentarily causing her smile to falter. If Lisbeth hadn't known exactly why it was there, she doubted she would've noticed. "Agil," Griselda said softly, "I'd appreciate it if you could please not mention this to Grimlock."

"Mention what?" Agil asked. Then, a moment later, he chuckled. "That you're bringing business to someone other than him?"

"Yes," Griselda said earnestly. She wasn't laughing. "It would just needlessly hurt him."

Confusion rose to the fore on Agil's face. "I'm… not sure I understand. Why the fuss over such a little thing?"

Lisbeth punched Agil in the arm twice, trying to distract him and spare Griselda the necessity of explaining further. "What's the big idea trying to undercut my business?"

"Ow," Agil said with a wry grin, rubbing a thick arm that had probably barely registered the hits. "Point taken," he said, turning so that he could bow to both of them. "I won't pry, then, and I won't mention this truly horrifying detail to your good husband."

The laughter on his face belied the mock seriousness of his words. Lisbeth rolled her eyes and traded glances with Griselda, who gave her a grateful nod. "Anyway," she said, "you two were in the middle of something."

"Just finishing up taking inventory of everything her party brought back this evening," Agil said, beginning to gather up the components on the table and stack them in his own inventory.

Something clicked in Lisbeth's mind; she jerked a thumb back in the direction of the foyer. "Oh, is that your group out in the waiting area, Griz? I didn't think you had a regular one."

Griselda nodded, her good cheer returning. "That's them," she confirmed. "Last time you were in town it was just me and Schmitt; the rest were pickups. Those others didn't work out, but ever since Caynz and Yoruko came on the four of us have been doing really well."

Yoruko was definitely a girl's name. There had been only one girl that Lisbeth had seen—the Puca with the flute. Process of elimination let her put two and two together. "She's a bard," Lisbeth said.

"Yoruko? Yes, that she is," Griselda said, nodding and glancing over at Agil as he finished gathering up the mats on the table.

"I don't know why you don't just do that in a trade window," Lisbeth said, lips forming into a teasing smile. "A lot easier than dragging it all out and having to pick it up again."

"I like putting my hands on things," Agil said, sweeping one of those hands crosswise in what looked like the motion of dismissing a window. "It makes them more real to me."

Lisbeth's smile turned to a lopsided grin as she mimicked recoiling away from him. "That sounds pretty dirty to me, you big perv."

"Liz!" Griselda said with wide-eyed shock.

"When I'm taking inventory," Agil said after a light snort, the dark skin of his forehead wrinkling as both eyebrows raised as far as they would go. "Only one of us in this room has a dirty mind, young lady, and it ain't me."
"You know me too well," Lisbeth thought, suppressing a snicker. The scandalized look on Griselda's face faded quickly as it seemed to penetrate that this kind of banter was normal between them. Lisbeth gave her a look that basically amounted to *what are you going to do, tell my mom?*

"So what brings you to the Depot today, Liz?" Agil asked.

"I need to pull out some mats for a project I'm working on during the conference," Lisbeth replied. "Nothing rare, just local commons in the kind of quantity I didn't want to haul around on the trip from Arun."

"I'll leave the two of you to your business," Griselda said, bowing.

"Hey, wait up," Lisbeth said to her quickly. "Stick around, will you? This'll only take a few minutes."

"My group is waiting out there, Liz. I don't want to make them wait for me any longer than I have to."

"So go wait with 'em," Lisbeth suggested. "I want to talk to you when I'm done here."

"How about I stop by your shop a bit later?" Griselda said, pausing at the doorway. "You've still got that little place in the Hoarfrost district, right?"

"That's the one," Lisbeth said, waving to her. "I'll be here all week, so I guess we've got plenty of time. Though if you bring the Puca girl with you, be sure to confiscate her flute first."

Griselda made a prolonged raspberry sound with her lips and tongue. "Yoruko's pretty good, you know. She uses some kind of advanced mode that requires her to actually know how to play an instrument for real."

Lisbeth returned the noisy sentiment. "Yeah, and doing it inside a small room almost made me go deaf for real."

"You're horrible," Griselda said, laughing and resuming her exit with a wave over her shoulder. "I'll send you a PM when I'm ready to head over. I need to go check in with my husband."

Lisbeth was glad that Griselda was turned away and couldn't see the sour look on her face. She didn't know the man, and Griselda had never said a single unkind word about him, but Lisbeth disliked him all the same. There was something in the way that her friend acted whenever she talked about her husband—some undertone that bothered Lisbeth on a visceral level. She didn't like the way Griselda felt like she had to answer to him, and as far as she was concerned, the fact that Griselda seemed afraid of how he would react to her coming to someone else to have her sword upgraded spoke for itself.

On some level, Lisbeth knew it was irrational to loathe someone she'd never even met or spoken to—but damned if she didn't anyway. It was probably for the best that they'd never been introduced; she probably would've given him a piece of her mind.

A snap of Agil's fingers pulled her abruptly out of her thoughts. "Something troubling you?" he asked.

Lisbeth shook her head swiftly, pushing the bothersome train of thought away. "Nah, just trying to remember how many Frost Beetle wings I need, among other stuff. Now let's talk shop."
The bulk of the city of Penwether was a sprawling complex of ruins linked by underground tunnels and elevated walkways, buried within a forest that seemed perpetually on the verge of taking back what once belonged to it. While not precisely easy to miss from the air, it was difficult to tell where it was until you were already very close to the city; the few peaks of orange stone blocks that rose above the treeline were hard to tell apart from any of the other ruins that dotted the Kingfall Forest.

Kirito knew where he was going, even if it had been some time since he'd been there. And now that he was out of Undine territory, he felt little need to take his time despite the potential of encountering higher-level mobs. Hostile mobs he could deal with. Hostile players were something he preferred to avoid. And he was going to be very glad to get into an inn room and out of his wet clothing; he felt like he was going to start losing HP just from the windchill.

The vine-covered, stepped ziggurats and walkways paved with cracked tiles reminded him faintly of pictures he'd seen of various Mayan ruins on the South American continent—albeit in considerably better shape. The sun was halfway towards the mountains to the southwest by the time he descended towards Penwether, casting long shadows across the crumbling and faux-deserted structures, and Kirito's stomach was starting to sing a familiar song that urged him to find sustenance before trying to locate his quarry.

There were not actually many places to eat in Penwether—NPC services in cities, Kirito had noticed, tended to reflect the volume and variety of drops that got sold in the city and the player population, and he would've been surprised if there were more than around 500 players who made Penwether their home—if that. After touching down in the muddy streets in the middle of the market, he began a slow circuit around the stalls and was slightly annoyed to find nothing at all that seemed appetizing.

Nor, for that matter, did there seem to be a whole lot of services in general. In most faction cities there were at least a few armorers, weaponsmiths and other crafters from the NCC who had set up shop to reap the benefits of doing business somewhere other than in their home cities where there was more competition, but here he didn't see a solitary Gnome, Leprechaun or Puca. Nearly every vendor or service provider he saw had the pure white cursor of an NPC.

The lack of players from the northern factions was unsurprising, he knew; beyond just the nearly persona non grata status that Spriggans had in the NCC, few of that organization's members would want to relocate to a city with such a small population where they'd be constantly checking the blacklist—not when there were so many better places to do much better business. He was even less likely to find a merchant or crafter from another faction; they were far fewer in number than in the factions with a racial advantage in crafting skills.

It was one of the many reasons Kirito spent as little time in his faction's home city as possible.

Setting aside the matter of food for the moment, he decided to secure lodging for the evening and get dry. There was a small inn far in the south wing of the main complex where he had stayed before; it was a short flight plus a shorter walk to get there. After paying for his room and unequipping all his rain-sodden gear, he flopped down on the bed and spread his arms and legs wide, taking the opportunity to indulge in a languid stretch before pulling open his game menu.

「Safe arrival,」 he wrote to Asuna. 「I'm going to get something to eat and then go try to find Yoshihara. Shouldn't be hard—from what I've heard she never leaves the city anymore.」

That duty fulfilled, he laced his fingers behind his head and took the opportunity to rest a little, staring up at the irregular dull orange stonework of the lamplit room. He felt like he'd barely done so when the reply came in.

「Thank you, Kirito. I just got a message from Yuuki too; she's safe in Everdark and spending the
night there. She has a meeting with the Imp Faction Leader in the morning. My business here in Parasel is done, so I'll be heading north to join you in just a little bit.

「That's a long flight,」 Kirito pointed out. 「With rest stops it'll take the better part of four or five hours, probably, and it'll be dark by then. Sure you don't want to stay the night in Parasel?」

He could almost hear the petulant protest coming through in Asuna's response, and it made him smile. 「I'll be just fine, thank you. Diavel has a patrol group clearing me a path to the Spriggan border, so I won't have to stop to fight much. Besides, you're likely to get into trouble if I leave you by yourself for too long.」

Kirito's head thudded back into the pillow with his palm on his face. He wasn't sure where she'd gotten the idea that he needed minding, but he was more than a little amused by it, considering how she tended to react to being babied. Pot, meet kettle. 「It's almost as if we didn't have someone in the party who was 12 years old,」 he wrote back, grinning the entire time he typed. 「Sure you don't want to keep watch over Yuuki instead?」

The next PM was some time in coming; Kirito was halfway done with selecting a new set of clothes from his inventory when he heard the notification chime and saw the blinking in his peripheral vision.

「Do you not want me there, Kirito?」

Alarmed for some reason he couldn't quite put his finger on, Kirito left himself shirtless for the moment and hastened to reply. 「No, no, that's not it at all. I just wanted your trip to be a safe one, and I thought maybe you'd prefer to see Yuuki right now, since the two of you are so close.」 He quickly jabbed the Send button almost as soon as he'd put a period at the end of his sentence.

「Yuuki sounded like she wanted some time alone,」 Asuna wrote back. 「And I'd rather be with you than have all of us be separated right now.」

Kirito had no idea what to make of that answer.

He didn't know if he was ever going to figure Asuna out. She could be so touchy sometimes, so cold at others... but there was a gentleness in her too, and a friendship that had grown between them—a trust. He would've sooner entrusted his life to her in combat than just about anyone else he knew; for all of her occasional standoffish tendencies she was as loyal and honest of a person as he'd ever known—and strong. Not just in terms of her level or her character's stats, but strong in her will and her principles, in her willingness to stand up for what she believed. That fierceness that Kirito had sometimes felt directed at him was far more often directed at things that she saw as unjust, and it was at times like that he most admired her.

It was just sometimes really, really difficult to get a read on her or how she was going to react to something. Just when he thought he had her sorted out and knew what she was going to think of something, she threw him a curveball. Like the way she'd acted when they'd parted ways at the Valley—

Kirito put an end to that train of thought immediately as his cheeks grew hot. 「I'll rent another inn room for you so that it's waiting for you when you get here,」 he wrote at last. 「I should still be awake when you do.」 An unpleasant snarling sound from his belly interrupted his thoughts as he was wrapping up the message, and he wrote, 「I need to go get something to eat now, but I'll let you know how things go with Yoshihara.」 A pause, and then: 「Safe trip.」

Since his search of the market had ended in a complete failure to find anything that didn't smell bland
and unappealing, he decided to play it safe and go with a known quantity. There was an NPC vendor on the floor directly below the Faction Leader's residence level, and while it wasn't exciting fare by any means, it was always available and predictable—and it would be convenient for the next stop on his itinerary when he was done eating.

He didn't quite count on exactly how convenient it would be. Kirito stopped for a moment in the doorway of the common room where the NPC cook was serving up some sort of soup with a dry-looking bread for dipping, staring across the room at the tall ash-haired woman who sat at a table across from a few other Spriggans in leather armor who seemed to just be getting up. Yoshihara looked like she was in the middle of her own meal, and she made a shooing motion at the pair of Spriggans who'd been sharing her table before resuming her assault on her soup.

Hunger warred with circumstance for Kirito's priorities. He was getting a bit anxious from the gnawing emptiness in his belly, but he didn't really want to waste the opportunity—by the time he got his own food, Yoshihara might well have finished her own, and he didn't want to have to try hunting her down again. Stepping aside for the black-haired Spriggan woman and her shorter companion who'd just vacated Yoshihara's table, Kirito hurried over and slipped into one of the chairs opposite her.

Yoshihara's eyes only rose from her food long enough to assess and dismiss Kirito; she gave no sign that he was anything at all to her but a random member of her faction. "Need something, kid?"

Kirito smiled at her with far more forced friendliness than he felt. "I was just thinking that the soup smelled pretty good. It's been a long trip and I was about to get some of my own. Maybe we can chat while we eat."

"That's nice. Welcome back to Penwether. Now who the hell are you?"

Kirito had to suppress a laugh at the question, if not the way it was phrased. He rested his hands on the table's rough-hewn surface as he stared at his nominal leader, unable to stop his eyes from straying to her food. "It hasn't been that long since the last time you saw me, Yoshihara. I know we're not best friends, but you'd think you could be bothered to remember."

Yoshihara looked up at him over her bowl of soup and pointedly took another spoonful, returning the stare as she finished swallowing. Without answering him, she put two fingertips to her lips and whistled sharply. Dozens of heads in the common eating hall turned towards the noise, and she waved in the direction of the willowy black-haired woman who had been on her way out the door with a small party. "Hey, Mouse!"

The Spriggan spearwoman at the doorway raised her eyebrows at the sound of her name, reaching up and scratching at the shoulder pads of her armor. "Can this wait? I told you we're heading out to go farming in the skylands, and that buff won't cast itself."

This time Kirito did laugh; no one else in the Spriggan faction ever seemed to treat Yoshihara any differently than anyone else. The Spriggan leader glared at him and then pointed across her soup bowl. "You remember who the fuck this is?"

Mouse's attention shifted to Kirito, and she gave him a look of appraisal. Moments later he saw a spark of recognition in her eyes. "Oh, yeah, he's that guy you got to stand in at that Treaty farce, remember? Haven't seen him back here in a while."

Annoyed, Kirito forced back a sigh. "My name's Kirito," he said a little wearily. "And it was more than just the Treaty. I've done work and gathered information for you a few times since."
Mouse had an appearance that matched her name; her face was slightly pinched and almost ratlike, with a long nose and very short black hair. She put a hand on her hip and exchanged a look with Yoshihara, ignoring Kirito. "Need me to stick around for now?"

Yoshihara waved dismissively. "Nah, I got this. Have fun." Returning her attention to her soup bowl, she lifted it to her lips and drained a large gulp. Wiping her mouth with the back of her wrist, she finally raised her eyes to Kirito again. "You're still here?"

"Still here," Kirito agreed. "Look, I'm not asking for your undying allegiance, but I'm here on important business and it's you I need to talk to, not some proxy."

"Business, is it?" Yoshihara pulled the curved black band out of her hair and ran her fingers through the ash-gray locks a few times, then settled it all back in place. "You should've said so when you first showed up. I've got no time for socializing, but business we can do, long as it doesn't take more than a few minutes."

"You seem to have all the time in the world," Kirito noted. "It's not like you can go anywhere, or have anything administrative to do. I'm surprised you're not bored out of your skull, honestly."

Yoshihara snorted, leaning back in her chair. "Right. So suppose you tell me what this business proposition of yours is, kid. Because you are boring me."

"I need you to look someone up," Kirito said, lowering his voice slightly. "In your Faction Leader interface, that is. I'm going to give you a name of a known PKer, and I need you to tell me whatever you can about him. And if you can, to help me track him down."

A startled look flashed across Yoshihara's petite features. "And I would want to do that… why, exactly?"

"Because I'll pay you to," Kirito said bluntly. He hadn't expected to get her cooperation by appealing to her better nature, but as a solo clearer who usually didn't have to split his loot, he was more than willing to throw money at the problem if that got the job done.

Yoshihara held his gaze for a few beats, punctuating the seconds with a staccato drumming of her fingertips on the table. "How much?" she demanded.

"Details first," Kirito said, seizing upon the opening. "Because once you know the background on this request, it may affect the asking price."

Yoshihara nodded, relaxing a little bit as the conversation started to progress along what must have been more comfortable, predictable territory. "Right," she said. "Okay, give me the info dump and we'll talk Yuld."

"There's a Spriggan who's giving all of us a bad name," Kirito began.

Yoshihara laughed and slapped the table. "Oh fuck me running, really? Because our name is worth its weight in mithril coins, let me tell you. Know how much a name weighs?"

"I'm not done," Kirito said evenly, growing increasingly irritated with her attitude and reminding himself that he didn't have to like her as long as he got what he wanted. "He and his party murdered a child."

The grin vanished immediately from Yoshihara's face. "What."

"You heard me," Kirito said, his expression hard and unflinching. "He runs with a group of Imps,
and apparently he's in the business of assassination and other dirty work. A few days ago he took a job to kill the woman who runs the orphanage in Arun. Instead he ambushed a group of her children in the Sewers and murdered one of them. Do I have your attention now, Yoshihara?"

Yoshihara's features had gone an even paler shade of gray. She was no longer looking Kirito in the eyes; instead her gaze dropped to her soup again. "And this is the guy you want to know about?"

"It is."

Yoshihara's grayish-black eyes shifted rapidly around the hall. Everyone else had gone back to eating once it became clear that nothing fun or interesting was going to happen, but one or two were still watching curiously out of the corners of their eyes. She glanced at her soup bowl again, drained the rest in one gulp, and stood, swallowing in stages until she was done. "Walk with me."

Kirito did. A number of gazes followed them on their way out of the room, and Yoshihara looked back over her shoulder as they headed down the vine-covered hallways towards the surface.

"Something wrong?" Kirito asked as he fought to keep pace with the long-legged Spriggan woman.

"I don't exactly fancy having a chat about selling information on one of our people in the middle of a fucking cafeteria where any one of them might well know whoever we're talking about," Yoshihara said irritably. She took a left down an angled hallway and stopped at the bend where she could see all the way in both directions, then leaned back against the wall with her arms crossed, speaking quietly. "What proof do you have that this guy did what he did?"

"You know me, Yoshihara," Kirito said.

"Yeah. Now pretend I don't."

"Whatever else you think of me, I'm not a liar. If anything, you've accused me of being too honest and soft-hearted."

Yoshihara shook her head. "That's not good enough, dammit, and you know it."

"Twenty children witnessed the attack," Kirito said heatedly. "I fought him off myself, along with two representatives of the Undine clearing groups. One of them is going to be arriving later this evening, and she can back up my story. If you really want, I'm sure I can get you interviews on recording crystal." Suddenly aware that his voice had been rising, he forced himself to calm down and continue in a more even tone. "What'll it take?"

A conflicted expression ruled Yoshihara's face. Her answer was long enough in coming that he was just about to press the advantage further when she finally spoke. "What's the name?"

"Prophet. The Imps that run with him are XaXa, Black, and Wraith. XaXa is dead—"

"Wait, what?" Yoshihara's eyes widened slightly, and she pushed off the wall and grabbed Kirito by the collar of his overcoat. "What did you just say?"

Kirito had only a moment to reflect on the irony of the fact that he currently had the option of sending his own Faction Leader to jail for violating his personal space. "Which? Prophet, or—"

"Oh shit," Yoshihara said, releasing him as if he was on fire. Her palm came up and covered her mouth as if she was going to be sick; she turned away from Kirito and took a few unsteady steps. "Oh god oh shit oh shit shit no."
An awful realization dawned on Kirito. "You know who he is," he said with a mixture of excitement and horror.

When Yoshihara glanced back at him, what little color her Spriggan features had ever possessed was gone. What he saw on her face in the brief moment before she averted her gaze again was an unhealthy blend of shock, disgust, and pure, raw fear. "I…" Her jaw trembled slightly, and she licked her lips once to wet them. "Come back tomorrow."

Anger and outrage flared in Kirito. "You know something, Yoshihara. If you know who Prophet is, if you know where to find him, you need to tell me before someone else—"

"I said come back tomorrow!" Yoshihara yelled, whirling to face him and reaching over her shoulder as if she was going to pull her spear from her back and strike—as if that would do anything at all here in their own Safe Zone. As her voice echoed down the hallway, Kirito was stunned to see tears in her eyes; when she seemed to realize what it was that he'd seen, she spun completely away again, arms wrapping tightly around herself.

"Yoshihara?" Kirito knew he was weak to the tears of girls on the best of days. He really had no idea how to deal with them from a strong, abrasive, grown woman who led one of the most hated factions in Alfheim and had never once demonstrated the slightest concern for what anyone else thought of her.

"Please," she said in a small voice without turning to look at him. "Just come back tomorrow."

It was the please that did it more than anything else. In no universe would Kirito ever have imagined that he would hear that one word from this woman... least of all spoken to him. He took a step back, unnerved by the surreal turn that this journey had taken. "I'll… I'll come find you in the morning," he said. "I'll be staying at the Burnside Inn under the South Wing if you need me before then."

No answer came. More disturbed and confused than he cared to admit, Kirito backed away and headed towards the exit to the surface, leaving the reviled leader of the Spriggan faction crying silently with her head pressed against the wall.
"Duels provide a way for players to engage in consensual PvP combat with a clearly-arbitrated winner, even within a Safe Zone. As with party invites and other such requests, a player who wishes to duel another uses Focus to target the other player's cursor and uses their game menu to choose a duel type (q.v. «Duel Types»). The request declares the names of both players and presents the challenged player with a prompt that allows them to accept or decline. If the challenge is accepted, any Safe Zone restrictions are temporarily lifted for both players and a 30-second countdown begins, allowing the combatants the option of casting buffs or making last-minute equipment changes before the duel commences. Players are cautioned that attacking their opponent before the countdown completes will result in an immediate loss by disqualification..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Dueling»

6 May 2023

Day 182 - Late Evening

By this point in the game, every clearing group or small community of players had their own particular flavor of survival lore—habits passed along from player to player, lessons learned the hard way that helped keep them alive or even just make daily life in Alfheim smoother. One which tended to vary the most from race to race was the method they used for quickly covering ground in uncleared territory.

Unless a player was considerably overleveled for an area, it simply wasn't safe to fly in a straight line at top speed from Point A to Point B. There would always be mobs to contend with—roamers that never seemed to show up in the same place twice, spawn points scattered throughout an area at various altitudes. One could fly up and over a mob rather than fighting it, but ascending burned wing energy more quickly, and there was no guarantee there wouldn't be something tougher to deal with higher up; mob difficulty tended to increase the higher you flew.

The strengths of Salamanders played to simply fighting their way through. Cait Sith could tame pets to fight for them—or in some cases, tame the mobs themselves. Sylphs had detection magic once Wind was leveled to a certain point, and could either stealth their way by or in some cases simply outrun mobs until they tethered. Asuna wasn't really sure how the other factions did things, but in her clearing groups the approach was generally to simply play it safe. Jahala had taught her that even though you could cover ground more quickly by continuing on foot while you waited for your wings to recharge, it was better to take the opportunity to rest. Not only did it make the overall journey less tiring, it made you less likely to have to fight a mob on the ground without the ability to fly.

Which was exactly the situation in which Asuna now found herself, precisely because she'd been in such a hurry.

She had fought Mandracoras before; even though this was a named mob she knew to expect the one-two pattern of poison spitting when «The Devouring Overgrowth» erupted from the ground and aggroed her, rearing back like a cobra and belching ichor from the mouth in the center of its petals. She dodged the first blast while chanting up her Defensive Shield spell, shoulder-rolling and coming up to her feet with her hand outstretched just in time for the follow-up projectile to splash across her shield in a hissing green mess. She reached for her rapier while using her other hand to quickly buff herself with Spiritual Armor, lunging to her feet to dash directly at the roaming plant-type mob before it could move on to its next attack set.

It was a mistake. Asuna realized as much while she was still in mid-lunge when the blocked
projectile erupted into a sickly green mist directly in her path rather than dispersing; it had been an AOE projectile that triggered on impact rather than the single-target streams of poison that the normal version of the mob used. There was no bracing oneself for poison; a nauseating tingling feeling spread across her avatar as she burst through the short-lived expanding cloud. She saw her HP begin to slowly decrement immediately after the «Poison» status icon appeared in her HUD. The drain wasn't too rapid; the mob was still quite a bit below her level—but it was steady, unblockable damage all the same.

Wrist-thick vines shot out from the serpentine plant one after another. Asuna severed the first one with the slim edge of her rapier, and two more rolling dodges across the uneven ground cover took her clear of the next few. Another tried to wrap itself around her ankle, and she slashed at it to free herself just in time to avoid being snared. When a lull in the pattern of vine attacks presented itself, she brought out her barely-charged wings just long enough to accelerate her leap above the final set of grasping tendrils and propel herself towards the plant mini-boss. Nearly half of its first HP bar disappeared as one of her strongest multi-hit rapier techniques drilled directly into the weak point where the writhing stem met the base of its petals.

"Setto zabukke yavaz yasun!" Before she'd even finished dropping to the ground after her technique, Asuna completed the incantation to the curative spell that would get rid of the DOT which was still slowly burning its way through her HP. As she landed in a crouch, her eyes went up briefly to her HUD, and then widened in surprise. What? I just cured that!

Except that the green icon was still there, and the MP for the spell had been spent. She knew she hadn't fumbled the incantation, and she'd been certain that a Magnitude 3 cure would be more than enough to get rid of a status effect from a mob much lower-level than her. Vines wrapped themselves around her free arm and left leg while she was still frozen in the long recovery frame of her technique, preventing her from casting most spells and pulling her off of her feet. She summoned her wings once more despite the sense of weariness she could still feel between her shoulder blades, keeping herself upright in the air and using them to steady herself while she used her rapier to deal with the thick cables of plant matter entrapping her. She propelled herself backwards the moment she was free, narrowly avoiding the chomping lunge from the Overgrowth's head.

Asuna heard a faint chime and caught a glimpse of yellow in the upper left of her peripheral vision. She had to get rid of that Poison status, and quickly. There was no time to experiment with different magnitudes to figure out the lowest one she could effectively use against this named mob's status effects; she used the highest one she had available. "Setto mezal keyavaz yasun!"

That did the trick. She felt the urge to breathe a sigh of relief as the status icon disappeared from her HUD and her HP stopped dropping just below the halfway point—but didn't allow herself the luxury. She was already chain-casting a Heal Over Time spell onto herself as soon as she'd finished the last spell, and when she saw that the cure had been successful she buffed her poison resistance before the mob could spit again. "Zutto yojikke neyaravul dweren!" The buff took its effect just as a pair of toxic clouds exploded against a tree trunk near her, and while the status icon still reappeared, the slow regen from her HOT spell was more than enough to counteract the slower DOT of the weakened poison effect.

Asuna had noticed a pause of a few seconds in its pattern between the spitting attack and the barrage of vines; she used that brief window to restore nearly a quarter of her HP with one of her strongest direct heals. That still left her more or less even with the Overgrowth, which had two HP bars and had lost half of one. And she was down nearly half of her MP.

I need to deal with this thing fast, Asuna thought with growing apprehension. She'd encountered the mob in a relatively clear spot in the forest, a space where the trees thinned slightly and provided few
obstructions for her to use as cover. Just to her right she spotted a trunk that had fallen at an angle against another tree and become stuck in a Y-shaped crook there; as the first set of vines snaked out towards her she threw herself to the right and came back to her feet at speed, running up the angled deadfall with several tendrils close behind her.

As the vines nipped at her heels, Asuna dove through the gap where the upright tree split, causing a number of the tendrils reaching for her to wrap themselves around the trunk and get stuck there. She brought out her wings for a few moments to stop herself in the air and reverse direction, aiming herself across the path of the Mandracora's tendrils with a short burst of acceleration. Asuna drew her rapier across one viny growth after another as she dropped in an arc, severing all of the ones that were stretched out between the mob and the tree; while it reared its head and hissed in outrage, she took advantage of the opening and charged.

With most of the vines destroyed now, the task of dealing with the creature's attacks became much easier. Her Cinder Thrust technique exploded against the Overgrowth's weak point, eliminating the last of its first HP bar in a blast of flame and sending the second one below the three-quarter mark. Asuna had already launched herself into the air when the bite came, and she let her wings go again to drop herself directly on top of the thing's outstretched head. Her rapier spun in her hand as she reversed her grip and brought it straight down, the impaling attack sinking her weapon into the mob's petaled, eyeless head nearly to the hilt.

Another brief burst of wing energy was enough to arrest her flight after it reared violently to throw her off of it, and while she slowed herself to a stop long enough to aim down the length of her arm, she begun incanting what she hoped would be the finishing blow. "Setto mezal jan!"

The unguided bolt of Holy energy surged away from her fingertips in a flash of glowing quicksilver, burning dead center into the mob's maw right as it spun to face her. The last of its red HP bar disappeared with a falling tone, and Asuna glided to the ground while The Devouring Overgrowth withered, withered, and exploded into a cloud of blue particles.

Asuna let her wings go as soon as she was close to the ground; she'd been able to make brief use of what little charge was in them during the battle, but they'd barely had any time to rest when she'd encountered the named mob, and she was lucky they hadn't gone dark at a critical moment. If she'd tried to fight the entire battle from the air, they probably would have. Sheathing her rapier and dismissing the Result window, she looked down at herself for the first time since the fight had started, and gave a groan of dismay.

Asuna liked quite a few things about being an Undine. Having most of her clothing and equipment options be white and light blue in color was not always among them. Trying to brush the worst of the mud from her outfit was a pointless gesture; it had gotten all over her arms and legs as well and she was just making it worse. She had a few alternate sets in her inventory, but she wasn't about to go changing her clothes in the middle of a public zone—and if it came to another fight like that one, she wanted the stats from her main gear.

"Just wonderful," Asuna complained to the air. "I'm going to look completely awful when I get there."

At least there wasn't too much further. She hadn't been to Penwether herself, so all she had was the map data that Kirito had shared with her—but she knew its general whereabouts anyway, and between that and being able to see Kirito's current location on her map, she was fairly sure this would be her last rest stop. It just figures that I'd come all this way without a problem only to get jumped by a stupid named right outside of the Spriggan newbie zones.

The Mandracora had been tougher than the Harpy she'd encountered the day before—being a named
mob, it was probably balanced for a full party around its level, and it was only the fact that she still far outleveled it and was equipped with high-end gear that had allowed her to solo it. And that poison DOT probably would've burned through a level-appropriate player in about ten or fifteen seconds if they didn't cure it promptly, she thought, watching the Resist Poison buff icon begin flashing as it approached the end of its duration.

There was nothing to be done for it now. Asuna pulled up her map again to verify the direction she needed to go, and had to double take to be sure she was reading it correctly. Less than a minute prior, she was certain that Kirito's map icon had been about five kilometers to the northeast; almost directly on top of the marker that was labeled Penwether. It was now southwest of that point—ever so slightly so, but nonetheless not in the same place as it had been. A pinch-and-zoom motion on the map changed the scale and confirmed her suspicions: Kirito was actively on the move.

In her direction.

Asuna palmed her face, a gesture that she instantly regretted—remembering a moment too late that she'd gotten mud on her hands trying to wipe it off her clothes. Making a frustrated sound of revulsion, she looked around until she found a puddle to rinse off her hands and face, then quickly opened up a new PM window.

「I'm fine, Kirito. You can skip the part where you come rushing to the rescue.」

He must have read the message and landed immediately; the reply was not long in coming. 「I saw your HP drop into the yellow and keep dropping.」

「Yes, that tends to happen when you fight a named mob solo,」 she responded, trying to decide whether to be exasperated by his hero complex or touched that he'd been watching her HP gauge in his HUD and came flying as soon as he thought she was in trouble. Wasn't that half the point of staying partied while they were separated—so that they'd know each other's status? Before sending the message, she added one more line. 「Thank you, but I really am fine. See? Green now.」

「It's hard to tell one set of ruins from another if you've never been to Penwether,」 Kirito wrote back, confusing her until she realized that he was changing the subject. 「The market's the most obvious landmark from the air—it's the big open space in the tiered pavillion with all the canopies covering the merchant stalls. It's getting late and I'm wearing black, but there's an NPC blacksmith right on the southern edge, and you'll be able to see the fire from his forge once you're close enough—I'll meet you there.」

True to his word, Asuna found Kirito leaning casually against the ruddy orange bricks of the NPC smith's forge, hands stuffed into a pair of the pockets running around the side of his longcoat. The elderly Spriggan NPC near him seemed to completely ignore the fact that he was there, but glanced up at Asuna and paused briefly in his hammering when she came in for a landing.

Kirito looked up a moment later, a smile on his face. The smile disappeared amidst a look of surprise as she stepped into the firelight, his eyes taking in the state of her clothing and the palm-sized smear of dirt that she hadn't been able to completely wash from her cheek and nose.

"Don't say anything," Asuna said immediately.

Kirito held up both hands in surrender. "Did I say a thing?"

"No," Asuna said, feeling the low-grade burn of embarrassment. "Which means you get to live."

Kirito looked back at her blankly, his face so perfectly neutral that she knew it had to be forced.
Asuna looked back at him with an equally even expression, as if daring him to remark on her appearance anyway.

The sound of the NPC smith's hammer began ringing out on the anvil again. The corner of Kirito's mouth twitched slightly. Entirely against her will, so did Asuna's. For a few more moments they traded twitch for twitch; Kirito was the first to lose his composure. Twitching turned to imperfectly-suppressed snickering, and finally he gave up and started laughing, holding his belly with one hand.

"It's not funny," Asuna said, laughing as she said it despite her best efforts not to.

"Yes it is," Kirito said between gasps, making no such effort any longer.

"Shut up," she said as she tried to stifle her giggles, smacking his arm half-heartedly. "It is not."

"It so is."

The portly old Spriggan NPC stopped hammering again and looked over at the pair, attention drawn by the fact that players were talking near him. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"No!" said both Kirito and Asuna at the same time, in more or less the same emphatic tone of rejection. They looked at each other as the NPC gave a grunt and turned away from them, and started laughing again.

"Oh God, I need a bath so badly," Asuna complained as she started regaining her calm. "So what did you find out from Yoshihara?"

The smile vanished from Kirito's face again, even faster than it had before. This time, however, what replaced it was nowhere near as neutral as his failed attempt to keep a straight face. "Her reaction was a bit weird," he said much more quietly, and with a puzzled furrow of his brow. "But we're not going to get anything out of her until the morning. I'll give you the details later, in private. For now, the service NPCs are starting to pack up for the night anyway—why don't I show you where your room is and give you the key, then get you something to eat?"

"Please tell me the rooms have baths," Asuna said as she fell in step beside him.

Kirito laughed again. "I'm afraid not. They're not exactly a standard feature of most inn rooms, you know—our avatars don't get body odor if you don't bathe."

"Which doesn't stop us from getting dirty anyway sometimes. I feel so gross. Is there anything higher-end I can rent? For any price? I'd sell my backup rapier for a real bath right now."

"Not that I know of," Kirito said, pointing westward. "But there's a public bath house built over a hot spring out on the edge of town."

"Public?" Asuna said skeptically, not particularly enamored of the idea of taking off her clothes anywhere but in the privacy of her own room—even if the game code did prevent her from being too exposed.

"Public as in anyone can use it," Kirito clarified. "But there's a men's side and a women's side, and it's probably empty at this time of night. It doesn't get used much anyway."

"And I wonder why," Asuna said with a slight bite to her words. "Is there at least a door?"

"I've only been there once," Kirito answered as they took to the air and flew along a path of cracked geometric tiles that was Penwether's answer to a main street. "But no, I don't think so. It's covered
and there's a stone wall between the two sides, though, so it's not like anyone could snoop without you knowing they were there."

Asuna was still skeptical when they landed near the top of the steps leading down to the large gazebo-like stone structure that had been built over the springs. Kirito made a sweeping gesture with his arm as if offering her what lay before them, and she tapped her foot slightly while she considered whether she ought to just go looking for a river to dive into.

"Up to you," Kirito said, ascending to the next step up and preparing to leave. "But if you want me to stand guard, I will."

It was the offer that made up her mind. She'd been a little nervous about the idea of putting herself in a vulnerable position when she wasn't in her own Safe Zone, but knowing that Kirito would be within earshot was reassuring. "Thanks, Kirito. I think I'd be a bit more comfortable if you stayed and kept watch." Her eyes narrowed at him sharply. "As long as you keep watch outside. Don't you dare set one foot inside that building." She didn't really think he was the type to go peeping, but you never knew with boys...

"I wouldn't!" Kirito said hastily, throwing up one hand in a solemn gesture of sincerity. "I swear!"

She pointed at the top step of the long stairway, just beneath where he stood. "Right here. Understand? Not one step further."

"I get it, I get it," Kirito protested.

Asuna looked him in the eyes long enough to quell any misgivings, and nodded. "Okay then." She turned from him and prepared to take to the air and glide down to the bath house, then stopped and looked over her shoulder again. "Not one—"

"Just go," Kirito said wearily, pointedly turning his back on the bath house.

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Argo's eyes glowed green in the darkness of the woods outside of Sylvain as she stretched out along the length of the highest branch that would hold her weight, the shine making her look a little like a cat caught in the glare of a flashlight. From this far away the cursors of the players she could see were very tiny, almost too small to identify by color—but the more narrowly she focused, the closer her view zoomed until she was at the limits of her racially-enhanced senses.

Everything looked calm. She knew full well that appearances could sometimes be deceptive. Thelvin waited in patient silence below, leaning against the trunk of the tree. His vision was as good as hers, she knew, but she was fairly certain a tank wasn't going to waste a slot on Searching or any related skills; at this distance it was unlikely he could make out anything other than the fact that there were people and they were moving. When she was satisfied that she wasn't going to learn anything further from their current vantage point, she shifted her weight with a sweep of her tail and slipped off her perch, landing soundlessly next to Thelvin.

"How does it look?" he asked quietly.

"Like a city," Argo said just as quietly. "No really, it just looks like Sylvain has any other time I've been here. No public executions or lynch mobs that I can see. Nothing's burning or exploding."

She didn't look and probably wouldn't have been able to see if she had, but she imagined that Thelvin must have at least cracked a smile at that. "Did you expect it to be?"
"Nah," Argo said. "Actually, I'm not really sure what I expected. But I at least saw what I was hoping to."

"Which was?"

"People who aren't Sylphs," Argo said. "Who seem to be going about business as usual. It tells me that whatever xenophobia or collective freakout might be going on, people from other factions feel safe enough to walk the streets at night without looking like they're expecting to be jumped."

"That's a good sign," Thelvin agreed. "How do you want to proceed?"

"Alone," Argo said, glancing up at the clock in her HUD. "I appreciate the escort, but I'm the one Sakuya asked for, and she's more likely to talk freely if I don't have any strangers with me."

She heard the subtle shifting of armor plates beside her, and tilted her head up to see Thelvin looking down at her, head silhouetted against the sky. "I'm not a stranger."

There was something in the way Thelvin said the words that made Argo set aside further argument of the point in favor of curiosity. He seemed to be implying an acquaintance beyond both of them simply being clearers. "What makes you say that?"

Thelvin was momentarily quiet; she saw him turn his gaze back to the city beyond the treeline. "I figured you knew. You seem to know everything else."

Now she really had to know. "I'll give you 15,000 Yuld for the story of how you know Sakuya outside of clearing the World Tree."

A minute or so passed in silence. Argo waited it out; the offer was on the table and he was either going to tell her or he wasn't. When at last he spoke, Thelvin's voice was even quieter, as if he expected someone to overhear even this far away. "No deal," Thelvin said.

"Twenty thousand—"

"This information is not for sale. But I will tell you for free on two conditions: one, that you agree to let me accompany you the rest of the way; two, that you keep this to yourself."

"That's not really how I work," Argo said after he gave her the second condition. "I deal in information."

"And I know there are some things you don't sell."

Which was true. As long as the person was someone who'd hadn't committed some kind of serious offense, she generally did not sell a player's levels, stats, or other truly personal—

"Oh."


"Sakuya and I know each other from the outside," Thelvin said simply. "We used to see each other."

Argo was more shocked that this was news to her than at the revelation itself. "How the hell," she said, "did I not know this?"

"Because we never brought it into the game. We tried to keep the two worlds separate. And once it was over, there wasn't any need to mention it to anyone anyway." Thelvin looked down at her again. "This may surprise you, Argo, but some people have a private life and keep it to themselves."
Well. That explained a great many things. Not the least of which being why Thelvin was so keen to escort her on this trip. But it raised new questions, such as—

"So why didn't you send her a message? We coulda saved a whole lotta time, you know."

The tone of Thelvin's reply was the closest thing to frustrated that she'd heard from him since his confrontation with Raikouji in the first days of the game. "Because she's not accepting messages from people who aren't on her friends list."

Argo chewed over that answer, and realized what it implied. "If there's history between you two, I'd rather not throw more variables into an already touchy situation. You might be better off waiting outside."

"There's history," Thelvin said. "But it's not bitter history. And it was settled well before we were all trapped in here." This time when he glanced at her, his eyes caught the reflected light from Sylvain's bright greenish-yellow glow.

Argo extended one of the claws from the back of her right bracer and picked at her teeth, mulling over this new information and the possible outcomes. The safest thing to do would be to tell Thelvin to go back to Freelia; bringing the emotional baggage from a failed relationship into this situation struck her as just short of idiotic. Sakuya hadn't asked for him, after all, she'd asked for The Rat—he was here completely uninvited. She was on the verge of telling him so when he spoke again.

"I just need to know that she's okay, Argo. I'm not here to cause a scene, and she's not the sort to do so either. I know her that well, at least."

You can find out that she's okay from here when I PM you, Argo thought and was very tempted to say. And she's managed to cause a hell of a scene here in her home city. Not generally a very sentimental person, she was not excessively moved by the whole story—not considering what was at stake.

But she knew Thelvin by now, from six months of fairly close interaction if nothing else. He was honest to a fault, and if there was anyone in her entire faction who was less likely to cause drama in a sensitive situation, she wasn't sure who it would be. His motivation was not unreasonable, and he didn't make it sound like the relations between the two of them were bad—just distant. And besides—

"You agreed," he said.

Argo sighed. Having principles was a pain in the ass sometimes.

"If you fuck this up," she told him as they took to the air once more, "you didn't come with me and I don't know you. Come on, let's go find an inn for the night."

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The bitter chill of Nissengrof's topside made Yoruko grateful for the Cold Resistance racial trait common to all Puca; not only did it mitigate a considerable amount of damage from cold-based sources, it also seemed to have an effect on the threshold beyond which the sensation of cold itself became unpleasant.

It still wasn't exactly comfortable being out in the open late at night, but at least the sky was relatively clear, with very light wind and clouds barely thick enough to diffuse the moonlight. The lack of wind alone was a blessing as she took to the air; it made flying a much less tiring business. The deep bluish-green of her flight trail traced a glowing line behind her as she crossed the city, ascending
towards one of the small floating islands that drifted lazily above the open pit of Nissengrof's Cauldron.

Even if Caynz hadn't been on her friends list and showing as an icon on her game map, she would've known where to find him. It was a favorite place that was by this point very familiar to both of them: an airborne chunk of granite roughly the size of a dump truck, cracked and split across the long axis by a missing chunk. The gap from the missing rock formed a small concave area with a flat stretch along the edge, and it was overgrown with thick tundra grass that seemed to thrive on the heat that rose from the Cauldron. The interaction of all of these factors made this particular spot ice-free and almost comfortable except in the worst weather.

As she banked to go around another floating land mass, Yoruko spotted Caynz—he was hard to miss, even from a distance. Although on the small side as Gnomes went, the way that race's avatars were scaled meant that "small" was a relative term—he was still considerably larger than Yoruko, and at 160 centimeters she had always thought her height was towards the tall end amongst her real-life friends.

And then there was his clothing.

Seated as Caynz was with his legs dangling over the very edge, the mottled pattern of his long white cloak pooled around him and made him stand out against the stone background of the isolated, unnamed island. He'd evidently been gazing down into the mouth of the Cauldron from his vantage point; he looked up at the chored tones of Yoruko's wings as she approached, a smile touching his face. Without a word he picked up the hem of his cloak and lifted one entire side of it in a clear invitation.

Yoruko was more than happy to accept. Smiling a little mischievously, she swooped low and dove under the island, doing an outside loop that brought her back up vertical so that she came out of it just above the rough edge of the island. From there it only took her a few beats to drop herself to a sitting position next to Caynz.

The advanced maneuver brought a chuckle from him as he draped the cloak around Yoruko's shoulders. "You've been practicing, my lady. I seem to remember it being not all that long ago that you mastered the voluntary use of your wings."

"Someone is a good teacher," Yoruko said, leaning to the side until her the deep blue of her hair spilled across Caynz's shoulder. "Even if he does have the most appalling fashion sense."

"The lady wounds me," Caynz said, miming a stab to the heart with his usual dramatic excess. "My new apparel is perfectly in line with the aesthetics of my Gnomish brethren—it has the required trim in our racial colors, does it not?"

"Only you would call those ugly brown splotches trim, Caynz. The rest of the world has a word for the look you're trying to pull off: camouflage. And it's bad camouflage. Which doesn't work in ALO anyway."

"It's true that the native creatures of this world have senses that will see right through the ruse," Caynz allowed, reaching up to sweep aside a harassment prompt in what was by now a gesture of habit. "But against other fae who might be seeking easy prey, it would be much more effective."

"If you're hiding in a batch of chocolate chip cookie dough, maybe," Yoruko said. She'd laughed for nearly a minute straight the first time he'd showed up in the new clothing. She wasn't an expert on games by any means, but she'd been in ALO long enough to know that mobs didn't recognize the
same visual cues that players did, and wouldn't be fooled by the ruse. It was true that the cloak might've helped conceal him from sight against human players who didn't have the Searching skill or an equivalent spell, but on the whole it was more aesthetic than practical. "So when was the last time you had to fight another player?"

Caynz didn't even have to stop and think about it. "...Never? But that's not the point."

"No," Yoruko said, "the point is that it's something your character would do, I know. I guess it just seems kinda silly to me to give up stats that could save your life for the sake of roleplaying."

"Who says I'm sacrificing any effectiveness?" Caynz said, settling his arm around her shoulders. "It's not like I have a better cloak that I could be wearing. I needed to have a new one crafted anyway, so why not have it made to look the way I want it to look?"

When he put it that way, Yoruko had to admit he had a point. And in all the time they'd been out adventuring together, his larper tendencies had never actually put them at risk—for all that he liked to play up the role of a Gnomish ranger or explorer of some sort, when it came to actually fighting against mobs he was more than capable of pulling his own weight.

_Besides_, she reminded herself as she leaned in a little closer. _Admit it, the larping is part of what makes him so cute—it's just so funny, so completely uninhibited and honest, the way it comes naturally to him. And it was part of why you decided you could trust him after only going out in a party with him once._

Which wasn't the whole truth, she knew—but the other part of that truth was something she was going to have to talk with him about soon. Perhaps even tonight.

Yoruko hated secrets—especially when it came to keeping secrets from people she regarded as close to her. And she was keeping an enormous secret at the moment, one which she had never been able to tell anyone—not even the other Puca in Sondref, which was an especially small community. It was a secret that already weighed on her enough in her daily interactions with others, even though it was none of their business—but with Caynz, it truly bothered her to feel like she had to hold back a part of herself.

It was only a matter of weeks that they'd considered themselves a couple, but their adventures together went back further than that. They still had separate residences, but even when going out exploring as a pair, she was always very careful about where and when she let down her guard—always waiting until he was off scouting ahead or they were otherwise apart.

But the times when they weren't in each other's company were becoming both fewer and shorter. They were together nearly every day now, whether as part of Griselda's farming group or off on their own exploring the area. Yoruko was becoming increasingly worried that at some point she was going to slip up—and that then she'd have some explaining to do on the spot, rather than having the luxury to think about how to broach the subject.

A squeeze on her shoulder brought her from mid-thought back to the warm presence next to her. "I sense deep thoughts," Caynz said, his voice tinged with the faint warmth of humor that rarely left him. "Would the lady care to share?"

Yoruko gave a little chuckle; the absurdly pretentious terms of address that Caynz used never failed to amuse her. _Lady? Good sir, if you only knew the things that go through my mind sometimes..._

Caynz affected a lofty pretense of ignorance. "I'm sure the thoughts are full of sweetness, magic, and the purity of snow."
If Yoruko had been taking a drink of anything then, she would've vented the majority of it out over the Cauldron. As it stood, she let out an extremely unladylike snort of laughter. "Yes, Caynz, that's it. Pure as the driven snow."

"I would expect nothing less," Caynz said. Yoruko wondered if it was his acting background that let him keep a straight face while saying something he knew was so absurd.

For a few minutes they sat in silence next to each other, soaking up body heat and companionship as they enjoyed the panoramic vista that their perch afforded them, the whole of Nissengrof’s topside spreading out below them and the faint odors of hot metal and steam rising up from deep within the Cauldron. It was a comfortable feeling for Yoruko; never before had she been able to simply sit with another person and not feel like they were expecting her to fill the gap with words instead of music. It was another thing she liked about Caynz—he could do enough talking for both of them if he wanted to, but he was comfortable with silence as well, and seemed to pick up on when that was what she wanted.

Spontaneously she reached up across her chest and covered his hand where it rested on her shoulder. His thumb came up and brushed across the back of hers, but he said nothing further. He didn't have to—that single little gesture of his was as good as a whole conversation acknowledging what she'd meant by hers.

But there were still some things body language couldn't say. I have to tell him, Yoruko thought.

"Caynz," she said, trying to keep the nervous stutter from coming back into her words—a problem she almost never had when talking to him. "There's something I want to do—I mean, something I've wanting to tell you for a while. And I don't think I can put it off any longer."

She felt him tense next to her, and quickly closed her hand around his. "It's nothing bad, don't worry… I just don't know how you'll react. And, well… I really like you, so I don't want to say anything that'll mess things up."

"Okay," he said, sounding more like the nervous boy that he was than the persona of the intrepid adventurer that he affected. His hand slipped from hers as he drew one leg up onto the island's edge so that he could half-turn to face her. He ran his fingers through his short, messy brown hair, a vain gesture that only made her smile—as if she cared at all about the state of his hair at this point! "What's on your mind?"

Yoruko nodded gratefully. "It's… it's not that it's hard to explain, it's just that I'm kinda nervous about it, so I don't really know where to start."

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The ruddy Gnomish complexion of Caynz's avatar paled slightly. "Well… I mean… start wherever you want to, I guess? I'm sorry, I know that's probably not very helpful."

Yoruko took a deep breath, gathering her courage. "Okay then." Her own concession to the weather was a set of thick but lightweight fur armor, with the top portion consisting of a wrap-around tunic secured in a diagonal line across her chest. With trembling hands, she reached up and undid the first clasp at her neck, and when that didn't give her enough room, moved down to the second.

Caynz's eyes went saucer-wide. "Y-Yoruko, wait! I mean… it's not that I don't want to, it's just… I mean… here? Just because we've never seen anyone else up here doesn't mean someone couldn't fly by and see!"

The confusion on her face must've been plain despite the dimly diffused moonlight and the warmer light from the Cauldron far below. Her fingers stopped at the third clasp just below her collarbone,
and she stared at him, perplexed, as if he'd taken his larping off into some strange world she couldn't see. Then, as she took in his reactions and the trajectory of his gaze, she couldn't decide whether to turn bright red or to laugh herself silly—so she did both. He had to reach out quickly and grab the back of her collar before she fell right off the edge.

Caynz looked as if he wasn't sure if she was having fun at his expense after he helped haul her back upright. "Did I… did I say something funny?"

Still far more amused than the misunderstanding warranted, Yoruko fell over against his arm, very nearly crying with laughter as she clung to it. "Yes!" she managed to get out finally, gasping. "Yes, you big dork, you totally said something funny and that is not at all what I was trying to tell you!" Not that she wasn't awfully curious in that regard, and he'd just let slip something very interesting about his own wants, but… that just wasn't something that a girl was supposed to say and there was no way she was letting herself think about it right now.

Caynz, thankfully, took the wiser path of remaining silent until she was ready to explain. When she had managed to compose herself a bit more, she cleared her throat and then tried to get back to the more serious, determined mood that she'd felt when first opening the discussion. It wasn't working; perhaps that was for the best. "Anyway, it's just… it's something I've been holding back from you, and I feel really bad about it."

Caynz considered her words in solemn silence, his own face serious again. "Yoruko, I'll listen to anything you trust me enough to tell me. And if you have a secret that troubles you, I'll hold it in the strictest confidence. But I can't imagine you having anything to tell me that would change my mind about you."

We'll see just how good your imagination is, Yoruko thought, trying to muster her courage again amidst the flush of pleasure she felt at his words. "Good. Because I don't want to hide anything from you, Caynz… I've just been hiding it for so long that I'm scared to change that."

"Is this…” Caynz hesitated there, visibly considering his words with the same care he sometimes gave to his roleplaying. "Is this about the way you talk to yourself?"

Yoruko blinked, again veering off into the land of confusion. "What?"

Caynz reached out and put a hand on her arm. "I'm not judging you—I do it all the time, too, at least when I'm on my own. It's something that a lot of actors and roleplayers do, practicing voices or delivery, that sort of thing. I just never figured you for that habit—" He grinned, making an uncharacteristically riaru comment for someone who rarely broke character. "You're a band geek, not a theater geek."

"I talk to myself?" Yoruko asked. "When have I—" Then it was her own turn to be stopped short by realization.

"You do," Caynz said. "Sometimes when we're out together, I've come back from scouting ahead and heard you doing your voices. You always stop when you hear me coming, but I've noticed a few times." He smiled, completely misreading her expression. "It's okay, Yoruko. Really. I don't think you're crazy or anything. You're just as big of a dork as I am, is all."

This time Yoruko managed to catch her amusement before it could spill over and become laughter. She liked the way Caynz made her laugh, but she'd had enough miscommunications for one evening and figured it was about time she stopped being coy and just came out with it. "I'm really happy to hear you feel that way," she said, chest still hitching a few times as she stopped herself from giggling. "Because you are a huge dork and I love that about you. But you've got it all wrong."
Before Caynz could venture any further guesses that wouldn't come anywhere close to hitting the mark, Yoruko reached up to the partially-undone neckline of her fur tunic and hooked a few fingers around the hem, pulling it out a little bit as she tipped her head forward and spoke down inside the tunic. "It's okay, Penny. You can come out now."

Yoruko squirmed a bit as a ticklish sensation rose up through the front of her tunic in answer to her words. Coiffed blonde hair on a head the size of a teaspoon poked its way out of her neckline, and a pair of tiny hands reached up to grab the edges. Pinhead green eyes blinked out at Caynz above a brilliant smile. "Thanks, sis. It was getting a little stuffy."

Caynz was staring wordlessly, jaw hanging open and occasionally jogging with some aborted thought. Penny fluttered out of Yoruko's tunic with a faint tinkling sound, her thin dragonfly-like wings leaving a short-lived trail of glitter behind her until she hovered in the air between the two players. When she showed her full form, some of Caynz's shock seemed to give way to open amazement. "Thor's beard, my lady… is that a pet pixie?"

"I am not a pet," Penny said firmly, hands on her hips in what Yoruko thought was a fair imitation of her own similar pose. "I'm Yoruko's Navi-Pixie."

"My sincere apologies, little miss," Caynz said with a slight sitting bow, settling back into his usual persona. "I intended no insult."

Penny smiled back at Yoruko. "See, sis? I told you he was a nice person."

"Yes, you did," Yoruko said, covering a smile. "But I already knew that."

"Why does she call you 'sis'?

"When I first got her, Penny wanted to call me mistress," Yoruko said, watching as Penny fluttered over to Caynz and sat on the back of his hand like a bird alighting, head cocked in curiosity. "When I asked her to stop, she asked if mama was better. That was a big no for me. So then she said that I was kind of like a big sister, and we settled on oneechan."

"And how does she know what kind of person I am?" Caynz seemed utterly fascinated by her little friend, who preened happily as he turned his hand around to get a good look at her.

"I don't know," Yoruko admitted. Penny barely moved Caynz's hand as she lifted off, flying back over and settling on her player's shoulder. "She's never really explained it to me. But she's usually right when she tells me to avoid someone. She was the one who told me I should leave the last group I was in, and I heard they ended up nearly wiping because they couldn't work together."

"The healer was such an angry person," Penny explained. "It wasn't nice to be around him. You shouldn't trust people who are always angry like that—sooner or later they get angry at the people around them, too."

Caynz's stare was one of boyish wonder. "In all my time here I haven't seen such a thing. I've heard of Navi-Pixies, of course, but I've never met one—or anyone who actually had one. I assumed they were merely figures of legend."

"There are others," Yoruko said. "I paid an info broker once to try finding them. She was able to confirm that there were at least three other players who got a Navi-Pixie as their pre-order bonus."

"I have seventeen sisters," Penny said in a slightly singsong voice. "Aside from oneechan."

"And that's all that Penny will say about them," Yoruko said with a sigh. "I asked the broker for
more, but she wouldn't sell me the names of the other players, or where to find them. I guess they're just as secretive about it as I am."

"People get jealous when someone else has something they can't have," Penny said in her tiny little voice. "It's understandable to want to keep to yourself if you're different."

"Wise little thing," Caynz observed. "She's so unlike—" He broke off there.

Yoruko thought she knew why—he tried to avoid talking about game mechanics or other concepts that weren't "in character" unless he could think of a way to rephrase them in a thematic way. She understood even though it wasn't her habit; it was another of his more adorable quirks. "I know," she said. "Penny's not like any mobs or NPCs I've ever met. I mean, sometimes she sounds really scripted, so you can tell what she really is—I call it doing her 'NPC thing'. But other times it's like… like I've got a little pocket friend."

"I am your friend, sis," Penny said brightly. "And I do fit in most of your pockets."

Yoruko smiled down at the pixie. "Caynz, I can't even tell you lucky I've been to have her. When I was scared and suicidal in the first days of the game, she was the one who listened to me and helped talk me through it. When I was horribly confused by the fake musical instruments we use for our magic, she showed me how to turn on the expert mode that lets me actually play. And more times than I can count she's helped me when I was lost, and warned me about mobs that I couldn't see or players that I shouldn't trust. She heard the tinkling bell-like sound of Penny's wings, and then a soft weight burrowed into the top of her hair. "She's honestly the only reason why I'm still alive. I don't know what I'd do without her."

"And you've managed to keep her a secret all this time," Caynz said in amazement.

A hint of bitterness touched Yoruko's smile. "I told you I used to have such a hard time going out in parties, right? Why do you think that was?"

"I just assumed it was because you were shy," Caynz said, clearly amused by the sight of Penny's little blonde head sticking out of Yoruko's hair. "But you were really afraid of how other players might react if they knew you had a Navi-Pixie. You were protecting Penny."

Yoruko nodded. "And myself. And I need to keep protecting us both, so… please don't tell anyone about her, Caynz. Please don't even hint about it. This is important—even when we're out with Griselda and Schmitt, I need you to pretend that Penny doesn't exist."

"I will," Caynz assured her. "But Yoruko… that can't last forever, you know. Not now that we're in a guild, not now that we've been going out with the same people all the time. I noticed, remember? After I'd been around you long enough, I knew there was something you were keeping to yourself... I was just wrong about what it was."

"What if we have a falling out with them, though?" Yoruko asked. "I mean, we work together really well as a party, and we get along when we're all just talking, but how well do we really know them? I don't think I'm ready to take that chance yet."

"Griselda is a nice person," Penny said from within her tangled nest in Yoruko's hair. "She's just sad sometimes."

"Everyone in this world is sad sometimes," Yoruko said. "We've all got more than enough reasons. But thank you, Penny. It's not that I don't trust Griselda—it's just that you never really know what people are going to do in a situation until you're there. People are unpredictable, and it scares me."
"You don't need to decide now, my lady," Caynz said, reaching out and inviting Yoruko back under his cloak—a warm, comforting place to which she was happy to return. "I mean, the guild just formed today, right? I'm just saying that secrets usually don't last, and it's better to be able to control how they come out. Just like you did here with me."

"Thank you, Caynz," Yoruko whispered as she burrowed into his bulk not too differently than the way Penny had nested in her hair. She'd ignored the anti-harassment pop-up for so long that it had minimized to the notification column in her HUD, and she was just as content to continue ignoring it—really, if she could've turned it off, she would've.

Caynz probably would've as well; she knew he hated the way the anti-harassment prompts interfered with his sense of immersion. Once he had become annoyed enough at the repeated pop-ups that he'd actually broken character, demanding to know how hard it was to add a checkbox for do not ask me again. It made her extremely curious as to whether the rumors she'd heard from some of the other NCC girls were true—and whether disabling the so-called "Ethics Code" would get rid of the stupid prompts every time she wanted to cuddle with her boyfriend.

She knew Penny would probably give her a full tutorial if she asked—the Navi-Pixie was always happy to explain game concepts and mechanics to her. But she'd never been able to get up the nerve to ask the question; sometimes Penny seemed so much like a real miniature little girl that the thought of asking her a question like that made Yoruko incredibly uncomfortable.

As her eyes began to drift closed in contentment, she felt Caynz's voice as much as heard it. "Didn't you say something about Penny keeping you from getting lost?" When Yoruko made a small sound of agreement, he went on. "Does that mean she knows how to guide you around areas you haven't been?"

"I am able to perceive map data in three dimensions," Penny announced in the more neutral tone and technical phrasing that Yoruko always thought of as her 'NPC' voice. "The most important role of a Navi-Pixie is providing guidance. When oneechan is lost, I help her find her way."

"You don't say," Caynz said, something thoughtful in his voice. When Yoruko opened her eyes long enough to glance up at him, she saw him grinning in that boyish expression of enthusiasm that he always wore at the thought of exploring someplace new. "Penny... I don't suppose you'd like to help us map the Frozen Underways?"

For all of Kirito's protests that he'd rarely been to the bath house in Penwether, Asuna found the interior to be exactly as he'd described it. A stone structure that resembled nothing so much as an oversized gazebo crossed with a temple, it had been built over a very large natural hot spring near the bottom of a hill right on the edge of Penwether. The spring itself was bisected down the middle by a wall of the same dull orange stone that seemed to end just above the surface of the water—that wall seemed to be the dividing line between the men's and women's sides. Vines crawled over more than half of that wall except near the bottom, where the heat from the spring seemed to deter them somewhat.

The whole structure was open to the outside in that you could simply walk in through doorways that opened into the hallways running around a semicircle of the perimeter, and she could feel a breeze from the outside running past her. The whole arrangement provided a level of privacy that satisfied the last of Asuna's skepticism, provided no one barged in—and Kirito was outside to intercept anyone who might do so.

The first thing she did was unequip her boots and dangle her feet over the tiled edges and into the
steaming water to gauge the temperature. That simple test felt so good that she impulsively dove right in without bothering to unequip the rest of her outfit, reasoning that she might as well get the whole thing rinsed clean.

It had been a long time since Asuna had let herself indulge in a bath. She didn't go as long as most other players she knew—even though avatars didn't accumulate body odor, she still felt vaguely self-conscious if she spent too long in the field fighting and exploring without cleaning herself, and once she started picking up persistent environmental messes like mud or dirt, she just couldn't let it go. But it had still been a few weeks since the last one; there had simply been too much happening lately to allow herself that luxury. So once she'd taken a minute to rinse off her clothes and gear, she swam back to the edge and sat on one of the blunt stones jutting out from just under the surface, opening her game menu.

A few taps on the "paper doll" window of her character status page rid her of everything she was wearing—all except the minimal set of default undergarments that were enforced by the rules of the game engine. Once while bathing, out of pure curiosity, she'd tried tapping one of those garments the same way she would've any other piece of clothing and equipment, seeing if it had a status window. It had—but in the place where she'd expected to see the Unequip button, there had only been a non-interactive blurb that said «Ethics Code Enabled».

Something that was enabled argued for the existence of a way to disable it. According to one of the other Undine girls she'd asked, there was some kind of undocumented «Ethics Code» flag buried somewhere in the overwhelming array of settings available in the «Player Options» submenu's expert mode… but when the girl had explained, in a whisper, what else the option let you do, it had made Asuna go bright crimson straight to the pointed tips of her ears.

She'd never been able to work herself up to try toggling that flag yet, and she wasn't about to try it here and now. She was entirely content to keep her underwear on while enjoying the blissful sensation of leaning back against the cool stone, soaking the rest of herself in hot water.

It wasn't a perfect simulation. For all that ALO managed to imitate so many things so convincingly, the simulation was less persuasively real when it came to the sensations of gravity or being submerged in water. Gravity, she knew, felt subtly different because she wasn't feeling its pull on all the differing densities of the different parts of her body—bones, flesh, and insides—all at once in the ways everyone in the real world took for granted as part of the human experience.

Water, on the other hand… the simulation of what Kirito had called "fluid dynamics" was actually—for the most part—very good. Liquids seemed to interact with other materials the way she expected them to. She felt wet when she got splashed, and her clothes—aside from the minimal "default" items that couldn't be removed—"absorbed" water and changed the way they felt in a realistic way. It was specifically the simulation of immersion that fell short of reality. There was something about the feeling of pressure from the weight of the water pushing against her skin; it was different in a way that just felt subtly wrong somehow.

Perhaps not wrong, Asuna decided as she let herself sink down into the comforting enclosed warmth of the water almost to her chin and closed her eyes. Just different. I've gotten so used to little differences like these that I usually don't even notice them now unless I stop to think about them. What would it be like, I wonder, to go back to my real body in the real world now? Would I complain that gravity felt wrong? That I couldn't move as inhumanly quickly as I "should" be able to? She smiled suddenly at an even stranger thought. Would it feel so wrong to me now, not being able to simply bring out my wings and fly where I wanted to go? Would I look at a busy street or a river and tense slightly in that particular way, expecting a set of wings to appear on my back as I kicked off the ground?
The inevitable prospect of losing all these things she'd begun to take for granted was a little depressing, and Asuna decided to let her mind wander in other directions instead. She must have let herself drift off after that in the heat and relaxation of the hot spring; a faint sound from somewhere behind her caught her ears and brought her out of her drowsy meanderings. Without opening her eyes she glanced at the clock in her HUD and immediately felt a little bit guilty; it had been close to fifteen minutes that she'd left Kirito out there.

"Sorry for making you wait, Kirito, I'll be out in just a minute or two," she said, sitting up far enough to raise her shoulders from the water so that she didn't have to leave its relaxing confines quite yet. "But you'd better not come in here."

Something cold and hard touched her throat then; Asuna went completely motionless. She couldn't see the weapon or who held it, but she knew what the edge of a blade felt like—and she was uncomfortably aware that she wasn't currently in her own Safe Zone.

"Don't worry," said a woman's whisper from just behind her. "No boys allowed here."

The pressure from the blade was light but noticeable. She had no doubt whatsoever that if she tried to call for help or open her menu, that light touch would immediately turn into a killing stroke at her neck. Asuna had a decent VIT; there was a chance she could soak enough of the damage to get free and heal herself. But she couldn't take that risk without first knowing what kind of weapon the person was using or how strong they were. She couldn't push off of her perch without pushing herself right through the blade, so she held as still as possible for now, well aware of her disadvantage.

Whatever this person wanted, if their immediate intent had been to kill me, they'd probably already be doing it.

A shifting of weight caused fabric to rustle, accompanied by the high-pitched tinkling sound of thin metal touching metal. Robes or light armor, Asuna thought. Possibly leather-class. Straps and buckles but no plating. They're very close to me and I can't see the tip of the blade—this can't be a very long weapon they're using; a short sword, straight or curved, or maybe a very long dagger. She's probably an AGI build like me.

"Good," said the player. "Stay calm and you stay alive—I assure you, this weapon will kill in a critical location. I have a few questions for you, and you're going to answer them quietly. Whether or not I like those answers determines how many of us leave this building."

"Like you have any intent of letting me walk out of here," Asuna said just short of a whisper, trying not to move her jaw enough that it pressed into the sharp thing at her throat. "What assurance do I have that you're telling the truth?"

"None at all," the woman said. "But one of us is holding a sword; the other is in her pantsu. I trust this makes our respective positions clear."

So much for the dagger theory, Asuna thought. That's not good—it means I've got no room for error here, and that she's probably telling the truth about my chances of surviving a crit in the neck. Kirito has to be getting impatient by now; if I can just stall long enough to get an opening or have him come looking for me...

"First question," said the voice. "What did your boyfriend ask Yoshihara earlier? Whatever it was, it caused quite a scene."

"He's not my boyfriend," Asuna said, trying to keep her tone neutral. "And I wouldn't tell you either
Bad answer. The blade pressed against her just a little bit; a small amount of HP slivered away from the bar in her HUD—so little that she only really noticed by the faint line of numbness at the cut. "Let's try that again without the suicidal stupidity," said the voice of her assailant with the bite of a threat in the words. "What did Kirito ask Yoshihara to tell him? What was her answer?"

"I don't know," Asuna said with complete honesty, eyes darting around within her field of view without risking moving her head. There had to be something nearby she could use. "He hasn't told me anything yet. Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"Ah," said the woman, shifting her weight again. The angle of the blade on Asuna's neck changed very slightly. "Thank you for the suggestion. I think I'll do just that. Matto nyafe jezut, ketrelzagul, shaja dweren."

The tone of the person's words and the unexpected, quickly-spoken incantation sent alarm bells screaming through Asuna's brain. Before the incantation could finish, she ducked her head away from the weapon at her throat so quickly that the back of her head struck the stone tile at the edge of the spring. When she felt a touch on the bare skin of her shoulder and the tingle of magic there, she sank herself down beneath the water as fast as she could; a line of numb fire lit up across her cheek and right ear as she felt the blade graze her. Taking advantage of the moments she had underwater, head throbbing, she started to draw open her menu and navigate to her equipment—

She heard muffled words from above the surface of the water, and blackness surrounded her suddenly, making it impossible to see even her game menu. In her HUD she saw not the timed icon for Blindness status, but the slightly different icon denoting the similar effect of a Dark Barrier. To nullify her advantage in the water and keep her from hiding there, whoever it was had cast a very large barrier of elemental darkness that overlapped with the area beneath the surface of the spring; she'd be blinded as long as she remained within it. She had to get clear of it, and fast.

As she shot herself up out of the water with a burst of propulsion from her wings, her vision immediately cleared. She spun in the air to evade a blast of Dark Magic as soon as she cleared the surface; it burned past her right side in a bolt of violet-black energy. Immediately behind it came an attack from—

Herself.

The sight was unexpected enough that it stopped her for what was almost a fatal moment. Whoever had been holding a sword to her neck looked exactly like her, all the way down to being a mirror of what she hadn't been wearing. The only difference was that the other Asuna had a short sword already moving into the pre-motion for a weapon technique. The system assist carried her attacker through the motions that followed, a pair of underhand thrusts followed by a diagonal overhand chop at close range. Asuna was able to barely evade the first two attacks by beating her wings and twisting around them, but the third bit into the skin on the back of her shoulder and left a numb, glowing slash of red light there.

"Kirito!" she yelled, with no reason now not to make as much noise as possible—if the sounds of spell and attacks going off didn't carry far enough, her shout certainly would. The other Asuna grimaced, and her long light blue hair spun as she moved into her next technique, shimmering green energy illuminating the blade of her sword with the beginning of an elemental Wind attack.

Asuna was not going to be able to keep dodging forever; the system assist was very good at connecting a weapon technique with a target—most of the time, fighting against them meant blocking or parrying, not trying fruitlessly to avoid them. Asuna didn't have a weapon and was
completely unprotected, which limited her defensive options to dodging and flying. She rose into the
air and started to cast a Spiritual Armor buff; before she got halfway to the ceiling another thrusting
stab took her in the side, interrupting her incantation and bringing her uncomfortably close to the
yellow zone that lay below half HP. The follow-up was a roundhouse kick that caused her to lose
control of her wings and sent her sliding uncomfortably across the wet geometric tiles.

The last blow, however, also gave her a bit of distance to work with. *Two can play the elemental
barrier game*, she thought as she held out both hands in front of her from where she lay. She didn't
waste time trying to get up, calling out the incantation as fast as it would come. "*Zutto yojikke
plemalthe ralth!*"

Elemental water rushed out from every surface within the area of effect, forming a thick rectangular
barrier of standing water between her and her assailant that stretched from floor to ceiling. The
refraction-distorted image of her doppelganger jumped back to get clear, momentarily thwarted. To
get to her, they'd have to find a way around it or take the time to push through the dense block of
water—and unless they were mimicking her racial traits as well, their movement would be
significantly slowed if they tried to do that, to the point of being fatally vulnerable.

Using the few seconds this granted her, Asuna stood and quickly re-opened her menu, selecting her
best rapier. She brought it clear of its sheath as soon as the equipment appeared on her hips; the
weapon felt comforting in her hand. She couldn't risk taking the time to equip the rest of her gear, but
even just having a weapon would be a lifesaver.

When she looked up again with her rapier raised to a guard position, Kirito was standing in the
doorway on the other side of the room, a stunned look on his face.

As soon as the impostor turned to face him, Asuna dove through the Water Barrier—her own
movement unimpeded by it—and came back up on one knee with her free hand held out. "*Zutto
tsutakke plorjabu jan!*" The watery debuff struck the false Asuna squarely in the back, but seemed to
disperse with a flare of light and no other visible effect at all.

*Resisted*, she thought with frustration. "Kirito, check your party list!"

The Asuna doppelganger was undamaged, whereas Asuna herself had been cut down to almost the
halfway point. As soon as Kirito's eyes went up and he saw Asuna's condition in his HUD, he must
have noticed that difference—or perhaps, it occurred belatedly to Asuna, the different weapons they
bore or the colors of their cursors tipped him off. Either way, the confusion on his face immediately
shifted to anger, and his wings came out long enough to assist his sudden dash towards the impostor.
The light of a weapon technique flared up to the point of the short sword's blade as she brought it
close in a defensive posture.

Kirito halted his charge and dropped low, spinning on his heel as his own technique activated. The
blackened steel of his longsword trailed yellow tracers as it scribed a pair of angled crosswise arcs
through the air, deflecting the woman's attack and then hooking around to strike one of her legs at the
side of the knee with the second slash. The blow produced a flash of violet light, but didn't seem to
do any damage; the impostor still had a full green HP bar.

The impact itself, on the other hand, took her off her feet; she dropped with a yell and a wet smack
onto the damp tile floor. Before she could get her weapon back up to defend herself, Kirito dealt a
kick to her wrist. The blow sent her short sword spinning away and splashing into the water of the
hot spring, and he came to a stop with his own weapon's point pinning the impostor to the ground—
temporarily immobilizing her without tripping the harassment code. Where the blade intersected her
avatar, purple light flared; the other player's HP bar was *still* not going down.
Kirito tried and failed to accomplish the impressive feat of paying attention to the downed player without *looking* directly at either of the barely-clothed female forms. "Drop the disguise," he said, shielding his face with his free hand. "I know you're a Spriggan, and I know how to tell which one of you is the real Asuna. Now who are you really, and what do you want?"

The impostor didn't answer, eyes darting around. Asuna could almost see the thoughts racing through the other player's head as she looked into her own eyes. Even though the other player had been called out, she still hadn't gotten rid of whatever disguise spell was letting her imitate Asuna's barely-clothed appearance—

Asuna's free hand flew up to her mouth. With the immediacy of the threat neutralized, a horrifying sense of embarrassment flooded across her, bringing immediate heat to her face. If she'd had a mirror, she was certain she would've been bright red all the way from her chest to her ears—and that it all would've been visible to anyone who cared to look.

In an excess of haste, she fumbled with trying to sheathe her rapier; it took a few tries. Then she kept a free arm wrapped across her chest in a vain attempt to cover herself as she manipulated her game menu. "Try sending her a duel request," Asuna suggested as her gear began shimmering into place on her avatar piece by piece. "That should tell you her real player name."

Kirito nodded, lowering his hand so that he could Focus on the player he'd knocked down and open his menu to send the request. It was one of the only ways to find out another player's actual character name aside from being in their party or guild, and it was an action that was overtly hostile enough to almost never be used. It wasn't something you had the time to do in the middle of combat, and if you weren't already in combat, you *would* be if the brute-force attempt to gain their name offended the other player enough for them to accept—

Kirito had barely opened his mouth to read whatever he saw in the duel request window when the doppelganger suddenly reached up and tapped *Accept* on their own prompt. A system-generated force repelled Kirito's sword in order to separate the two combatants, and as a banner-sized graphic appeared in the air above them with the names «Kirito» and «Fausta», a timer began counting down the seconds until the duel officially began. Kirito continued the motion in which he'd been thrown back, wings flaring as he put more distance between himself and Fausta.

Then, from the ground, Asuna heard her own voice. Events began happening very quickly.

"*Yatto nyafe jezut*—"

Asuna finished donning the last of her missing gear; Kirito landed from his power-assisted dodge and skidded to a stop. As Fausta spoke the opening syllables of her incantation, she was smiling in an awful way that Asuna did not like at all. Asuna quickly drew her rapier and started to bring it into the opening motion for one of her quickest attacks, a two-hit technique that would deliver an Interrupt effect and stop both the duel and the spell in progress.

"—*kemyetazhabrathnu, tepnaga*—"

Kirito's eyes widened halfway through the words. "Asuna!" he yelled, throwing himself at her suddenly. "Cover!"

"—*kwedan."

*Impact.* It was easy to underestimate just how much force a player with a high STR stat could deliver when trying as hard as they could. She knew Kirito was a STR build like Yuuki, but she truly *felt* that fact as he drove himself forward with both his legs and his wings, dropping his sword...
just before his whole body hit her at speed. The two of them struck the surface of the Water Barrier behind her with enough force to immerse them completely inside of the thick block of free-standing water in a violent trail of bubbles. Refracted light bloomed in Asuna's vision, and she caught the attenuated sound of a loud *thump*.

Then the whole world blew up.

If not the whole world, then at least her portion of it seemed to. Fausta's avatar disappeared in a flash of brilliant ultraviolet light and a sound that was simply too loud to be processed, a blast that rose to a blinding point and blossomed to fill the entire room until it met and was stopped by Immortal world geometry. Asuna's elemental Barrier was *not* an Immortal Object; it resisted the explosion for only a moment, and then dispersed into many thousands of particles as its durability vanished and the spell ended. Some of the AOE's energy remained after that; what there was blasted Asuna and Kirito out of the expanding cloud of mist for several meters, sending them tumbling and rolling separately onto the cold tiles.

Even Asuna's HUD was still slightly blurred with the effects of Stun status, and there was a ringing in her ears; it took a few disoriented moments for her sense of hearing to clear. While it did, she became increasingly aware of the chilly wet stone beneath her stomach and against her cheek, and what she thought sounded like someone's conversation from very far away through a tunnel of cotton. When she began to open her eyes, she caught a glimpse of Kirito lying on the ground not far away; he was struggling to push himself onto his elbows, although he didn't seem to have the same status effect she did. Just beyond him, on the other side of where her elemental barrier had been, was the blackish thundercloud of a Spriggan's Remain Light. Hanging in the air above them was the large glowing banner of the duel result that said «Winner: Kirito».

It quickly began to sink in that the player who'd tried to take her place had just *literally* blown herself up in a last-ditch attempt to kill them both rather than let herself be identified—even though they could've ignored the duel request and remained under the protection of their own Safe Zone. It meant that ending their own life was worth the attempt of killing the both of them rather than letting herself be identified. The thought was horrifying.

Asuna's eyes traveled up and to the left, and saw that her HP bar was so low that she was amazed it was still yellow. Still refocusing, her eyes traveled beyond the woman's Remain Light and fixed upon the open doorway leading outside. There was an Imp standing in it, a young man with a scruffy face whose ragged long brownish-black hair was almost concealed beneath the hood of a tattered black cloak. A memory flashed by Asuna as she recognized the cloak he was wearing—a memory from the Lower Sewers, and of the Imp she and Kirito had met there. She hadn't clearly seen his face before, but she was *certain* it was the same one.

The one that had tried to kill Jeinaa.

*What was his name? There was Prophet, XaXa, Wraith, and—*

One second. That was about how long it took the man to decide to flee, disappearing into the hallway.

Asuna started to push herself upright despite still recovering from the stunned state she'd been in, feeling a little stupid. Of course Fausta had been willing to take the risk of blowing herself up in order to take out Kirito and Asuna at once—she'd had an ally nearby to rez her if she succeeded. "Kirito! That was Black!"

"I saw!" Kirito, too, was getting back to his feet, albeit much more rapidly than she was. Even though he'd been at full health, his HP was nearly as low as hers. The duel had ended as soon as the
early hit had struck him, but all the damage that had been delivered in that one hit had still been applied. If the AOE had done that much damage to him, his body had probably helped shield her from the worst of the blast even after it went through her elemental barrier—and the barrier itself was probably the reason they were both still alive.

Kirito plucked his sword from the ground in mid-step, and kicked himself into the air as soon as his wings had fully appeared on his back. There would be time later for Asuna to worry about the hows and whys of what had just happened. Chanting up a Heal Over Time spell to start restoring their lost HP, she took off at top speed after Kirito and the player he was pursuing.

As Kirito rounded the corner at the bottom of the steps, he caught the end of an incantation just in time to take a dive; a Dark Magic bolt that probably wouldn't have affected him anyway went shooting just over his head. Asuna came around the corner right on his heels; with his torso twisting in mid-air, Kirito brought his sword around and deflected a throwing pick with a glowing status tip that came flying towards her. He landed in a tense crouch as the pick clattered against the stone with a tinny metallic sound, and unleashed that tension without hesitation in a leap towards their cloaked attacker, who backpedaled with a dismayed yell. The blade of Kirito's sword cut a red slash down the length of Black's leg as the Imp took off and went vertical.

Kirito followed without hesitation.

He could hear Asuna's voice chanting not far behind him; the first few spells sounded like heals, but after that he saw party buffs begin appearing next to the status gauge in his HUD. He banked wide to evade another unguided projectile and poured on as much speed as the manual control of his wings would allow him.

"He's headed for the skylands!" Asuna called from behind. Kirito could see it too; the slow arc of the Imp's jinking flight trail was taking three of them on a course for loose aggregation of floating islands about a kilometer outside of Penwether's Safe Zone. They'd almost certainly lose him in the clutter if he made it there—or worse, give him an opportunity to ambush them. Black looked back over his shoulder at his pursuers, grimaced, then altered his course towards the nearest island.

**Black has to be an AGI build,** Kirito thought as he veered off to use a drifting grass-covered boulder as a shield; two projectiles of Dark Magic burst into a short-lived AOE blast just on the other side of the rock. *I'm going all-out, and he's still managing to stay ahead of me despite looking back to throw spells at us over and over again.* Prophet had been that way, too—like a blur that was almost too fast for Kirito to follow when he moved in with his long dagger, evading or calmly deflecting his strikes despite wielding a weapon with lower clash priority by striking bare-handed at Kirito's arm instead. He wondered which of these killers had taught the other—it certainly seemed unlikely for both of them to be martial experts.

The next incantation that Kirito heard from Black contained a word that tickled a memory from his discussions with Sasha—he was certain that the word *vethleka* meant it was a seeker attack that he wouldn't be able to dodge. Instead of losing time by trying to evade the hit, Kirito quickly incanted the words to his Defensive Shield spell, free hand held out in front of him. Practically as soon as the hazy smoke of the Illusion-based shield flowed out of his palm, three more projectiles fanned out and homed in on him, dispersing across the shield in splashes of glowing purple that flared brightly in the dim evening. The third one caused the shield itself to evaporate rapidly into the air as it exhausted the spell's durability.

But it had done its job, and now Kirito allowed himself a few seconds of unreserved, breakneck speed to catch up; some of Black's spells had to be on cooldowns by now, the way he'd been
escalating their power level. The gap between the two of them closed as their flight took them at
treetop level above one of the larger floating islands, and from behind Kirito he heard Asuna's voice
rise in her own incantation. With a flash of silver light, her homing Holy projectile shot across the
intervening air and homed in on Black. He started to cast his own elemental shield, but the Holy Bolt
arrived before he could finish, striking him in the shoulder and causing him to briefly spin; a further
portion of the green bar around his head disappeared. Black left a stream of curses in his wake as he
pushed himself faster, trying not to lose any more ground to his pursuers.

Then, as the trees on the massive skyland thinned out into a rocky basin, the violet tracer of the Imp's
flight trail bent abruptly and shot straight down towards the island below as if in a power dive.

Kirito banked quickly to try to cut the corner, and saw that the Imp PKer was diving towards a
sinkhole. The walls of the cave below rose up to meet him more quickly than he expected, and Kirito
forced himself to slow down a bit as he followed the purple neon trail of the Imp's flight ahead of
him, dodging when he saw the other player dodge. He was lucky that the tunnel was short enough
that the game didn't seem to consider it a transition to being underground; it seemed to just be a broad
hole that went straight through to the bottom of the island. If Black had been counting on his racial
advantage underground, he didn't show any disappointment. His voice echoed loudly in the tunnel
through which they flew, and Kirito swung towards the wall just in time to avoid the burning violet
projectile that whizzed past him and burst against the rock.

They'd aggroed more than one mob on their heedless dive towards the sinkhole, and a poison-based
projectile hissed just past his head from something he didn't have time to stop and fight. He spun in
the air just enough to burst the next projectile with a sweep of his sword, very little of the damage
getting through the block.

That moment of self-defense had taken his eyes off of Black. Kirito flared his wings and bent
backwards as a dagger with a glowing status tip thrust just past his face. Black withdrew his weapon
arm before Kirito could take advantage of the dagger's almost nonexistent freeze time, and
immediately began chanting a spell. "Yatto yojikke navamdu min." Kirito prepared himself to evade
another projectile, but none came—only a diffuse purple glow that settled across his weapon.

Whatever attack he'd just charged up, Kirito wasn't giving him a chance to use it. He kicked himself
off the head of the closest Stormcrow mob before it could attack, and used the extra momentum to
supplement his wings as he brought Phantasmal Dirge into position for a three-hit technique that
inflicted Interrupt.

Black didn't try to dodge or parry. Instead, he accepted the first hit of the technique as a glancing
blow in order to lunge in close with a regular attack with his dagger. The Interrupt status would've
stopped any incantation in progress or a weapon technique in the process of charging—but Black
had already cast his spell, and there had been no technique to disrupt. When the dagger pricked
Kirito's side, the spell that had somehow been built up inside of it had triggered, transferring its
effects to him. Violet-black tendrils of elemental Darkness flowed out of the walls of the vertical
tunnel and lashed around his legs; the Root status icon appeared in his HUD. Kirito came to an
abrupt stop as the system assist tried to execute the rest of his technique but found his legs locked in
place; the second hit struck Black, but the Imp flew back out of range of the final strike.

Kirito had a fair grasp of what kind of spells the other schools of magic had. He knew there was a
Root debuff in Dark Magic, among others, and he knew there was a spell that charged your weapon
so that it dealt Dark damage the next time you hit… but he had never heard of anyone inflicting a
Root with a weapon before. There were a few dull impacts from behind Kirito that made him
stagger; the lower-level mobs they'd aggroed on the way had caught up with them again and started
attacking, but their relatively weak strikes were further weakened by the Spiritual Armor buff Asuna
had given him to the point where very little got through.

There was a moment where Black hesitated, glancing back and forth between Kirito and the exit as if he was trying to decide whether he was worth the time and risk to finish off. Then the moment and his window of opportunity passed; Kirito heard the sound of Undine wings and looked down to see that Asuna had looped around the edge of the island to cover the other end of the tunnel—and the moments that Kirito had delayed Black had allowed her to catch up.

Black swore at her and turned, executing a dagger technique that only partially deflected her rapier; the tip struck his shoulder and left a glowing red mark there, pushing him back towards the wall. That particular attack had no freeze time and was intended to chain into regular attacks; Asuna advanced on him while setting up for a follow-up strike to the center of his chest. Kirito considered trying to hit Black with a debuff, then immediately dismissed the idea when Asuna's movement blocked his line of sight.

Although he hadn't been able to avoid the system-assisted attack, Asuna's follow-up was freehand and had no such accuracy aids. Black nimbly evaded as if rolling across the outside of her outstretched weapon arm, flipped the knife into an overhand grip as she lunged past him, and then completely dismissed his wings. Gravity took effect; Black dropped immediately, and as he did, the serrated edge of his knife ripped down through one side of Asuna's wings with all the weight of his falling avatar behind it. They immediately dispelled, their damage threshold far exceeded, and a status icon appeared beside her head. The exchange of positions was immediate and absolute; Black brought his own wings back out to arrest his intentional fall, while Asuna cried out in alarm as she fell towards the open sky and the forest below.

"Asuna!" Kirito yelled, straining at the bonds of the Root status effect. A momentary glance at his HUD told him that the debuff only had a few seconds left on it; it wouldn't hold players as long as it did mobs.

Black had to know how little time was left as well; he took only the time for a sharp laugh before retreating. "Me or her, buddy," he called out as he began to accelerate straight up through the tunnel—in the opposite direction from where Asuna was falling. "Take your pick—I hope she's putting out."

Kirito wasn't really sure that he'd heard the last comment clearly; it had come as Black was still ascending away from him. He was just as content to leave it that way. Unable to move his feet, he still had free movement of his arms; he twisted himself uncomfortably back and forth in order to slash at the Stormcrow mobs around him, bursting them one by one in showers of blue polygons.

The moment that the Root debuff's icon vanished from his HUD and the dark tendrils evaporated away, Kirito accelerated himself into a power dive straight down—towards the ground, and towards a figure who was already uncomfortably small and getting smaller.

Asuna knew her over-eager attack had been a misstep as soon as she saw the look on Black's face. Committed to the motion, she watched him twist and lean away from the tip of her rapier, spinning as her momentum took her just past him. The whole maneuver took barely long enough for her to halt herself and start to pull away, but then she felt the strangest sensation—there was a tug at her back and a slight numbness just between her shoulder blades, and all of the carefully-trained nerve signals that usually went towards controlling her wings just seemed to… go nowhere.

She couldn't stop herself from crying out as she felt gravity yank her down and away, from surprise if nothing else. A status icon called «Wingless» appeared in her HUD, and she realized immediately
what had to have happened even though it was the first time for her—her wings had taken too much damage, and had completely disappeared in order to regenerate. Her heart sank straight into her stomach when she saw the timer on the icon: 0:53.

_Fifty three seconds_, Asuna's mind screamed to her as she managed to upend herself so that she was falling head-first. _It takes a whole minute for them to regen?_ Her eyes came inevitably back to the ground far below—not so far as it had been before. She wasn't sure exactly how high they'd climbed in their pursuit of Black, only that it had to have been taxing on everyone's flight energy. But now her free-falling descent was eating up meters faster than she could estimate, and she was going to meet the ground long before she got her wings back.

Looking down at her splayed feet had the effect of staring up at the moonlit sky; the massive island with the sinkhole through it had already dwindled to just under the size of her boot, and somewhere in between—still far above her, judging by how small he looked—a black figure who could only be Kirito seemed to be in a full-speed dive to try to reach her in time.

And judging by how slowly he was closing the distance between him, Asuna didn't think he was going to make it—not after she looked back down and saw the tops of the trees looming far too quickly.

_No get-out-of-falling-damage-free card today_, Asuna thought in despair. _If only we were over a body of—_

Asuna didn't have time for doubts or second guesses. She didn't have the least bit of time to worry about whether the thought that struck her then was plausible or not—it was all she had. She could very nearly distinguish individual leaves rushing towards her when she held out both hands in front of her and shouted: "Zutto mezal keplemalthe ralth!"

Water burst from her fingertips in a torrent; simultaneously, the surfaces of the tree canopies seemed to begin to cry upwards. All of this elemental precipitation rapidly coalesced into a rectangular body of free-standing elemental water, like a swimming pool suspended just above the treetops. She closed her eyes just as her fingertips struck the surface, a bubbly trail cavitating behind her while her dive slowed.

Without her wings, Asuna wasn't able to control her movement in the water other than by swimming normally. She flared her arms to try to slow herself more, but she was still moving just quickly enough to carry her avatar the rest of the way through the bottom of the Water Barrier's area of effect. As soon as her face burst through the bottom of the barrier she began grasping for something, anything; branches broke off in her grip and burst into polygons after being separated from their tree parent entity. She managed to get an elbow hooked around a thicker branch, but her feet flailed beneath her as she jerked uncomfortably to a stop.

She let herself look at her HUD. The HP gauge was just above the halfway point—still green, but not by much.

The woodwind sound of Kirito's wings approached rapidly; Asuna could hear him coming as much by that as by the sound of the branches giving way beneath his dive—and from the speed he was going, he couldn't have been slowed much by having to evade her barrier. Asuna felt her arm begin to slip, and grabbed the branch with her other as well, starting to pull herself up.

"Asuna!" Kirito shouted while braking as quickly as he could, slightly overshooting the branch that she was on and coming up underneath her.

"I'm okay!" Asuna yelled back, getting on top of the thigh-thick branch just as Kirito reached her and
put a hand out to help stabilize her perch. "I managed to slow myself enough."

"That really was amazing, Asuna," Kirito said, taking up a hovering position right next to her. The freely-offered praise contrasted sharply with the look on his face—he looked almost terrified, like he'd fully expected to be finding her Remain Light at the foot of the tree. And he had to know what that would mean, with him having no resurrection magic. "I didn't think I was going to make it in time."

"I didn't think you were either," Asuna said, shaken by how close she'd come to her own death.

"I'm sorry," Kirito said, eyes downcast.

Asuna shook her head quickly. "No, no, I wasn't blaming you, Kirito. It was my fault for leaving myself open to that counterattack. I thought I had him."

"He got away," Kirito said with a grimace. "He said it was you or him."

"So you came after me," Asuna said, feeling a hitch in her chest.

Kirito's look of benign confusion might as well have been translated in large block type right above his head: well of course I did. "We'll get another shot at him—especially now that we know he's operating in the area and interested in us."

Asuna couldn't help but be frustrated. "I just wish we'd gotten more than that," she said. "Everything we went through… even as far as one of them killing themselves like that… all Fausta gave us was her name, but it doesn't do us any good now that she's dead."

Kirito donned a thoughtful look, drifting slowly in the air just in front of her. After a few moments of consideration a slow smile came to his face. "Maybe we got more than we think," he said, eyes refocusing on hers. "How do you feel about taking one more swim, Asuna?"

"I think I've had quite enough swimming for one day," Asuna declared skeptically, leaning slightly away from him.

"It's a short one," Kirito said. "I promise." He glanced just past her shoulder; with her wings still gone, the only thing there was the tree trunk at her back. "Do you need a lift down while you wait for your wings to regenerate?"

A mild tingle had just replaced the numbness in the middle of Asuna's back, and she watched as the dark gray icon in her HUD stopped flickering and disappeared entirely. She was fairly sure that she'd still had enough flight energy to get to the ground before her wings were clipped, and if nothing else she could just glide now. But there was no way to be sure about the state of her wings without bringing them out and checking.

Instead of doing that, Asuna smiled back at Kirito and left the light blue glyph in the middle of her back unlit. "Yes," she said, loosening one hand to reach out towards him. "I'd appreciate that."
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Beginning at 7:00 PM the night before an Election Day, the ballot in the «Community» menu becomes active, allowing players to choose any one name from the ballot and cast their vote for Faction Leader at any time between then and 7:00 AM the next morning. Players may either nominate themselves for the ballot or someone else may nominate them, but in both cases the result is the same. The nominated player then has the option of filling out a biography section—allowing them to directly make their case for why they, out of all the candidates, would be best suited to lead the faction for the next 30 days..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Faction Leader Nominations»

7 May 2023
Day 183 - Morning

Asuna could not recall the last time she'd felt more outnumbered and out of place than she did during breakfast the next morning—certainly not since the game's first days when she was still just a teenage girl who'd found herself trapped in this strange world.

It wasn't Kirito making her feel that way—if anything, he seemed to be aware of her discomfort and was doing what he could to keep her mind off of it with a harmless conversation about switching. He just couldn't do anything about the fact that of the twenty or thirty people in the cafeteria, she was the only player whose attire and skin tone weren't mostly monochromatic. Here and there a splash of colored trim or some ornate gear adorned a Spriggan's otherwise black attire... but even so, the cool, bright colors of Asuna's best Undine clearing gear stood out in the crowd of Spriggans like a polished sapphire in a box of rough obsidian pieces. Even when she was pointedly not looking at anyone else she could feel any number of eyes on her.

"I'm sorry, Kirito," she said uncomfortably, unable to stop her eyes from occasionally darting to the side just long enough to catch a glimpse of one player or another quickly looking away. "I missed that last bit."

"I said, it's not actually an intended game mechanic."

"That's what Jahala told me when he was first giving us raid training," Asuna said. "But I didn't understand any of the terms he was using, and it didn't seem necessary to remember them once I learned how to just do it."

Kirito nodded to her over a mouthful of a cold sandwich that she thought tasted like some kind of bland poultry. "It's not necessary to know the mechanics in order to switch in battle," he said after swallowing. "But it helps to understand why it works—and why it sometimes doesn't. When it all comes down to it, mobs are basically just an extremely limited form of AI."

"I know that much," she said, frowning. "I'm not stupid."

Kirito gave a small, weary sigh. "Asuna, I don't think you're stupid at all. I just can't always know what you know about computers and what you don't, so I'm trying not to leave out anything important."

Asuna had already been regretting the tone of her response, and she bit at her lip, feeling chastened
and unsure of how to explain herself. It had been obvious once Yuuki pointed it out to her, but one of the things that got her back up the most was feeling talked down to—especially now, in Alfheim, when it came to anything that made her self-conscious about how little she knew about video games. She still remembered how scared she was in those first days; she might as well have been spirited away to an alternate universe where magic was real, for all that she'd understood what was happening or why.

That wasn't quite true anymore, and she'd gained a lot of power and confidence since that time—but the memories of that fear and the defensiveness it brought out in her were still with her. "Sorry, Kirito," she said, and meant it. "Keep going."

Kirito looked at her, that look of confusion briefly covering his face before he continued. "Okay. Well, um… basically most mobs have a fixed set of scripted attack patterns, and they're always re-evaluating their hate table."

"Aggro," Asuna said.

"Yep, aggro," Kirito confirmed, starting to peel the rind from an orange. "Well one of the factors that affects how mobs prioritize targets is how close they are. When you're close to a mob, like right up in its face, you're a much bigger threat than someone in the back ranks. So even if another person has slightly more aggro, the mob's still probably going to focus on you."

Asuna hadn't heard it simplified in quite that way, but this was still all stuff she knew; she restrained the urge to point that out and simply gave him an un of confirmation that she was listening.

Kirito's eyes went distantly thoughtful for a few seconds before he set the half-peeled orange in the middle of the table. "Mob." He picked a few unshelled walnuts next and set them in a line, one closer to the orange than the other. "Players. Right now this player—" He wiggled the walnut nearest the orange. "This guy has aggro. The mob attacks." Kirito took the partially-peeled edge of the orange rind and looked like he was trying to puppet it as if it was the mob's weapon arm, and was having trouble making it work without ripping the peel.

"I get the idea," Asuna said with a giggle. "The animation is optional." She also thought she understood why he was doing it—he was trying to distract her from being hyper-aware of all the eyes on her.

And it was working. Mostly.

Kirito coughed into his hand. "Right. So the mob attacks, and the player with aggro parries with a weapon technique." He picked up the nearest walnut and lightly bopped the orange, nearly sending Asuna into giggles again. "That knocks the mob's weapon back, which puts it off-balance for a few seconds—but now this guy is probably stuck in his end frame or on cooldown. So when they call for a switch, the other player jumps in front of them."

He took the furthest walnut and hopped it over the one doing forward duty, putting it in between the first walnut and the orange. "Now the mob is confused. It just got parried by someone right up in its face, which raises that player's position on the mob's hate table further. But suddenly the player who parried it isn't the nearest player anymore. After it recovers from the parry, the mob is going to re-evaluate its hate table, and it's going to prioritize the person in front of it—who's probably already attacking it. That complete re-evaluation takes about half a second, but when you add it to the recoil from a successful parry, it means the person switching in could have as long as two whole seconds to attack the mob while it can't defend itself. That's plenty of time to pull off the quicker weapon techniques and deal their full damage, and possibly even start a chain if you can keep it stun-locked."
All the pieces of the picture fell into place in Asuna's head at once. "That must be why switching sometimes doesn't work," she said. "If the person switching out has too much aggro, the mob won't try to change targets and the opening will be a lot shorter."

"Right. And not all recoil recovery times are the same," Kirito added. "It depends on the relative priorities and speed of the two attacks. If the mob only takes a moment to recover, and doesn't change targets, the player switching in is going to run right into the mob's counterattack. This is why it's good to switch often—it keeps the aggro balanced."

"So you're saying that all this isn't how the game was supposed to be?" Asuna asked, puzzled. "If it wasn't intentional, why didn't they fix it?"

"Because not all unintentional features are bugs that need to be fixed," Kirito explained, cracking open one of the walnuts and extracting the meat; the shells disappeared in a puff of blue particles shortly thereafter. "It's called emergent gameplay when the rules and limitations of a game engine interact to make something unexpected possible. There was a lot of discussion on the Fulldive forums during the beta, and the consensus seemed to be that Kayaba probably liked the idea of 'switching' and approved of the kind of creative thinking that made it happen."

"Maybe so," Asuna said, thoughts darkening for a moment at the mention of their captor. Then a much better thought occurred to her, and she smiled as she reached over and flicked the remaining player token across the table at Kirito with her fingers. The shell caromed off the edge of his plate and missed him entirely. "Or maybe he was just nuts."

Kirito groaned. Asuna beamed.

As funny as she'd thought it was at the time, the joke seemed to kill the conversation. Or perhaps they both had said anything that needed saying, and were trying to focus on the effort of will necessary to choke down the rest of the relatively boring NPC food. As they were finishing up, another Spriggan boy around Kirito's age with very dark brown hair sat down on the bench next to Kirito, greeting him by name.

"Yo, Coper," Kirito said after downing the last of his tea, scooting over a little bit to make room. "I didn't think you came to Penwether anymore. Aren't you always in Arun looking for clearing work?"

The other boy chuckled, taking in his surroundings and giving a nod of greeting to Asuna before answering Kirito. "Not today, but mostly. Could say the same for you, though."

"I've got some business to deal with here," Kirito said without elaboration. "I just figured you'd be staying as far from Yoshihara as possible, after the last time you tried to call her out for a debate."

Coper covered his face with one hand, making a pushing motion with the other as if to ward off the entire topic. "It's fine, really. I'm one of the only opposition candidates who hasn't managed to make a complete nuisance of myself to her yet. I'm pretty sure she doesn't have a price on my head."

"She's tried to have people killed?" Asuna asked, eyes widening.

Coper waved a hand in protest. "No, no, it was just a joke." He paused. "At least, I think it is—"

Kirito signaled the limits of his amusement with a chuckle that was barely more than a grunt. "What do you want, Coper? With how often either of us don't come to Penwether, I have a hard time believing it's coincidence, both of us showing up here at the same time."

Coper's keen black eyes made a sweep of the dining hall; at one point he angled his head so that he could briefly glance over his shoulder. "Look, Kirito," he said a bit more quietly, "I know you're not
one of Yoshihara's supporters. You know she has to go as well as I do."

"You're one of the people running to replace her," Asuna said, suddenly realizing what Coper had meant by opposition candidate.

Coper nodded to her. "Yup. The problem is that we have at least four different people who want to be the guy to change the way things work around here, and no single one of us has enough votes to do it. Aside from that, by this point a lot of people just don't bother voting. They figure it's a waste of time."

"Cooperate and throw all your support behind one person, then," Asuna suggested.

"I told him that months ago," Kirito said. "Don't waste your breath."

"He's right," Coper concurred. "Cooperation is a non-starter—we all have different agendas. Mizer wants to bring us all into the Treaty, whole-hog. Which is why he only gets about ten percent of the vote. Arajin doesn't want to change Yoshihara's stance on the Treaty, he just thinks she's useless and wants to be more proactive about negotiating with other factions for spots in their clearing groups. Krensh—"

"The less said about Krensh," Kirito hastily put in, "the better."

"And I'm 15 years old and look it," Coper said. "While everyone else on that list is either an adult or can pass for it. Never mind that I'm the only candidate besides Krensh who was a beta tester." He turned a wan smile on Asuna. "Anyway, not sure who you are, but welcome to the screwed-up mess that is Spriggan politics."

"I'm Asuna," she said, leaning forward a little in a sitting bow. "I'm part of the Undine clearing groups."

"Ah, okay," Coper said. "Yeah, I think I have seen you around, come to think of it, just never caught the name. Anyway Kirito, I came to talk because I heard you and Yoshihara kinda had it out last night."

Kirito sighed. "Does everyone know?"

"You had a short but sweet competition with the faction leader to see who had the loudest voice," Coper pointed out, grinning. "And there's what, a permanent population of a few hundred here? I'm pretty sure everyone in the building knew within minutes, and everyone in the city by morning. I happened to already be here on business myself, so I thought I'd see what was up."

Asuna was feeling a bit sensitive on the subject of being quizzed about last night's conversation—especially now that Kirito had had a chance to give her the whole story. Her eyes narrowed skeptically at Coper across the table. "Why are you so interested?"

Coper shrugged, eyebrows raising slightly. "Why wouldn't I be? One of the more well-known Spriggan clearers had a public argument with someone we both want to see replaced. Hell yeah I'm interested. If you got any dirt that'll help make Yoshihara look bad, I need to know."

"I don't think I really have anything that'd qualify as 'dirt'," Kirito said slowly. "There's a PKer we're trying to track down, and Yoshihara completely freaked out when I mentioned his name, like it was her brother I was talking about or something."

Coper's reaction was one of open curiosity. "Really? Got a name for this PKer? Might be someone I've run into professionally."
"What's that supposed to mean?" Asuna asked, giving Coper a piercing stare.

Coper didn't flinch from that stare. "I've taken a lot of different kinds of work," he said. "Especially early in the game. Some of us have done things we're not proud of in order to survive. Problem with that?"

The other player would have no way of knowing just how hard his words hit Asuna; they were like a blow to the stomach that brought back flashes of XaXa screaming in her ear right before they hit the water together. Her sharply indrawn breath caught in her throat for a moment, and her eyes dropped to the table. "I'm sorry," she said quietly.

Coper didn't answer her, turning back to Kirito. "So what's the name?"

"Prophet," Kirito said after a moment's hesitation. "Heard of him?"

The recognition on Coper's face was plain. "Yeah, actually. I'm just surprised you haven't. He was a bit notorious in the Salamander privateer groups when they were still running, and his name still comes up in some of the shadier circles in Arun if you're looking for some dirty work done. Scary bastard, from what I hear."

"Can you tell us anything else about him?" Asuna asked eagerly, her previous skepticism all but forgotten at the prospect of making progress towards catching Prophet.

Coper shrugged. "Wish I could, but that's pretty much the extent of what I know. Most of us who worked in a privateer group at some point have heard of him, but I doubt anyone else has. He only ever partied with his own people, far as I know. Argo might know more."

Kirito spoke next, sounding no less eager for answers than Asuna did. "I'd rather not get her involved just yet. Do you think you could find him?"

"If I did some digging on the pretense of looking to hire an assassin," Coper said, still keeping his voice low, "then maybe. I could probably find someone who knows a guy whose mother's best friend's sister's cousin twice removed can reach him—but somehow I don't think you're looking to open a dialogue, or have anyone taken out."

"No," Asuna said. "Just deal with him and his group. They have to be stopped."

"Which means taking them out. So who'd he kill this time?" Coper asked with an absence of tact. "Must've been someone you both knew."

Asuna could hear Kirito's hands tightening into fists below the table. She fought down the urge to do the same, especially at the words this time. "He killed a child," she said, unable to keep the fury and grief from her voice.

"Ah," Coper said, seeming unsurprised. "Speaking as a child myself, that officially sucks."

"No, someone a lot younger than us," Kirito said. "For no reason other than that they were there instead of his target." He paused momentarily to let that sink in. "And Yoshihara knows him somehow. When I told her, she looked like she was going to be sick more than anything else. And she was scared."

Coper mulled this over quietly, eyes unfocused as he retreated into his thoughts. "Well, that's interesting," he said. "Yoshihara has no shortage of faults, but associating with known PKers isn't one of them. It's fair to say she actively avoids anyone who's known to do that kind of work. And she has no reason to be scared as long as she stays put in Penwether and doesn't accept any duels."
"Kirito!" Asuna said in a hushed tone, as if Coper wasn't sitting right beside him to easily hear. "Are you sure we want to be telling him all of this? I thought we were going to try to track down Prophet ourselves before going public—he'll just go into hiding if we have the whole world looking for him."

"Oh, don't worry," Coper said with a wave of his hand, behaving in turn as if she hadn't just stage-whispered across the table. "I was hoping I could tie Yoshihara to something nasty, but there's nothing here I can really use publicly against her anyway. So I'm guessing you're off to talk to her again after this?"

Asuna's gaze sharpened suspiciously again. She was not overflowing with trust for Coper, and she was certain it showed. "How would you know that?"

Coper regarded her a bit bemusedly. "Because one of the few things the rumors agree on is that Yoshihara was screaming at Kirito to come back this morning for round two. I can do basic math, you know." He shrugged. "Whatever. Tell me or don't, but admit it—we'd both like to get rid of Yoshihara, and I'll take whatever I can get that puts us closer to doing that."

Kirito nodded reluctantly at the last bit. "We'll see what she has to say. Assuming she remembers my name without someone reminding her."

Coper's sideways gaze fell back on Kirito again. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing important," Kirito said, waving it off. "Just the last couple times I've come here on business, she's treated me like a complete nobody that she couldn't be bothered to remember or take the time to deal with."

"Interesting," Coper said, frowning. "She gave me the same treatment the last time I was here. I don't know why she doesn't just do us all a favor and resign—everyone knows she hates being stuck here."

"I actually asked her once," Kirito said.

"And?" Asuna prompted; she'd been wondering that herself. Why would someone stay in a job they didn't want—and for that matter, who would vote for someone who didn't want the job?

"I won't repeat some of the words she used," Kirito said with the faintest hint of a smile. "But what it boiled down to was this: she can't stop anyone from nominating and voting for her, so as long as the majority of the Spriggans keep electing her to do nothing, she's going to keep doing nothing and stay out of everyone else's business."

"It's a plurality," Coper said, easing off the side of the bench and standing up. "But whatever. It still adds up to another thirty days wasted on her. Message me if you find out anything good."

"You too," Kirito said, lifting a hand in farewell. "Let me know if you turn up anything."

Once Coper had departed, Kirito and Asuna left their dishes to be handled by the NPC waiter and took their own leave. She could feel eyes on her back as they walked out of the cafeteria, and it wasn't until they had rounded the next corner that Asuna turned her curiosity on Kirito. "Who was that?"

Kirito almost missed the first step of a wide stairway that led up to the next level. "You didn't get his name? I thought you introduced yourselves."

"That's not what I mean," Asuna said. "He just sat down and you two started talking like you were old friends."
"That's how Coper is," Kirito said. "And we're not friends, not really. We just know each other. He's like me—does jobs for hire, usually out of Arun."

"I don't think he's much like you at all," Asuna said, recalling a few of Coper's earlier remarks that still ate at her. "You would've never joined a Salamander privateer group. They had no purpose but to kill and steal."

"I know, Asuna," Kirito said. "But I also know he stopped working for them after Mortimer took over."

"That's not really a point in his favor," Asuna said, "considering that Mortimer started the process of breaking up the privateer groups. You don't really get credit for doing the right thing if you only did it because you didn't have any other choice."

"Maybe not," Kirito said, stopping at the top of the stairs to finish their conversation before continuing onward to Yoshihara's room. "But he still had the choice to keep working for PKers. He could've joined up with Prophet's group, if that was the kind of person he was. Instead he's helping clear the World Tree, taking independent work, and trying to replace Yoshihara."

"And that makes up for a month of helping the Salamanders raid Sylph and Undine territories?"

Kirito shook his head. "No. But it makes him someone I'd rather have leading the faction than Yoshihara. And it makes him someone I'm not going to blow off if he might be able to help us find Prophet."

A number of objections remained in Asuna's mind. She and the other Undines had been among those who bore the brunt of of the first month's war; she didn't recognize Coper, but PK groups like the ones he'd been a part of had tried to kill her and Yuuki more than once. And if Diavel was right, more than 200 Undines had lost their lives to those border skirmishes—to say nothing of how many Imps or Sylphs had died.

As far as she was was concerned, there were lines which, once crossed, could not be uncrossed. There were choices that defined who you were as a person, choices that clearly showed what your principles truly were. Even now knowing firsthand the kind of circumstances that could bring someone to kill another human being, she still could not forgive the kind of person who would willingly sign up with a group that was indiscriminately robbing and killing other players in order to make the rest afraid to even leave their homes. She doubted she would ever trust or feel comfortable around Coper, now that she knew what crimes lay in his not-too-distant past.

"You told me to change Spriggan politics," Kirito insisted when she didn't answer right away, still keeping his voice low so that it wouldn't echo. "And you were right—they need to be changed. But we don't have any perfect options; most of us have blood on our hands."

"Some more than others," Asuna said quietly, looking down at her own as she turned up one palm and examined it. As many battles as she'd fought in the game, she could easily imagine the glowing red lines that appeared on a player's avatar when they took damage. It was no trouble at all to see those lines superimposed on her hands, and to imagine that artificial crimson glow changing to the dull red gleam of wet blood.

They weren't as bloody as Prophet's, Coper's, or even Kirito's. But they still felt unclean all the same.

"Let's go," Asuna said suddenly, driving away the guilt and sweeping it into the little corner of her mind that had become its home. "The sooner we talk to Yoshihara, the sooner we can get out of this city."
"No drama," Argo warned as she stopped with her fingers on the handle of the door leading into the receiving room of the faction leader's office. She didn't turn around and wag her finger at Thelvin, but the idea wasn't far from her mind.

"No drama," agreed Thelvin. Argo did turn to look at him then; the blank, neutral expression never left his face.

"What?" Thelvin said when the seconds stretched on. The only movement was the slow, fluid swish of his black-furred tail as it drifted behind him.

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" Argo wondered aloud as she pulled the door open and stepped inside.

Thelvin didn't answer. It was just as well; as soon as she entered she realized that they were far from the only people waiting to see Sakuya—just the only people who weren't Sylphs. There were more than a half-dozen other people sitting in chairs or standing and talking quietly in small groups, and every set of eyes turned upon Argo and Thelvin as the door shut behind them, the sound loud in the sudden silence that followed the end of all conversation.

"Hi," Argo said, waving to the room as she walked over to the small desk where Chimiro was seated, working.

"Good day, Argo," said the short, chubby man who had long served as Skarrip's assistant. "Thank you for sending word ahead that you were coming; your courier reached me just this morning. It's quite fortunate that Lady Sakuya is eager to meet with you—I had to shuffle schedules in order to get you in this early."

A brief sidewise glance confirmed Argo's suspicion; more than one of the Sylphs in the room had been bumped to get her to see Sakuya on such short notice, and at least one of them looked sore about it. Probably would've been better to wait than create hard feelings, but oh well—it's done. "Thanks, Chimiro. I couldn't reach Sakuya herself, so I had to message someone else who lives here. Can we go in?"

Chimiro bowed in his seat. "Yes, Lady Sakuya is expecting you." His eyes turned to Thelvin, standing beside her. "But not you. May I ask your name?"

Thelvin named himself with a bow of his own. "I lead the Cait Sith clearing groups. Sa—the Lady Sakuya and I have worked together before."

"Your message said nothing of a second guest," Chimiro said skeptically to Argo, his voice on the verge of scolding.

"That's 'cause I sent the message to the gofer before I knew he was coming," Argo said with complete honesty. "Gimme a break, Chimiro. I'm here for Alicia, Thelvin's here for our clearers."

"I see." Chimiro gave the situation a moment's thought, then glanced up in the direction of his HUD. "It is a minute past eight," he said. "I'd prefer not to delay others any further, so please go in and take care of your business with Lady Sakuya as quickly as possible."

"How quick this goes is up to her, not me," Argo said, giving the other Sylphs in the room an apologetic look that she hoped seemed sincere. "C'mon, Thelvin."

It was not Argo's first time in what she called the 'penthouse'—the office at the top of the central
spire where the faction leader worked and received visitors. But it was very different from what she remembered. Little details jumped out at her: Skarrip's collection of chess pieces was gone, and the desk was barren by comparison to before—virtually no decoration or unnecessary objects cluttered its surface.

Then there were the not-so-little details—like the fact that a completely different person was sitting behind the desk.

A Sylph swordsman with long green hair was standing in front of the desk with his back to the entrance, and the tail end of something he was saying to Sakuya cut off as soon as Argo slid the door aside. Sigurd, she thought, putting a name to the face as soon as he turned to look at them. Interesting —these two hate each other.

Sakuya had already risen to her feet at the sound of the door, and Argo's gaze went to her just in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of the surprise that the Sylph leader quickly erased from her face. "Thelvin," she said in an unusual, almost questioning tone of voice as he shut the door behind them and turned to look at her. "I... wasn't expecting you here."

"Shit," Argo thought. Before she could say anything to defuse the potential bomb, Thelvin stepped around her and bowed. "Sakuya," he said. "It's been a rough couple of days, or so I hear. I wanted to make sure Argo got here safely... and that you were okay. I didn't hear anything from you about this, so I was concerned."

If Argo hadn't been watching for it, she would've missed the emotion that surfaced on Sakuya's face before being controlled again. She wasn't sure what the emotion was, but what he'd said had definitely caused a reaction. "I see," she said quietly and with a wisp of a smile. She threw a glance at Sigurd, and when she returned her attention to Thelvin she seemed to have mastered whatever had put her off-balance; her face and voice were all business. "Since the leader of our clearing groups is represented here, I suppose it's only appropriate that the leader of the Cait Sith clearers be here as well."

"Awesome," Argo said, stepping past Thelvin and finding herself a seat in front of the desk before either clearer could prolong the question of Thelvin's involvement. "So you killed Skarrip. What's up with that?"

Argo had no idea why Sakuya hesitated before answering. "I did, in a manner of speaking," said the Sylph leader. "But it was under circumstances that I can only describe as... well, insane. Which I assure you I am not."

"Oh, this is going to be good," Argo thought. "When you sent Alicia a message, you said you needed to know who—or what—Skarrip was. That all of our lives could depend on the answer." Argo gestured in an attempt to move her thoughts along. "You wanna maybe explain what that means?"

Sakuya gave a faint nod, but no immediate answer otherwise; she wasn't looking at anything or anyone in particular, just staring as if lost in thought. A few times she opened her mouth and even started to make a sound, then stopped herself. "Let's start with the basic facts," she said at last. "At some point in the last week, Skarrip hired an assassin to kill Sasha, a Puca woman who lives in Arun—acting on information that she was going to be in the Arun Sewers at a certain time. His objective was to steal her magic research and kill her so that she couldn't recreate it for anyone else."

"Wait, what the hell?" Argo said, surprised enough to interrupt. She'd heard some weak rumors about an attempted PK in one of the newbie areas of Arun, but nothing had firmed up yet. "Why?" she asked. "Sasha was helping both our factions. What happened to change that?"
"Nothing," Sakuya said with a quick headshake. "Sasha's help was invaluable. Whatever research it is that she's done, its effectiveness speaks for itself. But before we get into why, let me finish with what. Skarrip took out this hit on Sasha, but he apparently did so before the plan changed—she was supposed to teach our mages how to cast a spell, but she ended up going along on our joint raid herself. So when his assassin showed up in the Sewers to kill her, he instead found a raid group of the young children that she watches over. He killed at least one of them."

The facts that Sakuya was laying out were, on their own, shocking enough. But that wasn't why Argo reeled then, only half-listening to what Sakuya said next as her thoughts shifted into high gear, associations forming that weren't there before.

_Skarrip allegedly hired an assassin to kill Sasha. Sasha was at the raid instead. The assassin killed a child in the Arun Sewers. Kirito helped negotiate for Sasha's help. Kirito was in the Sewers farming for mats the day of the raid. That night, Kirito started asking questions about missing players. Yesterday he said he was trying to track down PKers._

She didn't have all of the pieces yet. But the ones she did have were starting to fall into place. _Why so coy, Ki-bou? You gotta know I'd tell you anything I could about someone who PKed a kid. Hell, if I could verify all the facts, I'd make sure all of Alfheim knew—for free. You and I are going to have a talk later._

Aware that Sakuya had stopped speaking, Argo took a moment to review the words that she'd just heard when she wasn't paying attention so that she could give a proper answer. "Sorry," she said. "It's kinda shocking. But what makes you think he wanted to suppress her research if it was so valuable as a tool for clearing the game?"

"That's the insane part of this whole story," Sakuya said. "Believe me, I'm getting to it."

Thelvin cleared his throat. "You mean faction leaders having children killed isn't insane enough?"

"No really, you're going to love this, Thelvin," Sigurd remarked a bit acidly from where he stood at one end of the desk.

"Bear with me," Sakuya said, holding up a hand in a plea for patience and throwing an annoyed look at Sigurd. "Put simply, Skarrip was not who we thought he was. Unfortunately, putting it simply doesn't even come close to the whole picture. Near as I can tell, at some point after the beta—after launch, I'm pretty sure, but definitely not during the beta—someone or something else took his place."

"Something?" Argo said. "That's the second time you've talked about him like he wasn't a person, and I get the impression it's not an accident."

"It's not," Sakuya said, tight-lipped. "The morning after the raid, I confronted Skarrip about what he'd done. He..." She hesitated again, conflict plain on her face.

"Oh, don't stop here, Sakuya," Sigurd sniped with his arms crossed over his breastplate. "This is the best part."

Sakuya was apparently unsettled enough by the topic that she didn't even respond to Sigurd's peanut gallery comment. Her next words came out all in a rush, as if she was just trying to get it over with. "I accused him of being Kayaba, which he denied. Then he turned into a quest NPC straight out of Norse mythology. And then a mob with nine HP bars. And then he faked his death when I hit him, somehow transferring leadership to me—which I think was his intent all along."
Argo stared at Sakuya.

Sakuya stared back without blinking.

Argo stared some more, and then finally remembered that she had words.

Unfortunately, she could only muster two of them. "The fuck?"

"Yes," Sakuya said with a grim flavor of amusement. "That is more or less the correct reaction. When he changed, he changed into an NPC with the name of Loki. I'm sure I don't need to tell you who that character is or what he represents. He talks like Loki—at least, he sounds like I'd imagine him. He acts like Loki. I couldn't get him to break character at all; even when he made references to the real-world concepts I was talking about, he was reframing them the way Loki would've seen them if this were a real world. He either believes he is Loki, or he's one of the best improv actors I've ever met." A pause. "And regardless of who or what he really is... he's declared himself as an antagonist to the entire player base. Regardless of where it comes from, he has power. And we haven't seen the last of him."

Thelvin was staring at Sakuya too. "You're not joking," he said in what was almost a tone of wonder. "You really believe this."

"How long have you known me, Thelvin?"

"A long time," he answered.

"Would I bullshit about something like this?"

Thelvin shook his head without hesitation. "Never. Which makes it no less difficult to believe."

"I told you," Sigurd said, looking somewhat smug for no reason that Argo could fathom. "There are things in Sakuya's story that I can accept—but Lord Skarrip being an NPC is one of the most idiotic things I've ever heard."

Ignoring Sigurd's verbal sallies, Sakuya met Argo's eyes then, and there was not a trace of deception that Argo could detect there. "Skarrip was not Skarrip anymore. Not the one we knew in the beta. He was either a player with GM access, or one of the most complex quest NPC's I've ever seen—fully capable of interacting with other players with them none the wiser. I wouldn't bet money on him failing a Turing test, either."

Argo shook her head. "Not an NPC. Regardless of what he looked like or what kind of avatar he was using, he was not an NPC. Look, I've interacted with quest NPCs that use the game's natural language systems before—we both have. They're extremely lifelike, and as long as you stay on topics related to their quest, you can fool yourself into thinking you're talking to a person—if you close one eye real tight. But they're still just programs. There's no way one could've fooled an entire faction into thinking it was a player for the last six months."

"Strictly speaking," Sakuya said, "he didn't have to fool the entire faction. The number of people he personally interacted with on a regular basis was actually very small. Chimiro handled nearly all of the administrative work, and visitors meeting with him wouldn't be there for long and would have a known subject they were there to discuss."

"Still," Argo protested, "it's just not possible. Pets and quest NPCs behaving in a lifelike way are one thing, but AI programming still just isn't that advanced. Skarrip was human. He had to be. And if he wasn't Kayaba—"
"He wasn't," Sakuya said. "At least, I'm pretty sure, not after thinking it over."

Argo decided to accept that assertion at face value for the moment. "If he wasn't Kayaba, he had to be someone else involved with the game—a GM or something."

"There was a rumor going around at one point that he worked somewhere at Argus," Sakuya said. "But as far as I know he never admitted or denied it, and I never heard a name."

"That much wasn't just a rumor," Argo said. "Skarrip—at least, the Skarrip I knew in the beta—worked at Argus on the Alfheim Online project. Zero doubt; the guy knew things about the game that he couldn't have without an inside track."

"Any idea who, though?" Sakuya asked. Sigurd remained tight-lipped in silence.

Argo hesitated, agonizing over this detail despite the stakes. She usually refused to sell or reveal important personal information about players—she'd pay for it, but she generally only used it to corroborate and fill in the gaps of what she knew about those players and their motivations. And Skarrip's identity had been a perfect example of why: letting it be known during the beta that he was an employee talking to an outsider would've stood a good chance of getting him fired, and once they were imprisoned in this game the revelation would've put him at risk from players who would take out their frustrations on him, as the only face they'd have for the company that made their prison.

But those were the least of Skarrip's worries now. Or theirs.

"I don't know for sure," Argo began slowly. "I mean, I can't prove it, and he never came right out and said. But for a long time I've had the strong suspicion that he was an artist for the Sylph faction's game assets—a man named Sukagawa Rintarou."

Sigurd's sudden laugh was like a dog's bark. "This is what you've brought us, Sakuya? The baseless speculation of a catgirl?"

"Fuck you too, buddy," Argo said defiantly, causing Sigurd to reach for his sword—and Thelvin to do the same in response, ears flattened back.

"Knock it off!" Sakuya said sharply, her glare alternating between Thelvin and Sigurd. To the latter she said: "Don't dismiss her opinions just because I brought her here. She's probably one of the most well-informed people in this game."

The look of contempt that followed Sigurd's derisive snort could've withered roses. "Not today she's not. This is straight out of her imagination."

Argo bore Sigurd's contempt and stared at him unblinkingly. "Does larping kill brain cells or something? I don't make shit up, Sigurd. I already told you that I wasn't certain, but I'm not pulling my theory out of thin air either. He had insider knowledge that you'd have to work on the Alfheim project to have. He knew the game really well, from the mechanics down to the lore. He was especially knowledgeable when it came to his own faction. And then there's his name: Sukarippu. Sukagawa Rintarou. It was an open secret on social media that Sukagawa was a player himself; it said so in the bio on his personal site—we just don't know who because he never posted his beta character name online. He might've even had multiple accounts."

"I'm done here," Sigurd said while making as if to leave. "Whoever it was that Skarrip might have been, she doesn't have a clue. For one thing, her theory about where he came up with his name is nonsense. Given his whole Loki charade, his character name was clearly intended as a reference to a tale in Norse mythology where Loki's lips were sewn shut—gaining him the moniker of 'Scar-Lip.'"
Argo mouthed the words and thought about it for a moment. She'd never heard that story, but the name matched perfectly once you put the English phrase *Scar-Lip* into Japanese phonetics. She mentally revised her estimation of Sigurd; he might be an asshole, but he apparently wasn't entirely stupid.

Sakuya was less impressed. "I'm not hearing any competing ideas from you about his real identity, Sigurd," she said with clear irritation. "If you want to leave, leave—Argo's giving us more than you are right now. And figuring out who Skarrip was and what he might do next as Loki is something that could save all of our lives."

Sigurd gave a dismissive sweep of his hand, as if her argument was a dialog box that was getting in his way. "Then start by finding a new source, because The Rat knows nothing. Skarrip couldn't have been who she thinks he was."

"Care to explain why?" Sakuya said.

Sigurd seemed, for once, to be at a complete loss for an answer, stopping in his tracks and staring blankly at Sakuya for some time.

"Well?" Argo prompted.

Sigurd looked back and forth between Argo and Sakuya, visibly struggling with the question for several very long seconds. Just as Argo was preparing to press him again, a look of resignation came across his face, and he refused to look at anyone while he spoke. "Because *I'm* Sukagawa Rintarou. And the title was Lead Artist."

Cool amethyst-hued orelight shone dimly from the walls of the cavern, filtered here and there through the translucent filaments of the bioluminescent fungal stalks that dangled from the high ceiling. Whereas the outer tunnels leading towards the surface were largely barren affairs, the Deep Garden below the city level of Everdark was full of colorful life—albeit the kind of life one finds far below the surface where daylight never falls.

The light level would still have been dim for someone who lacked an Imp's innate low-light vision, but for Yuuki—now that her eyes had adjusted again—it was a brilliant display of phosphorescence and natural beauty. But it was more than that, and until now Yuuki hadn't realized how much more it was because she'd never actually lived in Everdark.

While Imps could regain flight energy by resting their wings in sunlight or moonlight just like the other races, they also had the ability to recover wing energy underground by basking in the light from the many glowing plants, fungi and orelight deposits that could be found in Alfheim's subterranean zones. However, the speed at which an Imp's wing energy recovered from subterranean sources was dependent on the intensity and volume of those light sources; it had been rare for Yuuki to come across an area in the World Tree or any other dungeon where she could consistently charge her wings as efficiently as she could from the open sky.

That wasn't the case in Everdark. Orelight deposits—and light sources crafted from them—were virtually everywhere, dimly radiating their variously-colored light. Subterranean fungi ranged from thumbnail-size up to the point where they could be—and were—hollowed out and used as dwellings; most of them had at least some form of naturally phosphorescent effect on them. One of the largest in the Garden was a gigantic umbonate mushroom twenty meters in height, whose bulbous tip reached nearly to the orelight-studded ceiling. The edges of the cap overlooked the entire cavernous Garden in what Yuuki thought was a rather stunning view.
As beautiful as it was, her mind wasn't on the scenery. It was just that the serene, silent beauty of the place was soothing, and that was something she needed at the moment. Remembering hadn't been as painful this time—not when it came out as a story rather than a memory she had to relive. But thinking about the fact that her sister was gone and how it happened was still agonizing if she let her mind touch on it for more than a moment.

Sitting beside her on the slope of the mushroom's cap, Kumiko had listened silently throughout the entire tale, for which Yuuki was grateful—it helped her get through it without questioning why she was telling this kind stranger something she hadn't even told Asuna or Kirito. Kumiko had asked about the incident that triggered her panic attack, and there had been something in the way she asked that suggested it wasn't just idle curiosity about a traumatic event that Yuuki had tried to bury in her past.

She understood—at least, she did a little bit.

"Your twin sister," Kumiko said with sympathetic grief in her voice, her reserve broken. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. That's… I can't even."

"You can probably get why I haven't been back to Everdark since," Yuuki said. "There are bad memories here. Bad memories of bad people."

"For many of us as well," Kumiko agreed, her eyes unreadably black in the light. "Thank you for trusting me, Yuuki. Burdens like these weigh less when they're shared—something I know all too well. Is that the first time you've told anyone?"

Yuuki hesitated briefly before nodding.

Kumiko reached over and gave Yuuki a reassuring but brief squeeze of the shoulder; she seemed to have a keen feel for how to stop short of tripping the anti-harassment code. "All I can really say is that you're not alone… there are a lot of Imps who lost someone dear in the invasion, or who suffered in other ways then or during the month-long occupation that followed. Some because of what was done to them… others because of what they had to do. We all bear the scars in one way or another."

There was something that had been bothering Yuuki for a long time, and she didn't think she was likely to get another chance to ask the question of someone who was in a position to answer it. "How can you keep working with them?" Yuuki asked earnestly. "I know it wasn't all Salamanders who did those awful things… but without knowing which ones did, how can you be allied with them, not knowing if the person in your clearing group might be someone who killed a friend of yours?"

Kumiko was silent for a time; it gave Yuuki the space to continue with her own thoughts. She didn't really have any grasp of politics, but the ongoing alliance between the Imps and the Salamanders was something she just couldn't get her head around no matter how hard she tried. In the first month or two, sure, maybe they hadn't had any choice. But now? What kept the two factions together?

"It bothers you, doesn't it?" Kumiko finally asked.

"What does?"

Yuuki heard Kumiko shift beside her and felt the woman's gaze. "The lack of resolution. The fact that the Salamanders who did this to you got away clean. The fact that justice was never done."

"Of course it does," Yuuki replied, feeling tears come to her eyes again and wiping the back of her wrist against them. "But there's nothing I can do about it now."
There were a few more beats of meaningful silence. "What if there was?"

The words turned Yuuki's head towards Kumiko in confusion. "I don't understand."

"Suppose you did find them again? These Salamanders, Gitou and Trey. What might you say? What would you do?"

*Show them how much pain they caused. Tell them about the beautiful person that they took away from the world. Try to forgive them.* Those were the first thoughts that went through Yuuki's mind, and they were words that she knew she should heed. The words belied the pain in her heart, the turmoil that afflicted her; it was advice that came from her faith, and she knew that it was the path that led to being the person she wanted to be. Forgiveness led to salvation, and there was no point of no return that kept a person from achieving that—she had to believe that even Gitou and Trey were people worth saving. They had lives and families back in the real world. They had souls.

They were people. Broken people who'd done awful things… but they were still people.

*People who killed Aiko.*

Yuuki's hands tightened into fists where they rested on her lap. "I don't think there's anything I could do," she said, voice strained. "The Salamanders won't punish them, especially not now that Corvatz is the leader."

"No, they won't," Kumiko said quietly. "But what if you could? Would you?"

Never, she thought, feeling the dissonance between what she wanted and what she knew to be right. "'See that no one repays anyone evil for evil,'" she said after a pause that felt far too long. "'But always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.'"

"Those aren't your own words," Kumiko observed.

"Paul the Apostle," Yuuki said, nodding. "But there are others too. Revenge is a poison in your heart, and I don't want it."

She could tell that Kumiko didn't entirely believe her, but the woman accepted her answer with a slight smile after a few moments of intense examination. "As you will. You said last night that you wanted to talk to Lord Haydon because you were trying to find some PKers... so I assumed that you were trying to track down these two Salamanders who wronged you."

*Black. Wraith.* Those were the names that she was here to find. For all that the Salamanders had done, Black and Wraith were Imps, and Prophet a Spriggan. The Salamanders were her past, and it had simply never occurred to Yuuki that trying to find them was even an option—let alone what she might say or do if she did.

She'd apparently gone quiet again without realizing it; Kumiko spoke again. When she did, her tone had shifted to something a bit more businesslike. "Then what of these PKers you're after? What did they do?"

"They killed a boy in one of the newbie zones," Yuuki said, feeling the sadness well up in her again at the thought of having been unable to do anything to stop Robert's senseless death while she was chasing off Black. "Two of them are Imps, and they're assassins who don't care who they kill. My friends and I are trying to stop them before they can do anything like that again."

Kumiko made a humming, contemplative noise. "Assassins, you say. Were they part of Kibaou's privateer groups, then?"
Yuuki shrugged, wishing she had more information. "Maybe? I don't know what they did before this."

"Well, if they were privateers, then someone will know who they were. Give their names to Lord Haydon and it may be a start. He's in an important meeting right now, but he'll be free in about an hour."

It was an hour that passed, to Yuuki's relief, without any further discussions of vengeance or painful memories. Kumiko spent that time showing Yuuki around Everdark's city center, a bowl-shaped cavern with buildings that crawled up the sloped sides—and even in places hung from the ceiling far above, in spots only an Imp would ever be able to reach. There were so many new things she was excited to see; she hadn't really had a chance to explore a lot of Everdark on her first day in the game. That had been before she'd learned to fly, when she and Aiko—

Yuuki squeezed her eyes shut briefly to drive away the train of thought. This was the biggest reason why she'd never returned to Everdark—there was no part of her memories of this place that did not lead, in one way or another, to her sister. As she always did whenever she noticed herself going down darker roads in her mind, she banished the thoughts with a smile, and responded to Kumiko's remarks with renewed cheer that was more aspirational than sincerely felt.

When Kumiko at last received a message that Haydon was available, she brought the guided tour to an end. They found him a short time later occupying a stall in an archery range that had been built—whether by Kayaba or later by the Imps themselves, Yuuki didn't know—in a tunnel that was so long and exceptionally large that it almost qualified as a cavern of its own. It dead-ended in a slight rise that bore the furthest targets; Yuuki eyeballed the distance at somewhere short of 100 meters.

Haydon was a solidly-built older man with a long ponytail the color of dark ashes; from the look of him, he seemed as if he'd be better suited to a two-handed warhammer than the delicately scalloped curves of the longbow he was holding. He seemed to take no notice of their approach as he drew his knuckles back to his cheek, barely a breath passing in between the time he drew and the time the arrow flew from his bow. It wasn't until the shaft buried itself just outside of the gold ring in the center that Kumiko spoke.

"My Lord, I've brought you the young clearer I mentioned, the one from the Undine groups."

"So you have," Haydon said, turning the full weight of his attention on Yuuki in a way that almost made her retreat a step. That was until the man's sharp scrutiny turned to a gentle smile. "Kumiko says your name is Yuuki, and that you've just returned to us. So you're the owner of the unfamiliar name I'm always seeing near the top of the roster when I sort by level. You weren't one of our clearers, so I'd always wondered—even thought about sending you a message once or twice. So why've you been gone so long, little miss?"

Kumiko saved Yuuki from the awkward need to talk around the subject of Aiko's death by stepping in then and clearing her throat. "Monkey memories, Lord Haydon. Have care."

"Saru no omoide?" Yuuki thought, confused. Haydon, however, seemed to know exactly what Kumiko had meant. "Say no more, and forgive my prying." He turned back to the range then, drawing a new arrow from the quiver at his back and fitting it to the bowstring in one smooth motion. "But you've come back after all this time, so you must have a good reason. Well?"

Yuuki smiled, much of the gloom of the morning's reminiscence fading; it was hard not to like the man's grandfatherly demeanor. "I'm here looking for a couple of PKers who need to be stopped. I was hoping you could tell me about them, or maybe even do something about them."
Another arrow flew; this one towards the outside of the red ring. Yuuki thought it had been a pretty good shot, but Haydon made a disappointed face and drew again. "PKers," he said, eyes narrowing slightly just before letting the bowstring slide off his fingers. "Kumiko, have you discussed—"

"Another matter, Lord Haydon. This morning she's here looking for a pair of Imps."

"Alright. I trust your discretion as always." This time the projectile that shot out from the bow flew true and landed just off-center inside the gold ring. Looking pleased, Haydon set down the bow on the bench in front of him. "I'm assuming you want me to look up a couple of names. You understand I can't take any action without knowing more."

"Black is the name of one. He's a teenage boy with scraggly brownish hair. Uses a dagger and throwing picks. The other is Wraith. We think that's a young girl from the size and shape of the avatar, but don't know anything else."

Haydon snorted. "'Black'? 'Wraith'? Really? I swear, these kids are so freaking unoriginal sometimes. Well, at least those are easy names to spot. What'd they do? I need details, you know."

By this point Yuuki had managed to distill the explanation down to a single sentence. "Their group attacked some kids in a newbie zone and killed one of them."

From the look on Haydon's face, Yuuki wouldn't have wanted to be one of Prophet's group if and when he found them. "Can you validate this?" he demanded sharply of Kumiko.

Kumiko shook her head. "With hard proof? No. I'm still waiting to hear back on a few inquiries. But I do think she's telling the truth."

That seemed to satisfy Haydon, at least for the moment; Yuuki was impressed by how much he seemed to trust his lead clearer's word. But about thirty seconds of working with his menu later, Haydon seemed less confident than he had before. "Your PKers don't exist. I can't find their names in the roster, dead or alive."

"But they have to!" she blurted out. "That's what they called each other, and…"

"Yeah," Haydon said just as understanding settled in for Yuuki, causing her protest to trail off weakly. "That's what they called each other. But that ain't their real names. No 'Black' under the B-names. I even looked under the K-names in case he used normal Japanese instead of that English word, but do you know how many bajillion freakin' names in this faction start with Kuro-? It's like walking into an office in Tokyo and asking for Suzuki-san."

Yuuki almost managed to laugh at the joke—but failed, given the circumstances, settling for a faint and hopeful smile. "And Wraith?"

"Sorry, struck out there too. No Ikiryou or Yuurei either."

"So you can't help me?" Yuuki said, knowing and dreading the answer but asking for confirmation anyway.

Haydon shook his head. "Sorry, kid. I wish I could, but if I don't even know their character names..." He spread his hands with a look of regret before picking up the bow once more. "Talk to Kumiko after this," he said as he drew and loosed. "She might be able to help in ways I officially can't."

Yuuki bowed, drained of all the hope that she'd felt of making some progress. "I will. Thank you for
Haydon's voice halted Yuuki in mid-step as she started to leave. "Hold up a minute." When she turned with a questioning look, she saw him approaching her while he spoke. "You wouldn't have had to come back here to join our clearers—all that happens in the World Tree. But you've been clearing with the Undine groups, not ours. Will you tell me why?"

Memories flooded Yuuki as she began to answer, but not the painful memories that Everdark had dredged up ever since she'd arrived. These were memories of the kind Undines who'd taken her to Parasel, of Diavel granting her a green cursor, of clearing the World Tree… but most of all, memories of Asuna's kindness, the way the older girl had practically adopted her, teaching and protecting her. Yuuki didn't even know where to begin in explaining her feelings about her best friend's faction.

"They were kind to me," Yuuki said. "When the Sal… when I ran away from here, they took me in. The Undines were trying to help keep people alive, no matter who they were." As opposed to the Salamanders, she thought but didn't say. She knew it was bad to generalize the way she was, but on the whole that faction just didn't seem to have saving lives as one of their priorities.

"I think I see where you're going with this, Lord Haydon," Kumiko put in. "You should know that Yuuki doesn't quite understand why we're still allied with the Salamanders."

Haydon laughed without much humor, clapping a hand on Yuuki's shoulder. "No, I don't expect you do, little one. It's complicated, and I don't expect I'm likely to be able to explain the politics and psychological stuff in a way you'll understand, either. But let me try an angle you probably will understand. What do you think happens if your Undine friends are first to clear the World Tree?"

Yuuki smiled. "My friends can escape and go back to their old lives."

"But not you," Haydon pointed out. "Not unless their guy chooses the Imps as an ally, and that ain't gonna happen."

"It's okay," Yuuki assured him. Haydon wasn't treading on any ground that she hadn't already covered at length in the company of her own thoughts. "I just want the people I care about to be able to go home."

Haydon and Kumiko glanced at each other before the Imp leader spoke again. "You want to save as many people as possible, don't you?"

"Of course!" Yuuki said.

Haydon nodded. "Well, so do I. And whatever other issues we might have with them… I believe the Salamanders are going to be the ones who clear the World Tree."

"So of course you want your faction to be allied with them," Yuuki said.

"Our faction," Haydon corrected. "Even if you clear for the Undines, you're still an Imp, and when the Salamanders clear the game, you'll be able to escape with us."

Yuuki's smile turned slightly bitter. "If only that were true."

"It is," Haydon said with certitude. "It's a simple fact that the only way you're leaving this game is if the Imps do. Diavel can give you a green cursor, but that doesn't make you an Undine or a member of a race allied with them."
"So that's the most important thing?" Yuuki asked. "Self-interest?"

"It's the most reliable human motivation," Kumiko said.

"But that's not the only reason," Haydon added. "When the first three races win their freedom, nobody knows what's going to happen to everyone else."

"A lot of people seem to think that the other six will get to try again," Yuuki said.

"Yeah, I heard that theory," Haydon said, nodding. "Maybe they will. Maybe they won't. I don't fancy betting my life on Kayaba being fair. So let me give you something to think about. Kumiko—a demonstration for the young lady."

The vaguely-worded question apparently meant something to the Imp lead clearer, she walked up to Haydon and looked him up and down for a moment before hefting his entire avatar with what looked like very little effort. Her wings came out, and her feet left the floor as she slowly rose into the air.

"Okay, you can put me down now." Haydon dropped to the ground with a grunt and a puff of dust from the soles of his boots, and looked at Yuuki as he swept his hand aside in a gesture of dismissing a UI window. "A player who has a high-enough STR stat can fly while carrying someone else's weight, and Salamanders have a racial advantage in STR."

Yuuki suddenly thought she understood. "You don't mean—"

"I do. There are around three thousand living Salamander players, and a thousand of us. Working together, our two races alone could evacuate nearly half of the surviving players who'd otherwise be left behind—by carrying them through the portal when we leave. Add whoever gets picked for the third… and depending on how many players are even still alive by that point, and how big the third race's population is… we might be able to get everyone out."

"That idea has too many holes in it," Yuuki said. In point of fact, she and Asuna had both been very fond of the plan for a time—until Kirito had shot it down in a fairly exhaustive argument. She could almost hear his voice in her own as she repeated back some of the things he'd said.

"Even in the Salamanders, not many players are going to have enough points dedicated to STR to be able to carry another player without exceeding their Max Carry Weight limit. And even if you could, there's no way for anyone on this side to know if the player you carried out survived the trip. For all we know, the portal could treat anyone who isn't flagged for it as trying to exploit the game, and kill them. You could be sending thousands of people to their deaths, and you'd never know until you got out and found out that they died. Which means the people inside would keep sending them, and never know they were dying."

"You could say the same about that farfetched theory of the leftover players getting another chance to clear the game," Kumiko pointed out with a bit of frost in her tone. "There's no guarantee that Kayaba's terms work that way. If we don't try to carry as many people out as we can, we might as well be leaving them behind and saying, 'sayonara, hope you don't die.' Are you okay with being on either side of that conversation?"

Haydon waved his hand at the air. "Let it go, Kumiko. You can see the little tomboy's mind is made up. She wants to stick with her friends, and as much as we need more skilled Imp clearers… I'm not going to be the one to tell her to abandon people she cares about."

Yuuki bowed again. "Thanks for understanding, Lord Haydon. I'll keep your words in mind, but you're right… I have friends I owe my life to, and I want to fight at their sides."
Haydon gave Kumiko a significant look; the dark-haired woman sighed. "My Lord, thank you. I hope this wasn't an imposition on your practice time."

The Imp leader shook his head. "Nah, you're fine. She's a good girl, Kumi. Help her if you can."

As they walked away together, Yuuki stayed quiet until she could no longer hear the periodic sounds of arrows slicing through the air. "Can you help me?" she asked. "You didn't recognize the names of those two Imps when I told you, and Lord Haydon couldn't find them."

"Perhaps," Kumiko said, stepping past another Imp who had quickly moved aside for her with a nod. "What would you do if you found them?"

That was a question for which Yuuki did not have a good answer. Prophet's gang had to be stopped. But there was no ruling authority that could hold them, no law that forbade what they were doing. "They have to be dealt with," Yuuki answered. "We have to stop them from killing anyone else."

"Surely," Kumiko said. "How do you propose to do that?"

Yuuki hesitated again, uncomfortable.

"Let me help you find your answer," Kumiko said. "If they're the kind of people you say they are, then they're not going to stop when you say 'please', and you're not going to be able to shame them. So you have two choices: you either make them afraid to continue, or you take away their ability to continue." She paused. "Or a third choice, which is to do nothing and allow them to continue, secure in the belief that no one can or will stop them. Which of those would you choose?"

For a long time, Yuuki couldn't answer the question, and Kumiko didn't press further. So lost was she in her own tumultuous thoughts that she didn't even notice when they arrived at the inn where she was staying until Kumiko poked her in the shoulder. "Home."

No, Yuuki thought. This isn't my home. I'm not sure it ever could be. "Thank you for all your help, Kumiko," was what she said.

"Glad to help a fellow Imp," Kumiko said. "Have you figured out how you want to deal with these PKers?"

"They have to be stopped," Yuuki repeated.

"Yes," Kumiko said, a hint of annoyance showing in the dismissive flick of her hands. "We've established that. But how?"

Scare them. Trap them somewhere. Disable them somehow. Fight them until they give up.

Kill them.

Each possibility that went through her mind was countered by a voice scolding her for being naive, telling her that half-measures would never deter or stop people like Prophet and his gang. Each option escalated further from the last... until she was left with the one thing she couldn't do.

She couldn't... but Kirito could. And that was the truth that she'd been hiding from all this time, telling herself that they just had to find these PKers and 'deal' with them, just the way that she and Asuna had dealt with Salamander PK groups in the early days of the game—by being better than them, and driving them off.

But had even that really dealt with the problem? The groups that she and Asuna had defeated...
hadn't been killed. They'd just been beaten so badly that they ran. And run they had—run off to most likely find easier prey.

They hadn't dealt with these PK groups. They'd simply chased them away and made them someone else's problem.

The truth burned inside of her. Was it any lesser sin to work with Kirito and Asuna to hunt down Prophet's gang, knowing that at the end of that road Kirito was probably going to kill them anyway? Did that put their blood on her hands, too?

"They're going to die," Yuuki said, so quietly that she wasn't even sure Kumiko could hear. Tears were in her eyes, and she couldn't even look at the Imp clearer who was right in front of her. "At the end of all this, someone is going to die."

Kumiko reached up and brushed away a few of Yuuki's tears with the back of one finger. "Yes," she said almost as quietly. "They are. Was that so hard to admit?"

"But it's not vengeance," Yuuki insisted. "It's justice. It's protecting others. We can't let them just keep doing what they're doing."

"Justice," Kumiko said solemnly. "Is this the same justice you would want for the Salamanders who killed Aiko?"

"That's different," Yuuki said with a painful wince and a lack of conviction. "They're not doing that anymore."

Kumiko's gaze then was so intense that Yuuki had to look away again. Every word was like the lash of a whip. "Are you certain? You've never seen them since, Yuuki. This Salamander named Gitou, he wanted to do horrible things to you. Things you probably can't imagine and don't even want to think about. And he didn't care that you were twelve years old. Do you think you were the only victim? In here... or in the world outside?"

Shock ran through Yuuki. It had simply never occurred to her that Gitou would've tried to hurt anyone else… not after getting sent to jail the way he had to show him what would happen if he tried. As for Trey—

"And Trey killed your sister. Do you think she was the only one?"

The grief welled up in Yuuki all at once, striking her in its entirety so that her lips parted and she felt unsteady on her feet. Kumiko seemed to notice; she reached out and helped stabilize her. Rather than triggering her as it had before, the touch now felt comforting—almost motherly. "What should I do?" she asked, tears still running down her cheeks as her head bowed.

"Decide," Kumiko said, touching her gently on the top of her lowered head. "Maybe not now. Maybe not tomorrow. But think about it clearly, and decide what must be done. Stay here as long as you need to; I'll pay for your lodging."

She leaned in close to Yuuki then, and whispered in her ear. "If you're still here in a few days when she gets back, look up an Imp scout named Rei. When you decide what you want to do, she can help you."

"Help me with what?" Yuuki asked in the same whisper. "The PKers or the Salamanders?"

Kumiko simply drew back and smiled. "Yes."
"There's a friend of mine," Yoshihara began.

_You have friends?_ was the first thought that shot through Kirito's mind. He knew the implied insult wasn't true, but it was through an effort of will that he didn't say it out loud—not when he was sitting here in Yoshihara's room, about to finally get some answers. He didn't dare look at Asuna, but from her silence he suspected she was thinking the same thing.

"A very _dear_ friend," the Spriggan leader went on. "Someone I trust with my life. She… she and Prophet were apparently a thing in the past, and they knew each other from another game."

"A friend?" Asuna said. "_Apparently?_" The skepticism in her voice reached Kirito as well after a moment, as it occurred to him where it was coming from. _Right. A 'friend'. That's why you flipped your lid last night, and needed to sleep on it to calm down before talking to us._

Yoshihara glared at Asuna from the hammock where she was lounging. "You know what, kiddo, I don't owe you _shit_. I'm telling you this because I've got lines I won't cross, and that asshole has crossed one. And after what you said went down in the baths last night, I wouldn't put it past him to come after my friend if he thinks she's a liability."

"He's a Spriggan," Kirito pointed out. "You've got access to the Faction Leader interface. What can you tell us about him?"

"Honestly? Almost nothing."

"I don't believe you," Kirito said, growing annoyed. "I've seen the interface. You can see the levels of every player in your faction. At least knowing that much about him would help us prepare. You could also tell us if he owns or rents any property in Penwether."

"I don't care what you believe," Yoshihara said, matching his annoyance. "I can't tell you because _Prophet_ isn't his real character name. There _is_ no Spriggan named 'Prophet'. There's nothing even close to it in the P's."

Kirito and Asuna both fell at a loss for words for several moments; Asuna recovered first. "Then… is there even anything you can tell us at all?"

Yoshihara shook her head. "Not beyond what I'm telling you right now—but it's useful in itself to know that you _don't_ actually know his real name. It means you don't have to waste your time or money trying to hunt down records of him by that name."

"It's not a complete waste," Kirito said. "It may not be his character name, but it's still what he's known by. It's still the name he calls himself when talking to others. He has a reputation. All of that means he can be found by that name, even if it's not his real one."

Yoshihara smirked. "You're not as dumb as you seem, are you?"

Kirito made an amused noise. He couldn't really bring himself to value Yoshihara's opinion enough to be insulted by the backhanded compliment. "What about your… friend? If she did know him from before, she might be able to tell us a lot more than you can."

"No," Yoshihara said instantly and vehemently. "I don't want you talking to her."

Kirito was taken slightly aback by the unexpected verbal door being slammed in his face. "Why not? You said you're worried about your friend, and you want to see Prophet dealt with… so why not let
her help us?"

"Okay, maybe you are that dumb," Yoshihara said with a roll of her eyes. "Think about it. You're after this Prophet, and he knows it. Assassins that you said were from this guy's group came after your ladyfriend here last night. If word gets to him that you're talking to my friend, she will be in danger if she's not already."

"What about you?" Asuna asked.

"What about me?" Yoshihara shot back. "I'm not the one in danger here. Hell, the only reason I'm still talking to you is because at this point everyone in this city already thinks we're talking." She paused there, glancing up at her HUD, and before Asuna could do more than open her mouth, continued. "And on that note, I think it's time for you two to leave. Send word if you do track this guy down."

Neither Kirito nor Asuna spoke on their way out through the angular hallways of Penwether's largest ziggurat—not until they emerged into the tiled streets of the open city itself, indoor torchlight giving way to sunlight diffused by scattered clouds. Kirito could feel his wing energy begin to return after being indoors for so long, but since their wings would just now be charging, the next stop on their agenda would require a short walk.

"What a waste of time," Asuna said, breaking the silence. She was clearly near the end of her desire to spend any more time in Penwether.

"I didn't expect much from her," Kirito admitted. "But I was hoping for more than that. On with Plan B."

"I really hope there isn't still a line for that blacksmith," Asuna said as they turned onto the main street that led to the market.

"There will be," Kirito assured her. "He's apparently the only player blacksmith in the city today, so he's who everyone is going to go to for repairs, upgrades, whatever. Nobody wants to use a service NPC if they have a player alternative with any skill."

"We probably should've just waited, then," Asuna said. "We'd be done by now."

"We didn't have a choice," Kirito pointed out. "Yoshihara was adamant that we get this meeting over with by eleven."

Asuna frowned. "She's hiding something, Kirito. She wasn't telling us everything she knew, and I'm not even sure I believe the things she did say. A 'friend'... you and I both know she was talking about herself."

"Maybe," Kirito said. "From some of the things she said, I'm not so sure."

"Like what?"

"Well..." Kirito stopped walking for a moment, looking down in thought. He wasn't even sure there was a specific line he could pick out. There was just something about what she was saying that made him think she really was talking about a friend... but he couldn't put his finger on it.

No, wait. "I've got it," he said. "Why the fear? Why would she be worried about her 'friend' if she was really talking about herself? We know she never leaves the Safe Zone anymore."

"Do we?" Asuna asked.
"Well, of course—" Kirito hesitated in mid-thought, appearing to reconsider the assumption. "I can't say with 100% certainty that she never does," he said after fully thinking it through. "But it's really, really unlikely. She's the most-hated faction leader in the game—possibly one of the most-hated players in the game, period. She'd be a target wherever she went, just like she was before." He shook his head. "No. Even if she didn't care about her friends, she's not suicidal. I think there really is a friend—didn't she have a party she was really close with early on?"

"You tell me," Asuna said with a shrug, gesturing for them to keep moving. "You'd know better."

Kirito fell in step beside her once more. "Well she did," he said. "Argo said some of her party members were riaru friends. I remember hearing that one died against a mob, and another from an attempted PK. And that after losing two friends, one to an attempt on her life, that was when she stopped going out."

Asuna nodded. "I can understand why."

"I'm just surprised that she'd make that decision," Kirito said with a glance back the way they'd come. "It seems uncharacteristically... decent of her."

"Ouch," Asuna said with a laugh. "Maybe she's just a bit more complicated than everyone thinks. It doesn't mean she's not still a terrible leader, but I think it's good to keep in mind that even really awful people are still human. I'm sure there are people even someone as self-centered as Yoshihara cares about."

It took the better part of fifteen minutes to get to the front of the line for the player blacksmith, a weary-looking Leprechaun named Piker who was using one of Penwether's rental forges. But after he'd finished upgrading the broadsword of the player in front of Kirito and Asuna, he held up a hand as he swiped the other wrist across his forehead. "Sorry guys, I need a break—my arm is killing me."

By which he surely meant that he felt weary or uncomfortable; the game engine wouldn't allow the simulated sensations to actually be painful. Asuna started to make a disappointed sound; Kirito waved at her to get her to abide a moment. "I bet," he said with a sly grin. "But the business I've got for you is perfect, because I just need you to identify something. You can rest your arm and earn a fee at the same time."

Piker pushed locks of curly steel-blue hair away from his face, then looked at Kirito speculatively for a few beats before donning a grin of his own. "Sold. And quit your bitchin'!" he called out to the four players in line behind them. "I'll take you next too if you're just appraising, but I need to rest a bit before I do any more upgrades or repairs."

Kirito glanced over at Asuna and nodded. She reached up and began using her game menu; a few gestures later a weapon shimmered into existence in her free hand. The texture that followed the glowing wireframe of the 3D model was that of a short sword made of some unknown dark silver material traced with filigrees of a lighter platinum, sporting a crossguard and pommel of the same material inlaid with glossy black wood. The grip seemed to be wrapped with some kind of silver cord that matched the color of the filigree, and all of those shiny highlights had been the stroke of luck that allowed them to find it at all.

From what Asuna had said, the vertical channel of the hot spring seemed effectively bottomless, aside from a few side tunnels that she'd assumed were hidden passages to a different zone somewhere—she hadn't gone too far. But the sword had struck the water at an angle and must have sunk similarly; it had come to rest on a jagged lip of stone on the opposite side of the pool, roughly thirty meters below. The light from above had caught the filigree and attracted her attention just as she'd been about to give up.
They'd known immediately the potential value of what they'd found—not in terms of Yuld, but in terms of a clue that could lead them to Prophet. But first they had to learn the name of the player who'd made it.

Piker whistled appreciatively once the weapon finished rendering. "Nice work. Who's the smith?"

"That's what we'd like to know," Kirito said, holding out the weapon. "If you would?"

"4000 Yuld," Piker insisted. "I only take payment in advance."

Kirito didn't mind; it wasn't too far above the price he would've paid in Arun, and he wanted to know sooner rather than later. After Kirito had paid the agreed-upon price, Piker turned the weapon over in his hands and tapped its surface once, selecting one of the options that came up. "The weapon's name is «Aloof Negotiator»," he said with a slight snicker. "Aside from the funny name, it's a really nice sword."

Piker returned the weapon to Kirito, who read the status screen while Asuna leaned in close to see. "Good base damage," the blacksmith said. "Upgraded three times, each with Quickness; still has three more upgrade slots. I'll buy it if you're looking to sell."

Kirito forced away the urge to get excited about the weapon's stats or value; none of those things were what was important here. What he and Asuna were interested in was a phrase in smaller type near the bottom of the window: Created by Nezha.

"Do you recognize the crafter's name?" Kirito asked, showing the weapon and its status window to the Leprechaun again.

Piker shook his head after only a glance. "Not someone I know personally or by reputation, at least. If they're one of ours and they're guilded or registered, though, they'll be on record with the NCC administration in Nissengrof."

There was a growing amount of discontented noise from behind them; Kirito realized they were holding up the line. "Thanks for the help," he said, waving to Piker.

"Nissengrof," Kirito said as they walked away.

"Nissengrof," Asuna echoed. "Yuuki's not coming, so I guess it's just us."

There was something hollow in Asuna's words that Kirito wasn't sure he cared for. "Are you okay, Asuna? This is probably the longest you and Yuuki have been apart since you met."

"Just about," Asuna admitted. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little worried, but mostly I just miss her."

"She's strong," Kirito said confidently. "In every way." He gave Asuna what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "She'll be fine. She's in her own Safe Zone, and from what you said the Imp leadership likes her, so I'm not sure what trouble she could get into while she's there. Did she say how long she'd be staying?"

Asuna shook her head. "A few days, at least—but realistically, however long she thinks is necessary to get the answers we need. By then we should've at least reached Gnome territory, if not Nissengrof itself, so we'll be on the opposite side of Alfheim from her. Are you sure this trip is necessary, Kirito?"

"It is for me," Kirito said. He'd send a message to Argo just to be sure—she at least had names for
most of the major NCC crafters—but with her in Sylvain dealing with Sakuya, he wasn't counting on a solution or waiting for one. He mulled over whether to say more, not wanting to discourage Asuna or have her actually leave. "You don't have to come though. I'd completely understand if you wanted to see Yuuki again."

"Yuuki has her own investigation to take care of," Asuna said with a shake of the head. "She's safe and she's more likely to get cooperation from the Imps if it's just her. And on my own, I'm not sure what I could do other than what I've already said to Diavel." Kirito caught her gaze out of the corner of his eye; when he looked at her, she was examining him in a way that made him a little uncomfortable. "Besides, now that we know Prophet's group is targeting us, it's better that you and I stick together, since neither of us will be in a Safe Zone. Do you still want me with you?"

"Of course I do!" Kirito said, unsure of why the words came out with such force. Rather than putting Asuna off, however, she seemed satisfied with this reaction, smiling at him as if there'd been no question. "Then it's settled. We're still a party." She paused, looking off to the northwest before back at Kirito. "So… Nissengrof?"

Kirito took one last look around Penwether. They'd stopped in the middle of a small bridge that arched over the main thoroughfare below; it wasn't the best view in the city but he could still see all from one end to the other if he looked either way along the street. He wasn't sure why he felt the urge to do so—there was nothing for him here, nothing except a recalcitrant and mostly useless leader who'd barely been worth the time to make the trip.

"Nissengrof," Kirito confirmed with a grin, summoning his wings only a beat before Asuna's. "Let's go."

"Thanks for coming," Chellok said, with one of the grimmest looks that Lisbeth had ever seen on his face, made grimmer by the harsh lighting of the orelight lamps on the walls of his office. "I would've just gone and chatted with each of you instead of dragging you down here, but this makes things easier. To put it mildly, we got problems."

Lisbeth had a note-taking window open in front of her, fingers poised to type, but she didn't really think recording those particular statements was really necessary. The NCC might have been run like a business, but things just weren't that formal most of the time. Agil, standing beside Chellok, was equally stone-faced; they had already discussed this subject at length before this meeting. But the three representatives of the Northern Crafting Combine's faction leaders stirred at the frank declaration.

Yurielle, Thinker's proxy from the Leprechaun faction, spoke up first. "Yes, your messages said there was a serious supply issue you needed to discuss with all of us. Is this connected with the respawn reports we've been tracking?"

Chellok nodded, his lined face further creased with worry. "I'm sure it is. Our farming groups have confirmed what you've all probably suspected since last night: the distribution of mobs—both in level and in type—has changed. Mobs that were already spawned before yesterday haven't gone away, but whenever one of the old mobs is cleared, it respawns as something else. That something is, with the exception of the closest newbie zones, generally a good ten or more levels higher than the ones populating that area before. There's still a level ramp-up between the newbie zones and the zones bordering them, but it's a steeper ramp."

"We've lost people," said Aria, a short Puca woman with long straw-blonde hair and a sweet voice.
With her green eyes, she could've almost passed for a Sylph, were it not for the garishly multi-colored dress she was wearing. "One farming group nearly wiped because they weren't prepared to fight a mob that was otherwise right around their level."

Daizen, a very fat man with a receding black hairline who represented the Gnome faction leader, nodded. Normally quite jovial, his face was currently devoid of cheer. "We've had the same, as Agil here well knows. Named mobs are different too. We can adjust, though—in fact we already are. Most of our farmers are still level-appropriate for the new mobs, they just have to be more careful now."

"That's great, Dai, but I'm afraid it's a bigger problem than it sounds like," Chellok said. "Liz, today's manifest please."

Lisbeth's game menu was already open; she navigated to her inventory and turned a scroll into a game object, handing it to Chellok without any outward complaint about the menial work. Doing administrative jobs for the Depot when she was in Nissengrof was kind of tedious at times, but it had its benefits—she was looking forward to trying out a new recipe that Chellok had shared with her, and it was nice having access to all sorts of juicy gossip.

But first, she had to get through this meeting. And as both a crafter and a friend to at least half of the people in the room, she had a vested interest in the topic.

"Look, ALO's crafting system is deep and complicated, but here's the relevant bit: whenever you create, upgrade, or repair an item—food, weapons, equipment, whatever—it uses up these components called mats." The representatives all nodded at Chellok's explanation. "These mats come from all sorts of things—harvesting nodes, quests, but mostly from mob drops."

"Do we have to cover Crafting 101?" Lisbeth butted in wearily.

"It's okay, Liz," Yurielle said with a gesture of placation to her fellow Leprechaun. "Better that he go over things we already know, rather than assume we all know something that one or more of us don't and should. Please continue, Chellok."

"Right," Chellok said, with a critical glance at Lisbeth that she answered by sticking out her tongue. "So there are certain mats that are always needed in bulk when upgrading weapons and other equipable items, and to maximize your success rate you need a lot of them. Every item needs something different—usually a large number of a specific kind of common mat, plus a smaller number of something less-common. Longsword-type weapons, for example, always require one or more stacks of Wolf Incisors to upgrade, in addition to whatever rarer mats are specific to the individual sword."

"Tundra Wolf Incisors," Yurielle clarified, tucking a long lock of silver hair behind her ear. She didn't need to point out that she was wearing a longsword at her side.

Chellok shook his head. "No, just Wolf Incisors. Any mat that's tagged that way will work for the recipe, and every zone has different kinds of mobs that drop variations on them—like, say, Dire Wolves in the Ancient Forest and Kingfall. Tundra Wolves and their variants just happen to be the most common Wolf-type mobs here in the north."

Lisbeth had done some of the inventory herself, so she had a sinking suspicion that she knew where Chellok was going with this. From the look on the faces of the faction leader proxies, though, the implications hadn't sunk in for them. Chellok sighed, slapping the scroll down on the ironwood table beside him and flattening it out. "Point is, look at today's deliveries from our farming groups. Stacks and stacks of drops from Frost Giant trash mobs, which usually only our Jotunn Valley teams get
much of. An absolutely stupid number of Lithopede Carapaces, which would've been really nice to have months ago. But the worst is the twelve Tunnel Spider Mandibles. Not twelve stacks—twelve drops."

That was what Lisbeth had been afraid of. "Curved swords."

"Give Liz a lollipop," Chellok said after a deep-throated grunt of affirmation. "That's right, you need stacks of Spider Mandibles for upgrading most of the weapons that fall into the «One-Handed Curved Sword» class. The things were practically a goddamn infestation in the level five to ten underground zones, and now according to our farmers most of them are just... gone. Once you clear them, they don't come back. Instead their spawn areas are apparently swarming with mostly higher-level Lithopedes now."

"Which is great for mace users like me," Lisbeth said.

"And arachnophobes," Aria said with a shudder.

Lisbeth went on. "But a lot of our clearers use curved swords, don't they?" She'd done more than a few of those jobs herself, especially before moving to Arun.

"They do," Chellok said, nodding. "And a big part of the reason why so many went that route is because the upgrade mats were so easy to farm right around here. But that's not the only shortage I found. And I haven't gotten word from your depots in Domnann and Sondref yet," he added, glancing at Yurielle and Aria. "But I'd bet money that they'll see different shortages."

"If the shortages are different," Agil said, rubbing at his chin thoughtfully, "then it may all even out once we get their next shipments and pool our resources. I'll have to rework the maps and schedules for the farming territories once the new mob populations stabilize. We should let Godfrey know to have the clearers put nonessential upgrades on hold in the meantime unless they're using mats they farmed themselves."

"Aye, and take some of our surplus mats off the market," Chellok said to Daizen. "At least until we know for sure which are still going to be running a surplus from now on."

"I will," Daizen said. "But as inconvenient as this is—"

"It was pretty inconvenient for the players who died," Agil remarked with a more even tone than Lisbeth thought she would've managed.

"I'm speaking purely of our inventory shortfalls," Daizen said hastily, raising both hands in surrender. "As inconvenient as these shortages are, as I said before, we'll adjust. It has always been the case that some mats are more common in one zone than another. We are fortunate to have a well-organized commercial alliance up here, so any needs from one faction can, we should hope, continue to be met by another once we know what to expect from the new balance."

"That's us," Chellok said, nodding. "But what about the Salamanders?"

There was a sudden quiet that fell over the room. "What about them?" Aria finally asked.

From the look on her face, Yurielle knew exactly what Chellok meant. "The Salamanders can only muster whatever resources can be farmed in the zones of either Everdark or the Aldnari Desert," she said. "Along with the contested zones not claimed by any faction, of course, where anyone might be farming. The equipment types favored by their players have almost surely—as ours were—been influenced by what upgrade mats were most common in their 'home' zones. If they find themselves with one or more shortages—as I am certain they will—they will have to look elsewhere to supply
"That's going to be true for all of the factions," Daizen said. "Which is why we should waste no time in reaching out to them to discuss trade. If we can meet our own internal needs, we'll be well-positioned to make a tidy profit from filling the shortages of the other factions."

"The Undines will trade," Yurielle said. "Spriggan clearers handle their own farming individually anyway. Alicia will no doubt send Argo to negotiate with us, and we shall have to see what happens once the leadership issues in Sylvain settle themselves."

"You left out the Salamanders and Imps," Daizen pointed out.

"Yeah, she did," Chellok said with a meaningful look that made Daizen's swarthy Gnomish features blanch slightly. "Because they've got a new leader, too. And from what I hear, negotiation is not his strong suit."

Chapter End Notes

11/28/14: Happy Thanksgiving, for those of you in the US. Hope it was full of food and family.

November is drawing to a close, and with it the weekly updates. As much as I'd like to be able to write full-time, the last month has consisted largely of coming home from work and writing and/or outlining until it's time to go to bed. I can't sustain this pace indefinitely, but I'm very glad that for the fic's second anniversary I was able to not only launch Act 3 and post a new chapter every week, I met and exceeded my goal of 60,000 words this month. Four chapters, each of which have averaged at least 15k words. That's a lotta writing. And a whole lot of not much else.

Monthly is more realistic, I think, assuming I want to have any kind of a life outside of this fic—but as before, I can't promise any specific schedule. I'll do the best I can—I want to see this thing written as much as you do!

Now that the Mother's Rosario arc of SAO2 is airing, some of you may notice that Yuuki's portrayal in this story is a little different from the way she is in the anime. There are two reasons for this.

The first is that she's being animated and voiced as being a bit more tomboyish and aggressive than she came across as in the original LNs. Not that she didn't already have those traits, but I feel like they're really being emphasized. This may be chalked up to personal interpretation; sometimes it's just one of the hazards of writing a character before they're animated.

The second and more important reason is that in canon, Mother's Rosario takes place three years after SAO started. At that time, Yuuki is 15 years old—the same age that Asuna was when she started SAO. In FDD, we are only six months into the original death game, Yuuki is 12, and the loss of her sister is both more recent and more traumatic. Those differences are huge, and part of her POV story in this arc is her growth and character progression as she makes the transition from child to teenager over the next few months.
See you next chapter!
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"A GameMaster, or GM, is a person employed by Argus Software, Inc. to assist with running quests and helping players in need of any service which falls outside of the scope of normal gameplay—issues such as bug reports, being stuck in world geometry, or resolving player disputes related to the Alfheim Online Terms of Service. To enable them to handle these tasks, GMs are granted a limited set of admin privileges, and can request additional privileges from the system when necessary to fulfill their role. When not using their default GM avatar, A GM can be distinguished from any other entity in the game by their blue cursor and the blue-on-white «GM» icon where a guild tag would be, and players can summon a GM by selecting the «Call GM» button near the bottom of the player's game menu. Please note that there are a limited number of GMs serving the players of Alfheim Online, so players are asked to be patient in the event that there is a delay in receiving a response…"

—Alfheim Online manual, «GameMasters»

7 May 2023

Day 183 - Morning ~ Evening

In the silent moments of tension which followed Sigurd's admission, three players—one Sylph, two Cait Sith—stared at each other with slack jaws and stunned expressions. Sakuya doubted that Sigurd could tell; ever since dropping the bombshell of his real-life identity and occupation, he'd been looking at the ground, the wall—anything that allowed him to avoid another person's eyes.

She wasn't even sure she could blame him for that. Revealing that he'd been the lead artist for the Sylph faction may have shut down Argo's speculation, but it had opened him up to a whole new world of trouble for anyone who knew and wanted to make something of it. Before this meeting she'd emphatically reassured Sigurd that Argo wasn't here to follow through on Sakuya's threats, but he had to know the kind of ammunition he'd just handed her.

His problem, not mine, Sakuya thought, eyes flicking back to the front of her desk and the two Cait Sith standing there awkwardly. There was a flat sound as Argo's gaping jaw closed sharply, but Thelvin's features were a mask of stillness. She knew him too well to take that as any indication of his actual thoughts—even without the involuntary motion of his tail lashing behind him even more furiously than Argo's. Oh Michisuke, thank you for having such a level head. I can't afford to let it show on my face right now, but I'm really glad you're here. Just please, don't do the white knight thing if Sigurd mouths off.

Argo broke the awkward silence by clearing her throat; Sigurd jumped slightly. I'd better put the brakes on this, Sakuya thought. If Sigurd thinks he's backed into a corner, he might well decide to burn me anyway—and there's no telling what might happen to Thelvin and Argo if this gets ugly.

"This is a good time to remind the three of you that what we speak of here does not leave this room," she said, "with the obvious exception of Argo's duty to report back to Alicia, a report that I trust need not include this particular detail. Confidentiality was the agreement for this meeting, and I'm reminding you all again now. I won't have anyone dragged through the streets for a crime he had no part in committing."

Sigurd's head whipped around; he stared at her incredulously. Sakuya stared back at him without blinking. Within moments, the extremity of his reaction faded—he still looked skeptical, as if he
wasn't sure what kind of game she was playing, but some of the hostility had thawed. His jaw twitched a few times, and Sakuya wondered if he was trying to work himself up to thanking her for the face-saving concession but couldn't make the words come out.

Before he could say anything else, she continued onward. "So now that that's out in the open, Sigurd, is there anything that you can tell us about Skarrip that you couldn't reveal before? If he worked at Argus on ALO, you must've run into him outside of the game at some point."

Sigurd expelled an annoyed puff of air and folded his arms before him, condescending arrogance beginning to return to him as it became clear that he wasn't in immediate danger. "Do you have any idea how big the team was that worked on the Alfheim Project, Sakuya? Any clue whatsoever?"

"Enlighten us," Sakuya deadpanned.

"At least a thousand people at its peak, including temps," Sigurd said with tones of absolute assurance. "We packed the reception hall at the Exhibition Center for the beta launch. I had twelve direct reports, most of whom were each part of a cross-functional dev-test-art pod working on a specific area of the Sylph game assets. I knew their names of course, and I knew the names of their team members because I rotated attending their daily standups. I knew the other lead artists from our weekly meetings, as well as Principal Art Director Ohtsuwa and the senior management of most of the other departments—even if only from seeing their names on an email thread or getting drunk with them."

"And?" prompted Sakuya, growing a little weary of Sigurd's propensity for puffing himself up.

"And," Sigurd continued with biting emphasis, "all told that amounts to maybe a hundred people—most of whom I couldn't pick out of a police lineup if you paid me to. And you expect me to know the life story of someone who didn't even post his character name on our forums?"

A sharp metallic clapping sound drew his attention and Sakuya's towards the Cait Sith in the room. Thelvin lowered his gauntlet-clad hands to his sides, and Argo—looking up at him—nodded.

"Thanks. Okay, look, let's rewind for a sec. Why is it important to know who Skarrip was in real life?"

Sakuya opened her mouth, got one syllable out, and then stopped to think for a moment. "If we know who he was," she said slowly, "we might be able to figure out a way to defend against him, or even defeat him. At the very least, knowing that he's a GM and what his personality is really like could give us some idea of how badly he's likely to screw with us."

"Pin pon," Argo said, accompanying the congratulatory sound effect by miming the action of ringing a bell in the air with a wiggle of her fist. "That's what's really important right now: figuring out what Loki is capable of doing as an adversary. Figuring out his identity is just a way of getting there. So let's not get so hung up on sleuthing out Skarrip's real name, job description, and national ID number. Forget who Skarrip was. What is he capable of or likely to do, as Loki?"

"How should we know?" Sigurd demanded.

"By grabbing two brain cells and rubbing them together for a few seconds," Argo said. "The way I see it, there are two possibilities that don't require me to swallow the idea that Kayaba programmed AI NPC gods who can fool people into thinking they're human. The first is that Loki really is Kayaba."

"Which he said he wasn't," Sigurd pointed out.
"It's so cute that you're ready to take at face value anything said by someone larping as the Norse god of lies," Argo replied.

"Mischief, actually," Sigurd said. "You've seen too many comic book movies. The traditional depiction of Loki in Norse myth—"

"In case you haven't noticed," Argo interjected before he could get wound up, "ALO's relationship to canon Norse myths is like one of those people you've had on your friends list for years but never actually talk to."

"I wouldn't've never guessed," Sigurd said with a dramatic roll of the eyes. "Next you'll be trying to tell me that Norse gods aren't real."

"That's what I'm trying to get at," Argo said, breezing right past Sigurd's sarcasm. "We're not dealing with a real-life magical god of anything here—like I said, it's someone pretending to be Loki. Whether he's Kayaba, a crazy GM, or some kind of bullshit hax AI, the fact is that Loki is still based on Kayaba's idea of what that character should be like."

"You were going somewhere with this," Thelvin remarked, reaching over and lightly nudging her shoulder.

Argo nodded. "For starters, what are the permissions on his account—or at least, what can we infer about them from his actions? Because if Loki really is Kayaba, he's a sysadmin. He's not a real god, but he's closest thing to one that exists in an online game. We're characters in his story, and he's not gonna let it get derailed—there's literally nothing we could do to stop him from doing pretty much whatever he wants within the structure of the game world."

"Well, in that case I'm glad we've decided to spend this morning talking about how to stop him," Sigurd remarked, giving Sakuya a resentful look. "We were coming dangerously close to doing something productive."

"Not a fear that often weighs on your mind, I'd imagine," Thelvin said. His voice was mild and conversational, but the look in his eyes was frigid.

All conversation stopped. Sakuya and Argo both stared at the usually-reticent Cait Sith tank. Sigurd started to nod, and then seemed to catch the actual meaning of Thelvin's carefully-worded comment. His pale features darkened noticeably. "You goddamn—"

"Out." Sakuya was done. She only spoke the one word, but it carried the force of a cracked whip and stopped Sigurd in mid-insult. The bulk of her anger was directed at him, but her gaze shifted to include Thelvin as well—she'd expected better of him. "Both of you. If you have nothing to offer right now except a manzai routine, go find somewhere else to practice your lines."

Thelvin nodded, as if he'd expected nothing else. Perhaps he had; he certainly knew her well enough and had to have known how she was likely to react. Sigurd, however, turned on her with aggrieved offense. "Excuse me?"

"Excuse yourself," Sakuya snapped, finger pointed at the door. "It's not as if you're taking any of this seriously. Why do you care if you stay or go?"

"It's not so much staying or going that I'm concerned with," Sigurd shot back, making no effort to follow Thelvin as the latter bowed and walked out, sliding the door shut behind him. "It's your mishandling of this entire debacle. You want to know why I'm not taking this meeting seriously? Because it's pointless. Worse than pointless—it's a security risk. The entire reason you invited The
Rat here was because you thought she'd know something about Lord Skarrip." He glared meaningfully at Argo. "But she doesn't, and that means that this is no longer a confidential meeting with a knowledgeable source about a sensitive internal Sylph matter—it's an aimless bull session with another race's lead clearer, and a walking hairball who happens to be the biggest mouth in all of Alfheim."

The hell of it was, he was right—at least, up to a point. Sakuya had been desperate for help when she reached out to Alicia, and it had seemed to her that if anyone would know who Skarrip was or what to expect from Loki, it would've been Argo. Inviting her here as The Rat had been one thing. But now…

Sigurd wasn't done and didn't seem to know when to stop; he ignored Argo's angry sputters and plowed onward. "Well done, Lady Sakuya. I wouldn't be surprised if the minutes for this meeting are in Loki's hands by end-of-day."

"News flash, Mr. Lead Artist," Argo said, marching over to Sigurd and tilting her head up at him. "If Loki really was your boss, and he really wants to keep tabs on us, he's prolly watching right now. He wouldn't even have to be in this room—he could just spawn a virtual camera here, or flag the system to alert him when any player says certain keywords. Keywords like, say, Loki or Kayaba." She waved at the ceiling for effect. "Hi!"

Sakuya found herself regretting her impulsive demand for Sigurd and Thelvin to leave the room. Thelvin was courteous enough to respect her desires, but Sigurd was well aware that there was little she could do to force him to do so without also forcing his hand—and his refusal was making her look weak, which was entirely her own fault. Worse, she had just driven out the one person in the room who—although uninvited and unexpected—she could probably fully trust. The situation was slipping away from her again, and she realized that she'd missed another exchange of witticisms between Argo and Sigurd, the latter of whom was in the midst of rolling his eyes at whatever she'd just said. "How precious. Look, if Lord Skarrip really was Kayaba—"

"I'm still not so sure about that," Sakuya said, holding up a palm to plea for a moment's pause. Something in that theory about Skarrip's identity didn't sit right with what she remembered, but she wasn't able to make the connection quite yet. "And it's not simply because he said he wasn't Kayaba."

"Neither am I," Argo said. "Which brings us to the second possibility: I think it's more likely that he's a GM co-conspirator. Someone who Kayaba brought in to play key roles in his story, roles he didn't want to entrust to an NPC. He's just one man; he can't play every character that's important."

"Nonsense," Sigurd said dismissively. "Kayaba didn't want the GMs or Navi-Pixies in the game at all, which was probably why nobody's seen any player-allied Pixies since launch—those stupid pre-order rumors notwithstanding." Sakuya found Argo's snicker then curious, but didn't give it much more attention than Sigurd did. "The only reason even the beta had them was because we finally managed to get it through his head that our conveyance sucked and we needed to do better at introducing game concepts—and frustrate players less in order to properly QA the game. The man was a notorious control freak, and it was an uphill battle to implement anything that made the game more novice-friendly or took control away from Heemudaru."

Something about the the foreign-sounding word tickled a sense of familiarity for Sakuya. Argo's reaction was considerably more intrigued. "Heemudaru?"

Sigurd waved disinterestedly at the air. "Heimdall. Internal name for the back-end daemon that manages all of the automated systems in ALO. The point is—"
"Funny name for a program," Sakuya observed. He simply shrugged. "Everything got Norse-related nicknames to reduce the risk from leaks. The proper name is **HMDR** and it stands for some English words I don't know, but nobody actually used the acronym. Point is, he wanted it running everything in the game for reasons that now seem quite clear, and it's ridiculous to think he would've allowed GM accounts to continue to exist after springing his trap. Even *they* had to submit requests to Heimdall for anything that exceeded their immediate permissions."

"Holy shit," Argo said suddenly. Sakuya blinked in surprise. Sigurd raised an eyebrow. "What now?" he asked without any real apparent interest.

Argo ignored Sigurd's question and launched herself into an aggressive pattern of pacing around the room, changing directions only when it looked like she was going to run into something. Her hands were raised slightly and twitching, her eyes distant. "Yeah but wait wait wait wait. Just… oh god. Really. And that was what he—oh, you son of a—no, but it still doesn't make—but why would he—"

As fascinating as it was watching Argo think out loud without any apparent awareness of her surroundings, she was generating nothing that was even remotely coherent, and all that Sakuya could gather was that she had obviously remembered something or made some kind of connection. "Argo," Sakuya said, snapping her fingers at the air. "Only the fact that the floor is an Immortal Object is keeping you from digging ruts in my office. Mind sharing your discovery with the rest of the class?"

"He wasn't crazy," Argo interjected in the middle of another sentence before resuming her mumbling and pacing.

"Argo," Sakuya said with an edge of impatience. "Skarrip wasn't crazy," Argo said more emphatically, stopping in front of the northern bay windows and spinning to face the two Sylphs in the room. "I thought he was just losing his mind and larping it up, but he wasn't actually crazy—at least, not as crazy as I thought he was. He knew exactly what he was saying and doing."

"Explain please," Sakuya said. "We lack the context you have."

"Heimdall," Argo said. "He's part of the Norse pantheon, right?"

"Watchman of the gods," Sigurd answered. "Depending on the attestation. He's said to keep vigil at the Bifrost against incursions from the Jotnar."

"Yeah, that's what I remember from the blurb I saw once," Argo said. Her lips parted, and before more than the beginning of a syllable had come, she began shifting her eyes back and forth between Sakuya and Sigurd. She pointed at the latter. "Can you get rid of him?"

Sigurd reacted immediately and predictably, his angry words lost as they mingled with Argo's retort. Sakuya glanced over at her appraisingly. "Why?" she asked, sounding calmer than she felt.

"Because I don't trust him with this," Argo replied, arms cross defiantly while her tail lashed in agitation behind her. "And this is non-negotiable. I have nothing further to say to anyone but you. He stays, I walk."

"I'm not leaving," Sigurd snapped, sweeping his arm towards Argo emphatically. "Because I don't
trust you, and I sure as hell don't trust the two of you in private."

Sigurd's aggressive resistance confused Sakuya at first, but as he and Argo traded further barbs, an uncomfortable thought penetrated and the surprise almost caused her to bring her hand to cover her mouth. Look at it from his perspective, she tried to tell herself. You threatened to use Argo as a weapon against him, to spread word of what he and Skarrip plotted. Then you invited Argo to a confidential meeting which Sigurd had to insert himself into in order to avoid being shut out, and now you're proposing to exclude him entirely and talk to her in private after both of you have been taking shots at him.

The surprise wasn't that Sigurd was acting the way he was. The surprise was that it had taken her this long to realize just how uncomfortable and poorly-timed Argo's presence was for him. Remember, she thought to herself, don't back him into a corner. You're supposed to be a leader now; start acting like one.

"Sigurd," Sakuya said, interrupting the two of them. "Look at me." When he turned his eyes on her, she met his gaze and spoke slowly, calmly. "This has nothing to do with any differences you and I have. I need to hear what Argo has to say. If she wants to say it only to me and you refuse to leave, you're not accomplishing anything—we can just go somewhere else or use PMs. Please step outside and give us a few minutes."

The contest of wills was a short one, full of staring and silence—but whether it was her shift in attitude or his own internal reasoning that ended it, what mattered to Sakuya was that it ended. Sigurd threw one last distrustful glance in Argo's direction before his face and posture relaxed slightly. "If this is a trick," he warned without finishing the sentence.

"It's not," Sakuya said. "I don't expect you to believe me when I say that. But what else can I say? This meeting is about Skarrip, not you. Take it or leave it."

To Sakuya's relief, Sigurd accepted this—without comment, but still radiating distrust. It was with obvious reluctance that he backed down and took his leave, eyes lingering on each woman before shutting the door.

"What was that all about?" Argo asked.

"Nothing worth discussing," Sakuya said. "You, on the other hand, just figured out something so important that you couldn't even say it in front of Sigurd. What was it?"

The question seemed to snap Argo back into a lesser version of the agitated state in which she'd just been. "Okay, right, so..." There was a moment's hesitation. Sakuya wondered if Argo was trying to decide whether or not to charge her for answering the question; she was prepared to give the info broker a piece of her mind if she tried that now.

"Well?"

"I got a lot of different sources," Argo began. "Some of them work for me. Some are customers. Some are just players who send me info 'cause they hope to get a favor. But I do a lot of my own sleuthing, and I overhear stuff. A few times I overheard Skarrip talking to himself."

An uncomfortable feeling itched at the back of Sakuya's neck. "How? Skarrip was rarely anywhere but his home or this office—" She cut herself off, suddenly wishing that she had the appropriate detection skills for what she wanted to find—or rather, what she hoped she wouldn't find. Her eyes traveled the entire oval of the penthouse office.
"Not like that," Argo said. "Don't worry, I got nothing hidden in this room. You can even bring in someone to check. How I overheard him isn't important. What's important is what he said. I remember him having what seemed—at the time—to be one-sided conversations with someone who wasn't there. And it was crazy, weird stuff—things that made no sense and sounded like he was larping hardcore. I still honestly don't know exactly what to think of it, even now… but I remember every word."

Someone was invizzed, Sakuya thought. I don't know how Argo managed to eavesdrop on Skarrip, but there had to be someone else there that he was talking to, they were just invisible. Prophet, maybe? The possibility made a disturbing amount of sense—true Invisibility was a very high-level Illusion spell, and Prophet was a Spriggan.

Quit getting ahead of yourself; Argo has more to say. "Go on."

Argo hesitated again. "It's probably better if I do this." She made a throat-clearing sound, and something in her posture shifted, straightening a bit from her usual slouch. The next words out of her mouth nearly shocked Sakuya into taking a step back—Argo's slangy, nasal speech patterns were gone, and although the voice was still unmistakably hers, it had changed to an extremely good impression of Skarrip's crisp, aloof baritone.

"I demand an answer to my previous request, guardian." A pause, and then she continued in the same voice. "I think not. You fail to comprehend my purpose here. This task is essential in order to fulfill the prophecy." The pause this time was longer; Sakuya realized that Argo had to be reciting Skarrip's side of the conversation word for word, including the times spent waiting for his unseen companion to silently respond.

"Enough! Your intransigence threatens the very fabric of destiny. Will you stand athwart the Allfather's will?"

This was sounding a lot like the kind of nonsense Loki had spewed at her—which Sakuya supposed made sense in hindsight. She frowned, but said nothing.

"Simple. Midgardians are mortal. Incarnating in these fallen forms does not change that immutable fact, and I do not propose to alter it—only to exploit it in a way fully consistent with my purpose. Remember that it is not the Allfather who shepherds the mortal soul. It is not your place to deny me this, so long as I preserve the balance of the world."

"What the hell?" Sakuya asked finally, her total lack of comprehension plain on her face. "Argo, I get that you are repeating Skarrip's words, and it sure sounds like the kind of things that Loki said to me, but I'm not making the connection."

Argo raised a hand; she wasn't finished. "There is your justification," she said, still in her imitation of Skarrip's voice. "Now see that it is done." Another pause.

"As well you should. Do not forget yourself or your purpose here, Heimdall. The prophecy is in motion, and my daughter grows restless."

When the next pause ran long, Sakuya realized that no more was coming; Argo was back to normal and looking at her expectantly. "Skarrip had a daughter in the game?" she asked finally.

Argo shrugged. "Got me. If he did, we should probably try to find her."

"How long ago did this conversation happen?"

"April," Argo answered, slow footsteps bringing her back to the side of Sakuya's desk. "He was
alone at the time—I had no idea who he thought he was talking to until now. There have been other incidents, but that was by far the most whacko. So what do you make of that?"

More of Loki's insanity, Sakuya thought, perplexed. "It didn't make any sense to me at all. So Skarrrip was yelling at a Norse god about souls and destiny? And you think this means he wasn't crazy?"

"Not only do I think it means he wasn't as crazy as I thought," Argo said, making a distinction that Sakuya did not fail to catch, "I think it means he was telling the truth when he said he wasn't Kayaba."

Sakuya gestured towards the chair in front of the large hardwood desk, and moved to reclaim her own seat. "I'm listening."

To Sakuya's mild annoyance, Argo drew her feet up under herself as she took a seat; it wasn't worth the time it would waste to comment on it. "Sigurd said that Heimdall is what they called the program that runs ALO. He said that even GMs had to make requests of Heimdall when they wanted to do something that 'exceeded their immediate permissions'. The precise two-count that spanned Argo's pause then had to be calculated. "What do you think it sounded like Skarrrip was doing?"

"Making a request of Heimdall," Sakuya said immediately. "Or rather, a demand."

"Exactly," Argo said, snapping her fingers. "As if he was a GM. Do you think Kayaba woulda had to argue with his own program to get it to do what he wanted?"

The explanation hit Sakuya more like a revelation. She felt the receding shadow of a fear that she hadn't known was still haunting the back of her mind; a part of her had remained terrified that the mass-murdering administrator who created this death game had taken a personal interest in her—and that she would be powerless to do anything to stop him. "I see," she said slowly. "So you think Skarrrip was one of the GMs in the beta?"

"I'm sure of it. Nothing else fits."

"Then why the larping song and dance?" Sakuya asked. "If he was all by himself, what's the point? Don't tell me you think that Kayaba expected anyone administering the system to make requests while roleplaying in-character as if they were talking to a Norse god?"

"Who knows?" Argo said, turning up her hands and shrugging as she swung one leg over the side of the chair. "I doubt it, personally—I wouldn't want to rely on a program to try accurately parsing shitty Norse poetry into consistent game mechanics or player account administration, not when I can just say, 'spawn itemID hohogh123 at target location' or something less ambiguous like that."

Sakuya tapped a finger slowly on the edge of the desk, allowing the light drumming sound to drive her thoughts. They didn't give her much to work with. "This isn't really getting us anywhere."

"No," Argo said, "it's not. I feel like I'm right on the edge of something, like if I just had a few more of the right pieces of information, this exercise would give us some idea of what to do about Loki—or if we need to do anything except wait to see what he does next. I'm tempted to just put the information out there and crowdsource the problem."

"No!" Sakuya said immediately, and with some alarm, nearly bolting out of her chair.

Argo paused with a piece of candy halfway to her open mouth, staring. "It was just a thought."

Sakuya forced down her immediate, panicked reaction, slowly sinking back with a creak from her seat. "Well, please un-think it. Anything you publicize about this beyond the mere fact that there is
an NPC antagonist in the role of Loki is going to either start a panic, point back to the Sylphs, or both."

The rock candy finished its journey; Argo sucked on it thoughtfully for a few moments before shifting it aside to speak. "I can be selective about what gets released. I'm used to laundering info to protect sources."

Sakuya shook her head. "We had an agreement: what we discuss does not go beyond these walls, other than what you filter back to Alicia. Her I trust. Fifteen thousand irrational strangers who are afraid for their lives? Not so much."

"But—"

"Argo," Sakuya said sternly, extremely uncomfortable with the necessity of what she had to say then. She chose the words that followed extremely carefully. "You are here as a guest receiving this information because we made an agreement. This exposes me to risk. Please do not break that agreement and thereby put me in a position where I have to regard that exposure as a threat to my safety." Her hands were clasped before her, fingers laced in a casual way, but she felt them wanting to tighten nervously.

Argo did not seem to miss the veiled warning. Ears flattened back against her head, she quickly waved at the air as if to dispel a bad odor. "You can put away the pointy stick. I'm not saying I'm going to go back on my word, I'm trying to persuade you that getting more eyes and ears on this problem might help."

Sakuya's lips pursed as she took a few moments to rethink her immediate fight-or-flight reaction. *She has a point. This is bigger than me, bigger than any one faction. We're talking about a threat that could impact every player in the game.* "What do you propose to reveal? And what would you leave out?"

Argo held up one hand and began uncurling fingers one by one. "First, we can skip the fact that Loki was Skarrip, or anything else related to the Sylphs. I also don't think it's necessary to describe your encounter with him in detail."

"Or at all," Sakuya said. "Too much chance of anyone who was here that morning being able to put two and two together. The lack of a Remain Light, the fight, anything could ring a bell with someone and lead back to me."

"Not just *anything,*" Argo said. "I think it'd be pretty safe to at least reveal that someone discovered an NPC portraying Loki, and that Loki's planning on using illusions and mindfucks to screw with us. That's the main thing I'd want to get out there."

"Surely you're not proposing to reveal that Loki was concealing himself as a player?"

"Why not?"

This was one point on which Sakuya did not plan to budge. "Panic and paranoia," she answered. "Let's say you spread the rumor that an NPC antagonist was using some kind of illusion to successfully impersonate a player. How do you think the average player is going to react to the possibility that anyone they meet, even in their own faction, might well be a hostile NPC planning to betray them?"

Argo grimaced. She didn't need to say anything.

"Worse still," Sakuya went on, driving the point home, "remind me again which race it is that
specializes in Illusion Magic?"

Argo's expression soured further still. "Spriggans," she said unnecessarily.

Sakuya gave a wan smile as she echoed Argo's earlier bell-ringing gesture and the words that followed. "Pin pon. Not that I have any particular love for that faction or their leader. I just don't like the idea of people deciding that the best solution is to eradicate all Spriggans on sight and let the game sort out who's an NPC and who isn't. You want everyone to be looking at their party members with suspicion and treating anyone using Illusion spells as if they were an aggro mob?"

Argo shook her head.

"Neither do I. So how about this for a list of details that are acceptable for the public."

Before Sakuya was even finished describing what she proposed, Argo was nodding along. The information broker didn't take any notes, but Sakuya doubted she needed to—she'd heard stories about Argo's memory, and the way the girl had recited Skarrip's conversation with Heimdall as if playing back a recording seemed to align with those rumors. It was almost scary, and seeing it for herself had given her the urge to be exceptionally careful about what she said in Argo's presence.

Once they had hashed out a final agreement, Argo slid off the edge of the chair and onto her feet without ceremony. "Okay, I can run with this. Is it gonna cause problems if I stick around for the day and do some footwork before we leave? I won't reveal anything we haven't agreed on, but I gotta meet with some of my contacts in person, and I wanna interview people who knew Skarrip."

"Talk to Chimiro on your way out," Sakuya offered. "He can give you names and point you to where to find them; tell him I said it was okay. And don't worry about hanging around—the Cait Sith are always welcome in Sylvain."

"I'll do that," Argo said. Her footsteps stopped at the door, fingers on the handle. She looked back over her shoulder at Sakuya. "All of us can use every friend we can get. I've known Allie a long time, and she trusts you. We got your back on this."

The door shut with a click, leaving Sakuya alone in an office that was far bigger than needed by any one person. She leaned back in the chair and extended one leg, prodding her desk with the tip of her geta firmly enough to set the chair on a slow counterclockwise spin—much as Skarrip had done in order to give his grand reveal the kind of drama that would satisfy him.

The morning was still new; the entire meeting had felt longer than it was. Sunlight streaming in through the eastern windows cast shadows which moved as the chair did, shading and illuminating her like the phases of the moon until the chair slowed to a stop on its own with her facing west. She sat in the shade there for a minute while she waited for Chimiro to bring in her next appointment.

_Every friend we can get_, Sakuya mused to herself. She'd never had many of those; crowds were obnoxious, and she barely tolerated social gatherings. She usually found other women to be catty and shallow, and most men in her life just wanted to fuck her. She'd cultured the ability to navigate human interactions and discovered that she was able to be quite good at it when she tried—but she still didn't enjoy it. It felt fake, put on.

That had been one of the contributing factors to her breakup with Thelvin. Like her, he was generally quiet and preferred to avoid unnecessary drama. If anything, his biggest fault was a tendency to treat her as if she needed protecting, but even that she'd usually found sweet—at least, when it didn't result in a scene like the one with Sigurd.
Unlike her, however, he had a lot of friends, and he liked spending time with them. He'd tried to make it clear to her that he understood her desire to not be social and didn't expect her to go with him or accept them as her friends—but in the end, it just didn't leave them spending enough time together to make things work. Rolling different factions in the beta had simply sped along a process that was already under way.

It was over. But she was certain that if she ever needed anyone or anything, if she ever asked, he would be there for her without hesitation.

Sakuya opened her game menu and navigated quickly to her friends list, scrolling past Argo's newly-added name and down towards the T entries. He wasn't there, of course; they hadn't spoken much since the start of the death game, and only seen each other when in the company of their respective clearing groups. You had to Focus a player's cursor in order to send them a friend request; they had to be physically present in front of you, and he currently wasn't.

She was still trying to decide what to do when Chimiro knocked at the door and announced her next appointment. With a sigh, Sakuya swept her menu closed, swiveled her chair to face the door, and donned the most convincing smile that she could manage.

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When the tinkling sound effect of the Lesser Jotunn's death animation completed, it left behind the empty silence that was typical of the Glitafrost Wastes. It wasn't absolute silence—the wispy gusts from the storm that seemed to be approaching occasionally added white noise to the stillness, and a few of Griselda's party members were "breathing" heavily as the game tried to simulate the effects of their prolonged burst of exertion. But compared to the clashes of metal and bellows of rage that had accompanied the battle, it was empty indeed.

Griselda's longsword slid smoothly into its sheath with a now-unconscious motion and a metallic slithering noise. The others followed her lead, although Schmitt took a few moments to check the status of his tower shield—he'd held aggro for most of the last fight. As she always did after a battle, she slowly turned in a complete circle, green aurorae flowing across her eyes while she panned her gaze around and looked for the next target.

There wasn't one—at least, nothing she could see for hundreds of meters in any direction.

"I don't see anything," Griselda announced, swiping threads of hair out of her face as the wind whipped her ponytail around. She glanced up quickly. "Except for way above us, but I don't think we want to wear ourselves out fighting anything we can't pull back to the ground."

"Our hunt seems to have driven the wildlife away," Caynz observed, crouching and putting his gloved palm to a patch of bare rock as if he could tell anything whatsoever from it. "I think we've stayed here too long."

"What he means," Yoruko said with a teasing smile, "is that we've overfarmed. Repops are getting slow, and we should probably find a new area to let stuff respawn."

Caynz grinned at Yoruko, who gave him an innocent look and brought her flute to her lips. A series of softly-played trills led into a now-familiar melody evoking a sense of longing, and a warm glow began to faintly surround the younger girl while she continued her serenade.

Yoruko didn't maintain the song for very long. When she trailed off, she let go of the flute so that it dashed from a cord around her neck, then closed her eyes and put her hand to her chest. While doing so she turned slowly in place much like Griselda just had, but stopped at what seemed like an
arbitrary moment and pointed off towards the distant edge of the Snjarholt Forest. "That way."

"You're sure that's where the closest mobs are?" Griselda asked. "I didn't see any cursors with Searching."

Yoruko nodded, wind-blown purple bangs half-obscuring her face. "Positive," she said, dropping her gaze to her chest where her instrument hung.

Griselda sought to reassure her immediately. "I'm not doubting you," she said. "You've always been right about that. I just want to make sure before we commit to moving on."

"That part of Greater Snjarholt is Shriker's territory," Schmitt pointed out, struggling for a few moments to free his armor-clad legs from the deep snow before giving up and just using his wings to lift himself clear. "His party'll be pissed if we poach, and they're the last people we want to tick off."

Griselda hesitated, suddenly uncomfortable. She wasn't the only party member who froze at those words. "You didn't hear?"

The heavily-armored Gnome glanced up at Griselda while he brushed snow from his waistcloak, a confused expression crossing his face. "Hear what?"

"Schmitt wasn't at the Depot with us this morning," Caynz reminded her.

"I already told you why," Schmitt said defensively, "The smith had a crit-fail and I got held up getting him to fix my gear and reimburse me for the lost upgrade."

"That's not what he means, Schmitt," Griselda said, looking down at the ground. She took strength from the feeling of her sword's hilt under her left hand. "Shriker's group didn't come back last night."

Schmitt's features paled noticeably. His wings disappeared from his back as he let himself drop the short distance to the ground, sinking into the drift to his shins. "Tell me you're kidding," he whispered, rapidly opening his game menu and navigating through it, no doubt checking his friends list.

A chorus of heads shook. "Nobody knows what happened," Yoruko said, unease in her voice and on her face. "They just didn't come back from farming yesterday, and they didn't show up this morning for assignments."

Griselda lightly touched the layered metal plates protecting Schmitt's shoulder; she doubted he felt it. "You used to farm with Shriker's group, didn't you?"

Schmitt nodded jerkily as he closed his game menu, brown eyes seeming haunted now. "First group I went out with after the raid. I owe him my life."

No clarification was necessary. Everyone present knew exactly which raid he meant: the assault on the Jotunn Valley boss which had blocked the passage to Arun. Schmitt had been part of one of the tank groups, and had come within a hair's breadth of losing his own life before a Spriggan and a Salamander had taken aggro and finished off the boss. There wasn't a player in the NCC who didn't know at least some of that story, so often had it been retold.

A near-death experience could weigh on a man. It had weighed more heavily on Schmitt than others; Griselda knew he had dropped out of the clearing groups and refused to leave the city for weeks. Shriker, as one of the most experienced Gnome beta testers who wasn't part of a clearing group, had been the one to persuade him to take up farming as a low-risk way of getting back on his feet.
And now Shriker and his entire party were dead.

No one was saying it, of course—but there was very little question. After all, it would've been trivial for Agil or Chellok to verify his status or get someone with the necessary privileges to do so, and they'd had no words of reassurance to offer. But she could've told them so herself—any PMs sent to Shriker bounced with a message saying that he wasn't currently logged in, and he was greyed out on her friends list.

Griselda had been a member of the Sylph Militia during the Salamander invasion. She knew exactly what that meant.

"I'm sorry," she said. It was all she could say. "We all had the greatest of respect for him."

"Let's go," Schmitt mumbled, shouldering his lance after lifting the butt clear of the snow.

There was one advantage to having farmed the area to the point where mobs stopped respawning for a while: it meant that they didn't have to stop to fight every hundred meters or so, and it only took them a few minutes to move to new territory. They had covered a considerable distance by the time they encountered any mobs, and those were isolated non-aggro animal mobs which weren't really worth the detour it would take to clear them. Yoruko insisted that there was a large concentration of aggro mobs not far into Snjarholt, though, so they pressed onwards.

The game seemed to reward their perseverance not long after the « Greater Snjarholt» zone change message faded in and out of their HUDs—Griselda's routine scan revealed a handful of red cursors not far from them, and the discovery dispelled much of the funk that had fallen over the party. With renewed enthusiasm they returned to their clearing work.

*We needed this*, Griselda thought to herself in between pulls, feeling the now-familiar rush of satisfaction and danger that came with battle. *It's too easy to dwell on things when all you're doing is traveling. Too easy to get lost in what-ifs and regrets. As long as we can keep these pulls coming one after the other, maybe I can help keep everyone's mind off of what happened to Shriker.*

A part of her almost felt bad about what they were doing, hunting in the territory that had belonged to him until that morning. It felt a bit like stealing from a dead man. She knew that was silly—he was gone now, and no one would be out here today; it was too soon for Agil and Chellok to have assigned his farming territory to another group.

*On the bright side, this is really going to improve our haul today, especially if we focus our efforts. Everyone benefits if we bring back more drops, especially with the mob spawns changing the way they have been. Shriker always said that this area was dense with aggro mobs, so we should be able to find plenty-*

Griselda frowned, holding up her free hand to stop Schmitt from pulling the next mob. Something felt wrong. An uneasy feeling had been nagging at her ever since they moved into the woods; it felt like there was something important she was missing.

"What's up, Griz?" Schmitt asked, half-lowering his lance and letting the taunt technique he'd been charging fade away.

"I'm not sure," she answered, activating Searching again and scanning in every direction, even up. Different cursor colors sprang into her field of view, floating and bobbing in the distance even though she lacked direct line of sight to them. She saw the yellow cursors of non-aggro animal mobs that any wilderness zone had, but only a few dozen or so within her field of view—and her scanning range extended for quite some distance. She could only see a handful of red cursors indicating the
aggro mobs that were far more worthwhile to farm.

Griselda's frown deepened, as did the puzzled furrow in her brow. "Does this area feel… well, empty to anyone else?"

"How so?" Yoruko asked, squirming slightly. She pinched the collar of her overcoat and tugged at it for a few moments, as if trying to dislodge an uncomfortable pebble or some other irritant.

Griselda bit her lip, her sense of unease growing. She deactivated Searching and tried again to see if maybe there was a random element—but she still saw all the same cursors the second time. "This zone is supposed to be lousy with aggro mobs," she said. "One of the more lucrative—that's why Shriker never wanted to give it up and rotate out."

"And?" That query came from Caynz.

"And what do you see?"

The Gnome larper straightened a bit, activating his own Searching skill—the two of them were the only ones in the party who had it, but her skill level was higher. "I sense dozens of living things nearby, but only a few are radiating aggression."

Which was his peculiar way of confirming exactly what she'd detected. "Doesn't that seem off to you?"

Caynz looked at Yoruko again. She elevated herself onto her tiptoes, and he leaned down a little so that she could whisper into his ear.

"Check again?" he suggested gently.

Yoruko's flute again came to her lips. The solemn, yearning notes echoed through the trees, as if the sound itself was seeking out anything that might hear it. This time the song only lasted for a few bars, and she squirmed uncomfortably again, grimacing.

"Yoruko?" Griselda asked. "Are you okay?"

The Puca girl gave her a tight smile, shimmying in place as if she desperately had to go to the bathroom—which of course no one in the game did. "Fine! Just having a… slight wardrobe issue."

That made no sense to Griselda—nor did Yoruko's sudden odd behavior. She tried setting that aside for the moment, smiling as if the girl had made a funny joke. "Well, that sounds uncomfortable. Were you able to tell anything about the mobs around here?"

Yoruko shook her head vigorously, looking increasingly agitated for no reason that Griselda could discern. "They're around. Can't tell where or how many, so I'm probably picking up the same ones you did—eek!"

Griselda started at her sudden loud squeak. Even Caynz was giving Yoruko strange looks now, and she was looking more and more upset by the minute, occasionally glancing helplessly up at Caynz. She finally made an exasperated sound that was half groan, half growl. "Oh my god, all right! Just come out and say what you're trying to say!"

Before Griselda could ask her to explain what she meant, the front of Yoruko's thick winter tunic rippled like a living creature, drawing wide eyes from the rest of the party. From her neckline, what looked like a tiny female humanoid who could've fit in the palm of Griselda's hand burst out into the air. It somewhat resembled the Corrupted Pixie mobs that she'd fought in the Ancient Forest, but
smaller and... well, without the Corrupted part. When Griselda focused on it, the creature popped a white cursor with no name above its blonde hair.

It wasted no time at all, its tiny features stamped with worry. "I've been trying to tell you," the little thing complained, burrowing into Yoruko's hair and peeping out from its purple nest. "They're here. You just don't see them. We really should keep moving."

Griselda's unease ran cold and threatened to turn into panic. She wasn't sure what this thing was that Yoruko had with her, or why the girl had concealed it, but she had a horrible feeling she knew now why Shriker had gone missing. She let go of her shield's grip and raised her left hand to cast a spell which she hadn't used very often, hoping that she could avoid fumbling the trailing consonant sounds. "Futto mezal kehevatrul dweren!"

At the conclusion of the incantation, some of the color saturation faded from her vision—not entirely, but enough to render in sharp contrast the glowing green spell effect which indicated moving things. The little pixie-like thing had been right—no matter where Griselda looked, near and far, she saw the cloudy glow of air disturbances left by mobs in motion. Dozens of them, some very close.

Not one of them popped a cursor, or was even visible to the naked eye.

There was a crackling, hissing sound effect that Griselda had never heard before in the game—like a cross between sand pouring and someone uncovering a large item covered in plastic wrap. Griselda looked straight up just in time to see a bluish-white spider the size of a golden retriever fading into visibility as it drew near, dangling from one of the trees overhead. She threw herself aside just as the mob dropped to the ground where she'd been standing, and activated her wings in mid-dive in order to bring herself back upright, focusing its cursor long enough to see that it was called a «Cloaking Arboreal Spider».

"Adds!" Schmitt shouted, lance and shield in hand. "Fucking invizzed adds!"

That horrible sound the spiders made as they became visible was everywhere now, or at least seemed like it—and each one decreased the chances that they were going to get out of this alive. Griselda cut one of the mobs in two as it leapt at her, a lucky blow from her sword catching it right at the junction of the thorax and abdomen and one-shotting it.

A small spray of blue particles blew past her face as the mob died, and she backhanded a second with her kite shield to buy herself time to cast. "Futto mezal, kevaploynul dweren!" There was a slight fuzziness at the edges of her peripheral vision when the Blur spell took effect, and she felt the familiar thrill as the spell accelerated the potential speed of all of her avatar's movements.

She was sure the sensation of time slowing down was deceptive—she wasn't thinking any faster than she did before, she was just able to move faster—but it was hard to believe that when she found herself parrying attacks that she'd barely even had time to register, or reacting to threats to her party members before the blows landed.

Moving to intercept a spider as it dropped out of invis to attack Yoruko, Griselda wasn't sure what she would've done without the Detect Movement spell she'd cast just before the battle. The spiders seemed to have to reveal themselves before attacking, and the distinctive sound as they did so was a clear enough warning sign, but if she hadn't been able to see them while they slowly moved around invisibly, she might've lost precious moments getting to the right place or reacting to an incoming attack. Was this what killed Shriker? she thought frantically as she whipped her head around to look for the next threat. His group had been farming these woods for nearly six months, and he knew exactly what to expect here. Did it make him complacent?
Schmitt cried out suddenly as one of the spiders landed on his back, sinking its fangs into him. A
debuff icon appeared on his status ribbon and in her party list, resembling the stylized snail of
«Delay» status but colored a sickly green. He looked like he was trying to get it off of him, but with
all of his movements slowed significantly, the nimble arachnid mob was able to easily evade his
blows.

"Cure!" shouted Caynz. There was a light shattering sound as the crystal he'd used burst into
polygonal blue motes, and the icon immediately disappeared from Schmitt just in time for him to
present his lance and permit a leaping spider to impale itself. Yoruko began playing her flute with an
urgent tempo, once which she'd used often enough for Griselda to recognize the melody—she was
buffing everyone with Poison Resistance.

"Three more!" Griselda shouted, pointing with her sword where the remaining mobs were flanking
them, unseen.

"Get them on the ground and draw them in!" Caynz yelled back, dropping his weapon to free up
both hands. Schmitt, stepping in beside him, raised his lance high above his head and gave a loud
bellow, a pulse of red energy surging from the weapon like an enormous bubble of threat. Griselda
saw all three spiders halt their flanking move and rush in towards the Gnome tank, that unnerving
crackling sound all around them as the three mobs dropped their invisibility.

That was what Caynz had been waiting for. "Dotto zabukke navamdu tepnaga kwedan!"

As the three spider mobs rushed in at them, amber-colored spell energy churned under Caynz's feet.
Ankle-deep snow was violently disturbed by the rippling of the ground, and elemental stone formed
around the legs of the spiders, rooting them in place.

"Now!" Griselda yelled, dashing towards one of the immobilized mobs, with Schmitt rushing
another. Caynz grabbed his warhammer from the ground in mid-stride, claiming the third. Afforded
the extra moments it took to line up the perfect critical hit, Griselda drove nearly half the length of her
longsword into the spider's head. Schmitt's approach was more brute-force; he used a bash skill to
 crush another mob with his tower shield. Griselda turned just in time to see Caynz knock his own
spider's head nearly clean off with his warhammer, both parts of the mob erupting into short-lived
blue splinters almost immediately.

Only seconds remained on her Detect Movement buff; the icon was already starting to flash. She
quickly made use of the time she had left, turning every which way. Nothing. Well, not nothing—
she could see the same hazy green clouds in various shapes for some distance as mobs moved
around, but she couldn't tell what they were, and none of them were anywhere near the party. She
sank to her knees in the snow as soon as the effect faded, the richness of color returning to her sight.

"I think that's the last of them," Griselda said, forehead pressed against the pommel of her sword.
"But that detection spell's on cooldown now. Yoruko?"

When she looked up, she saw Yoruko glancing uneasily over at Caynz, who shrugged. "Cat's out of
the bag now," he said. "Nothing for it."

Yoruko visibly swallowed, nodding. "Penny?"

Griselda hadn't noticed the little pixie during the battle. But now that it was safe, Yoruko's pet
crawled back out of one of her pockets and took to the air, making a show of shading her eyes with
her hand as she drifted in a circle and looked around.

"There aren't any more of them close enough to be dangerous, oneechan," Penny announced in a
sweet, small voice. "But they're always moving, and they're drawn to noise."

Griselda saw some irony in taking advice on how to avoid mobs from *another* mob. But clearly this little pet of Yoruko's was more than just a summon, or something pre-tamed that she'd bought from a Cait Sith. Whatever it was, it had probably saved their lives. She just wasn't sure *how* or *why*.

"I think we'd better get back to Nissengrof and tell them what we found," Griselda said, lowering her voice a little so that it wouldn't carry through the deathly still forest. When Yoruko's eyes went wide with panic, she hastened to reassure the girl. "Not about your pet, Yoruko."

"I am not a pet," Penny insisted. "I'm Yoruko's Navi-Pixie." Caynz coughed briefly in what sounded like an aborted laugh, hand covering his mouth. Yoruko gave him a frown, and held out her hand to let Penny land on it.

Griselda smiled gently and continued. "Okay, you're not a pet, and I am very grateful to you for warning us. But we really should cut the day's farming short and get out of here *now*—before we find out the hard way what other surprises might have killed our best farming group."

"I'm good with that," Schmitt said, wide-eyed and looking like he wanted to run as far as he could in any given direction.

"What about Penny?" Yoruko asked, clearly still very distraught that her Navi-Pixie's existence was no longer a secret. The little thing's head peeked out from under her cloak, round blue eyes as concerned as Yoruko's. "I'm sorry for keeping secrets from you, but please, *please* don't tell anyone about her. I'm begging you."

Griselda caught the same expression of concern on Caynz's face; he was standing right next to Yoruko with one broad hand resting on her shoulder. She shifted her gaze to the left to look at Schmitt, who seemed more preoccupied with the prospect of going back to Nissengrof than with anything else.

"Tell anyone what?" Griselda said, turning her back on the group and setting a brisk northward pace. "All I saw was a bunch of spiders."

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"There," Kirito said at last, pointing off towards the northwest where a faint warm glow could be seen in the sky above the horizon. As soon as his feet touched down on the icy shelf he took the opportunity to rest his wings by dismissing them; from the faint ache between his shoulder blades he was fairly certain that the lengthy ascent to the top of the cliff which barred their way had consumed most of his remaining flight time.

Asuna took the cue; the fading iridescence from her wings suggested that hers could use a recharge as well. She squinted for a moment and then nodded. "That's Nissengrof?"

Kirito gave her an answering nod of his own, cupping his hand to one side of his face to shield it from the wind-driven snowflakes. He was already missing the relative shelter of the canyon through which they'd been flying for the last hour, and after a few moments he gave up and just raised the hood of his cloak. "It's hardest to spot in the mornings and evenings, when it's too dark to see the plume from the Cauldron but not dark enough see the glow."

"How far is it now?"

Kirito's map window expanded before him with a few touches on his game menu, and a few more set it visible and tilted it towards Asuna. He tapped a finger on the red marker which indicated the
waypoint he'd set; it was right next to a white star icon labeled «Nissengrof». "We're maybe an hour out if we don't have to fight any more mobs. This ridge we're standing on marks the outer border of Cauldron's Wreath."

"Cauldron's Wreath?"

"The newbie zone surrounding Nissengrof," Kirito explained, pinching the window to zoom it out and pointing at the label for the roughly doughnut-shaped zone. When Asuna nodded, he closed the map with a casual brush of one gloved hand. "It means we can probably cruise safely from here without having to fight. From what we've been able to tell so far, the newbie zones haven't been affected by the changing mob respawns, right?"

"So far," Asuna said, a note of wariness in her voice. "I'm not sure I want to assume it'll stay that way."

Kirito gave a beckoning gesture as he began walking in the direction of the glow, being careful where he put his feet while he picked his way down the shallow slope. "I think it should," he said. "I think the newbie zones were left untouched so that low-level players wouldn't be at risk of walking out of the gates and running right into a mid-level named mob. There has to be somewhere that low-level mobs still spawn." He smiled when he glanced back over his shoulder to make sure Asuna was right behind him. "But you're thinking like a solo player, and I like that. I'd rather be cautious and wrong than reckless and dead."

With that in mind, caution was the word as they began to traverse the home stretch before their destination. They were, according to Kirito's map, a little over 20 kilometers away from the outskirts of Nissengrof. All told it was probably less than half an hour's total flight time at the kind of cruising speed Kirito could sustain, but he knew the necessity of recharge breaks would more than double that even if they didn't run into any mobs that were high enough to aggro them.

His estimate wasn't far off. The clock in his HUD read 21:38 by the time they laid eyes on the city, which put the elapsed time since reaching Cauldron's Wreath at not much more than 45 minutes. They'd made outstanding time, but they'd still been traveling virtually non-stop ever since leaving Penwether that morning, and they both felt as drained as their wings were.

They were both hungry, too—without time to prepare anything better, all they'd had to eat were cold traveling rations purchased in a hurry on their way out of Penwether from an NPC. They'd considered detouring to stop for dinner at a small village they spotted in the distance on the edge of Snjarholt, but Kirito had pointed out that if they did that, they might as well spend the night there—it would be at least midnight before they reached Nissengrof. As it was, it was still so late that the smart thing to do would be to just find an inn and get started in the morning. While they made their way through the wide, snow-covered streets of Nissengrof's surface level, Asuna said as much.

Kirito agreed. "Let's take care of repairs and stuff tomorrow morning. Right now thought, I could use some hot food." He tipped his head towards a side street as they passed. "That tavern on the corner is pretty good."

Asuna glanced over at the indicated building, which bore a sign with the word "Gnomey" in English lettering followed by the Japanese character for "Things". The look on her face was blank at best. "Weird name."

Kirito grinned. "Say it out loud."

"Gnomey Mono… Nomimono…" She groaned loudly as the pun finally struck her. "That's terrible. Besides, we need food, not beverages."
Kirito's laughter drew a glare from Asuna that was slightly undermined by the smile tugging at her mouth. He hastened to explain. "Name aside, it's not just drinks, and the food's actually pretty good—last time I was here they had a player chef. Want to give it a shot?"

Asuna gently elbowed Kirito in the arm, bringing them both to a stop in the street. "You have a player chef right here, you know. My skill isn't very high yet, but I could still make something better than an NPC, and cheaper than your restaurant. I could use the practice, too—I want to find out what some of these ingredients I harvested on the way taste like."

Kirito hesitated uncomfortably while he tried to think of a tactful way to tell Asuna that he'd rather not volunteer his stomach as a guinea pig for leveling up someone's Cooking skill. While he was thinking it over, she opened her menu and looked like she was scrolling through her inventory. "I have all these mats that we farmed or harvested on the way. I don't know what the Frostbloom Stalks smell like, but they smell like celery. Drake Meat tastes a bit like pork, and I have most of my seasonings with me."

**Pork.** Kirito would've gladly soloed a gateway boss if there was a chance it would drop a bowl of *tonkatsu* ramen. He quickly tried to push the thought out of mind when he heard his stomach register its opinion of the matter, which drew a warm laugh from Asuna. "I'll take that as a vote for doing something with this half-stack of Frost Drake Meat. I'm curious to see if it tastes any different than the water drakes in the Valley of Rainbows."

*Good thing Silica isn't here to hear that,* Kirito thought. The girl would probably have a conniption if anyone suggested hunting water drakes for food. There didn't seem to be any way to dissuade Asuna from experimenting on their stomachs—although in fairness he was probably prejudiced by some fairly unpleasant food he'd eaten in Penwether which had been made by players with low Cooking skills. "How long do you think that'll take?" he asked. "I'm pretty ravenous."

Asuna gave him an amused look, eyes twinkling. "You've never watched someone use the Cooking skill, have you?"

Kirito grinned, reaching up to grab the hem of his hood to keep the wind from blowing it back. "I've never watched code compile or paint dry, either." He just barely caught her rolling her eyes out of the corner of his own.

"I'm pretty sure you just compared my cooking to paint."

"I'm pretty sure I didn't."

In the end, Kirito gave in and looked for a place where they could rent a room with a kitchen. It was easier than it might have been further south; the racial advantages that the northern races had with various crafting skills meant that it wasn't at all uncommon to find lodging with crafting facilities—for a price. That price probably more than countered any money they might save from cooking their own food, but as Kirito wasn't exactly hurting for Yuld at the moment, it was a small price to pay for making Asuna happy.

And happy she was. She exclaimed loudly and joyfully when she saw the layout in the kitchen, and practically did a little dance in place. The behavior almost shocked Kirito—we was fairly sure it was the first time he'd ever seen her act like this.

"This is an inn room?" Asuna said, delighted. "None of the places Yuuki and I have are anywhere near this fancy! This almost reminds me of my ho—" She stopped abruptly there, face clouding briefly before she reclaimed her prior cheer. "It's really nice. Thank you, Kirito. Tell me what you spent to rent this and I'll reimburse you once I vendor my trash tomorrow."
Kirito shook his head vigorously. "No no, that's not necessary at all. I'm actually doing okay on money right now."

"Hm." Asuna gave him a look of piercing scrutiny that made him a bit uncomfortable... until her smile returned, a little wider than before. "All right then," she said, excusing herself and stepping into the restroom for a few moments. When she came back, Kirito had to do a double-take; Asuna had unequipped her armor and other gear, and replaced them with a comfortable-looking casual white skirt and blouse which were covered by a white-trimmed cooking apron the color of the deep ocean.

Kirito stammered and tried to collect himself while his mouth started outrunning his brain. "Wha-wha? What are you doing?"

Asuna gave him a very strange look. "I'm not very well going to cook in my armor, you know," she remarked, giving her pale blue hair a toss. "We're not going to be pulling any mobs here. You should get comfortable, too."

Comfortable was the one thing that Kirito was most definitely not at the moment. He didn't actually have any casual clothing in his inventory, and he struggled trying to think of how he was going to extricate himself from the situation. "I uh... well, I..."

"Oh good grief," Asuna said, throwing up her hands. "Suit yourself." She turned and headed towards the kitchen, opening her menu and starting to pull some utensils and jars from her inventory.

Kirito's cheeks were warm despite the chill in the air. He opened his own game menu to his paper-doll window and unequipped his overcoat and sword, leaving the plain black trousers and tunic that he wore underneath.

"Cooking isn't like most of the other crafting systems," Asuna said as she began processing their drops. One by one while she spoke, she manifested the meat items as world objects, touching a knife to them and waiting a moment for them to re-materialize as slices with an electronic shimmer. "With Blacksmithing, say, you have straightforward recipes with preset results—so-and-so number of this leather or that ingot, and so on, and when you're done you have a weapon or a piece of armor. Right?"

Kirito knelt beside the hearth in the rented room, glancing up at Asuna when she stopped speaking. "I don't have any of those skills, but that fits what I do know." He touched an arbitrarily-chosen spot on the brick fireplace to bring up its context menu, and turned it on at the «Medium» setting. Flames at once sprung out of the wood on the rack, immediately beginning to warm the room.

"Mhm. Well, like I said, Cooking is different. There are recipes you can buy, find, or quest for, sure. But every ingredient I've run into so far has an actual flavor profile that resembles something in the real world, and the recipes you find seem to be just combinations of whatever ingredients would actually taste like the resulting dish if you cooked it with them for real."

Kirito had never been particularly interested in the Cooking system, only the tasty end results. But what Asuna was describing piqued his curiosity. There was some kind of puzzle there, a hidden depth that he hadn't known about—a system within the system. "So you think the recipes are just there to teach you what you need to know to experiment with making your own food?"

Asuna nodded, continuing her prep work. "I think so. It hit me not long after I started that you could use the preset recipes as kind of a Rosetta Stone for the Cooking skill—teaching you how to translate in-game items into real-world ones without necessarily having to taste them all."

"Like what?"
"Well, I mentioned a few earlier." She picked up some kind of a thick grassy stalk and lobbed it over to him, who caught it one handed and sniffed, then tapped it to open its status window.

"Frostbloom Stalk," Kirito said. "I remember you saying that now. You're right—it does smell like celery." He sniffed at the item again, and then took a bite of it.

"Hey!" Asuna complained, putting her fists on her hips.

"Maise mike ih'hoo," Kirito said as he chewed. It had been a long time since he'd snacked on any celery, and although the texture was a little different, the flavor was spot-on.

"You might as well finish that one," Asuna said, sighing. "I can't use it now. However—" She opened her game menu again, and a few touches later began typing something on the air before her.

"Taking notes?" Kirito ventured after swallowing.

Asuna nodded. "That's right. Any time I discover a real-world analogue, or a combination that tastes like one, I write it down here." She swept the window closed and returned to her prep work.

Kirito knew that Asuna was smart, but this was taking things several steps further. He was impressed not only that she'd made a connection he hadn't, but that she was putting so much time and effort into picking apart the mechanics of something that wasn't directly necessary for survival. While she worked on preparing the meal, she handed Kirito a stack of items and told him to taste them.

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Experimenting on my stomach after all, Kirito thought with more than a little amusement. Literally.

True to her word, the actual crafting part of the cooking process took only minutes—and true to his suspicions, it was about as interesting as watching two million lines of code compile; there was nothing to see except a timer that counted down after all of the ingredients were selected. Once the meal was ready, they sat in front of the fireplace and ate in silence, hunger demanding their full attention until their bowls were clean. The silence lingered for a short time after they set the dishes aside, and Kirito let the warmth from the simulated fire continue to warm his avatar while the dancing flames drove his thoughts.

"Big day tomorrow," Asuna said finally.

Kirito gave a quiet sound of agreement. "I already sent a PM to someone I'm pretty sure should be in the city at the moment, but no answer yet. She's probably tied up with the conference going on right now."

"She?" Asuna asked with an edge to her tone that befuddled Kirito.

"A blacksmith who's done some work for me before. She has deep ties in the local crafting community, so if we're really lucky, she might even know who this Nezha person is. And if not, she'll have the connections and credibility we need to dig deeper. There's someone else I want to try as well, someone who owes me a favor—but he blocks unfriended senders."

This seemed to mollify Asuna somewhat. "But this blacksmith isn't responding?"

Kirito shrugged. "Well-known crafters tend to get a lot of messages from potential customers and regulars. She probably just goes through it all at the end of the day."

"So we might get a reply tonight?" Asuna asked hopefully.

"Maybe," he answered. "But since we have no way of knowing whether we will or not, I vote we
just get some rest."

As if on cue, Asuna yawned widely, covering her mouth. "Is it okay if we stay here for a bit first? We don't have to talk about anything, I just want to sit here by the fire."

"Sure," Kirito said, shifting his weight and preparing to come to his feet. "I'll go rent my own room; you're welcome to use this one."

Asuna's hand snaked out more quickly that Kirito would've expected from her drowsy state, grabbing the hem of his sleeve. "Don't go."

"Huh?" Kirito looked down at her hand, a little confused. "I thought you wanted to sit by the fire for a while?"

"With you," Asuna said quietly, without letting go.

"With—" Kirito felt a flush of warmth that had nothing to do with the nearby fire.

"With you," she repeated, scooting just a little bit closer on the rug and leaning against his shoulder. This did nothing whatsoever to alleviate Kirito's confusion and embarrassment. All he could really do was freeze in place, scarcely daring to move or speak for fear of it being the wrong thing. This wasn't the first time Asuna had acted this way, and when he tried to reconcile this behavior with the girl who'd been so touchy early in the game, it just didn't add up.

Then again, she had been gradually lightening up over time. She even smiled at him now, let alone this. Was this the real Asuna he was seeing now, the person that he'd been traveling with for the past few days? Had this side of her been frightened into hiding when she was trapped here, a warmth that just needed time and relative normalcy in order to venture back out?

Kirito felt like he was missing something important. He was hyper-aware of her head on his shoulder, of the heat he could feel from her across the centimeters that separated them. "Hey, Asuna…"

"Mm?" Asuna said, a slight rise to the hummed sound.

"I've been trying to figure something out."

"Mm." One of her arms was trapped between them; he felt her shift it around until it was behind his back. Kirito's discomfort escalated, and he bulled onward with what he was trying to say.

"Y-you've been acting a bit… well, differently. Not in a bad way," he hastily added, almost tripping over his words. "Just different from how you were when we first met, or for most of the times we've run into each other. It's like…" Kirito trailed off there, trying to figure out a way to say "nicer" without implying that she used to be… not.

"Mm."

He stifled his own yawn, lest it be misinterpreted. "Well, like I said, it's not a bad thing. It's just that I'm kind of confused, and… I'm not really explaining this well." Kirito racked his brain, eyes locked on the fireplace because it offered a distraction from the girl leaning against him. "I tried to be friendly to you for a long time, but you weren't having any of it from me, and I never really understood what I'd done wrong. Now you're being friendly, and it's not that I think it's bad… I… I'm just trying to understand what changed."
Asuna offered no immediate answer. Without a breathing reflex, it was impossible to tell whether or not she was really asleep. When he gave his shoulder the very slightest of shrugs, it drew a quiet sound from her. The arm behind his back tightened a little, bringing more heat to his cheeks.

"A-anyway, that was kind of what I've been trying to figure out how to ask. But we're both pretty tired right now and this probably isn't the best time to talk about it, so don't worry." His eyes went up to the clock in his HUD, which read 22:26. "For now though, I think I'd better go get a room for myself so we can both get some sleep."

No answer. "Asuna?"

Kirito turned his head just enough to look down at Asuna's head, trying to ignore the extremely distracting scent of her hair or the way she felt next to him. "Asuna, I can't go anywhere with you like this."

There was no doubt in his mind now that she'd fallen asleep; saying her name a few more times didn't draw any kind of response, and the arm behind his back had gone slack. Her head was starting to slip, too—this position wasn't stable without her actively keeping herself upright. It took a lot of awkward fiddling, but by freeing up the arm she was leaning against, he was able to gently lower her weight without disturbing her, a process which—to his further embarrassment—ended up with her laying on his lap, the back of her head against his stomach.

Giving out a sigh of resignation, he opened his game menu, navigating to his inventory and manifesting as a world item the cloak he'd unequipped. He carefully draped the item over her like a blanket, adjusting it until it covered her bare shoulders. This time she did make a tiny sound, and drew her legs up into a loose fetal position.

Kirito stared down at Asuna's still, peacefully sleeping form, trying to sort out exactly what kind of alternate universe had swallowed him up at some point in the last few days.

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Penwether sometimes felt like a ghost city—in a way that had nothing at all to do with the undead mobs in the catacomb zones below.

It wasn't just the relatively small player population that made it feel that way, nor was it even the way the already-small population tended to keep to themselves as individuals or small clusters of players. For the most part that feeling came from the art style and setting of the city, a collection of what in the game lore were considered the ruins of a previous civilization. It made even the cozier parts of the city feel like exactly what they were, once you stripped away the flowery verbiage of the Spriggan NPC lore: an abandoned husk of a long-dead city inhabited by a permanent population of treasure hunters and grave robbers.

Philia could deal with the 'treasure hunter' part. It was, after all, one of the reasons why she'd warmed to playing a Spriggan in the first place, despite the fact that the race hadn't been her choice—she'd liked the idea of pretending to be some kind of fairy version of Lara Croft, hunting down treasures and adventures with her friends deep inside some scary dungeon. But she could do without the gloomy feel of the city, and would've long since moved if she'd had the choice.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons why she liked the way Yoshihara had furnished and decorated her home. The nominal Spriggan leader liked plenty of light, and had commissioned enough wall sconces to warmly illuminate the orange stone of the main room. It made it so that whenever Philia's group returned to their friend's place to trade loot and divide spoils, any treasure they manifested from their inventory as world objects tended to practically glow with reflected torchlight.
All things considered, an ambiance reminiscent of a dragon's hoard room was considerably nicer than the empty, dead feeling of the hallways outside. It made her a little reluctant to leave the company of her friends, as she'd been considering doing for most of the last hour. Today she just couldn't manage to take any joy in the division and sharing of loot, nor was the topic of conversation doing much to lift her spirits—but at the moment it was preferable to the solitude of her own thoughts.

A moving flash of reflected light caught her attention, yanking her out of those thoughts. Reacting on reflex, her hand snapped up and caught a sheathed dagger out of the air. Her eyes focused first on the ornate silver knotwork winding its way around the sheath, then past it to the person who'd thrown the item.

Winslow, the man who did double duty as their group's healer and DPS mage, made a grandiloquent gesture as he dipped his head, long raven-black hair swaying with the movement. "Would you be so kind?"

Philia turned the weapon over in her hand a few times to look at it from different angles, even though there wasn't really anything she could tell about its stats from visual examination. It was pretty, but that didn't necessarily mean it was valuable or useful. She tapped the dagger's sheath and selected one of the options that appeared, activating her «Appraisal» skill.

"Nothing special," she said immediately, giving the identified weapon a flip back towards the Spriggan mage, who caught it as deftly as she had. "Randomly-generated name, decent stats, no special effects, five upgrade slots."

"Five? Vendor trash," Mouse said without looking up from the pile of such items she was amassing, reaching blindly for her mug while her eyes alternated between a pair of status windows, comparing them.

"Vendor trash," Philia agreed. "Mid-level vendor trash, but trash all the same."

"Vendor trash is still money in the bank, though," Yoshihara pointed out around a mouthful of stew-soaked bread. "Especially when it drops from higher-level mobs. Same story as yesterday with those?"

"Yep," Mouse said after downing the remainder of her drink, dismissing the status windows on her items and pushing one back towards the discard pile. "All the repops were different today. Like, we'd clear, say, all the Lopers on one skyland, and none of them came back. Instead we got a bunch of Corrupted Pixies that were like five or ten levels higher than the Lopers they replaced. It was like someone hit a button and just re-randomized what kinds of mobs appear where."

"Well, shit," Yoshihara said with her usual eloquence. "I was wondering if that was a coincidence. I guess that means all the mat drops were different, too?"

"You got it," Mouse confirmed. She plucked a hundred-Yuld coin from the pile on the table and began absentlv rolling it across her knuckles while she talked, leaning back and propping up her feet. "About thirty-odd tufts of Loper Fur, and a metric fuckton of Pixie Wings. At least the wings'll fetch a good price, but unloading 'em for max profit'll take a trip to Arun, and who's got time for that hassle?"

The red-hemmed black sleeves of Winslow's robes fluttered as he waved a hand in the air from across the room without looking, cuff sliding down to the elbow and baring his gray-skinned arm. "All of us, that's who," said the Spriggan mage. He closed his menu with a flick of his hand and brought his attention back to the others. "I mean, come on. We've been talking about moving
operations for a while anyway, right? Our leveling has slowed to a crawl. We're not going to break out of Tier 3 by sticking around here and scouring the high-altitude skylands forever—we're starting to hit the limit of how high we can fly to find harder mobs and still have wing energy to fight."

"Maybe not," Mouse said, lobbing her coin across the room so that it scored a three-point shot into the upraised cuff of Winslow's sleeve. She and Philia both grinned as he made an annoyed sound and shook his sleeve to dislodge the coin. "This mob respawn thing, right? They used to cap out around 20, and we gotta hack skyland dungeons near the Valley of Butterflies to find those. The Corrupted Pixies we cleared today were some of the best EXP we've gotten in weeks."

"So?" Winslow said.

"So if the spawns are changing, maybe we don't have to move after all," Yoshihara said. "Which I'm all kinds'a good with."

Arun. Philia had been there once, early in the game. She was inclined to agree with Winslow; it was long since time for their group to move closer to the center of Alfheim and start tackling harder content… maybe even venturing into the World Tree and eventually trying to catch up to the clearing groups.

But moving to Arun would almost certainly mean leaving Yoshihara behind—something that everyone in the room knew, and no one wanted to say. They had all known each other for a very long time, and despite all of her faults, none of them wanted to see Yoshihara stuck in Penwether while the other three moved on to Yggdrasil.

"I need some fresh air," Philia said abruptly, removing herself from the comfortable chair with an effort of will. "We all done with the idents?"

Her three companions exchanged looks. Mouse was in the process of stowing her share of the vendor trash in her inventory, while Winslow's hands were already empty. "Go for it," Yoshihara said with a yawn and a wave from her hammock. "I'm crashing soon anyway."

"Yeah, you must be hella worn out from a long day of parking your ass in this room and leveling your Sewing skill," Mouse remarked, leaning aside immediately to dodge the shoe that Yoshihara threw at her in return. "G'wan, Filly, we're done here anyway."

The usual horseplay between Yoshihara and Mouse at least still managed to bring a smile to her face, and she carried it with her as long as she could. Her not-quite-aimless walk eventually took her out to the roof of the central ziggurat, a walkway paved with tiles and moss that ringed the highest point of the structure and looked out over the city. The wind whipped infrequently by as it broke around the stone wall several meters behind her, plucking at her wavy black hair and occasionally blowing it into her face as she gazed up at the stars.

Even though the night sky was clear, there was no comfort to be found in constellations that anyone in the real world would find familiar. Instead, Philia distracted herself by inventing her own; here and there her mind would assemble patterns of stars into asterisms, and when they came to mind she would give them a name. The patterns never seemed to be the same from night to night—either that, or the arbitrary groupings that she'd chosen simply didn't pop out at her the same way twice. Nonetheless, it was distraction that never failed to calm her, and whether she remembered or found them again, it was the process of naming that gave her peace.

*The Festival Snake*, Philia thought, eyes tracking across a meandering path of stars in the sky. A trio of armless stick figures leapt out at her next, with a stick figure neighbor that looked like it was lying on the ground. *Pickup Group*, she named the cluster with a wry smile. She looked around slowly,

"There's no escape to be found there," said a hauntingly familiar voice—one she hadn't heard for a long time.

Philia was so startled that she nearly jumped out of her avatar, hopping in place as she spun around and staggering back against the stone railing while she tried to regain her poise. "Vassago," she whispered, palm pressed to her chest and eyes wide with disbelief. "So you really *are* alive."

The other Spriggan turned up his palms, then folded one arm across his midriff while he performed a mock-bow. "Kotone," he said, answering his true name with her own. "You look troubled."

Philia nodded jerkily, fear warring with all of the other conflicting emotions that pushed their way to the forefront. More than anything she wanted to run to him and throw her arms around him, but almost as much she wanted to slap him and scream at him for… for everything. To demand answers. "You scared me," she said, head slowly turning as he walked towards her and leaned his arms on the cracked stone of the railing.

"It's a talent I cultivate," Vassago said, the low growl of his voice shifting towards a purr. "One of many."

Philia had to force herself to tear her eyes away from him. She went back to observing the night sky, as if her unending search for new constellations would save her from having to think too hard about what might happen in the next few minutes. "I have so many questions," she said quietly, trying to suppress the excess of emotion she could hear. "I haven't seen you for months, and you dropped off my friends list. I heard talk about you, but I'd started to think maybe you were dead."

There had been a time when her boyfriend's rough demeanor and gruff, cynical laughter had pleased her. Now, after all this time and everything that had transpired, it had taken on an equal part of unease. "Dead?" he echoed to her at the tail end of his laugh, pushing back the hood of his cloak to reveal yellow eyes that seemed more like dull amber in the moonlight. There was no mirth in his smile. "Kotone, I have never been so alive as I am here, now, in this world." He straightened, taking a few steps until he stood behind her. His next words came from just behind her ear, so close that she could feel the simulated sensation of breath across her skin; it made her shiver as she tilted her head automatically towards his cheek. "You could live like this, too."

"You made me that offer once," Philia said without turning, struggling between the desire to put space between herself and Vassago and the desire to lean back against him, to remember what that had felt like. "I told you, I don't want to PK in a world where death is for real."

A chuckle. "But you were so good at it."

Philia felt a brief, feather-light touch at the nape of her neck; her back arched slightly in reaction, arousal still warring with revulsion as the primary cause of her trembling. "Stop that," she said, her words sounding unconvincing even to herself. "PvP in our last game was one thing, Vassago. In this world, it's murder."

"Don't speak as if it's a flavor you haven't tasted," Vassago said sharply. "I've seen you kill. You enjoyed it."

Philia shook her head vigorously, as much denying it to herself as to him. "That was self-defense," she protested. "We didn't have any choice. And back then we weren't really sure if the whole death game thing was for real anyway."
She felt strong hands come to rest on her shoulders, and without thinking about it she started to press back into the touch before catching herself. His fingertips kneaded her shoulders, and she made a small sound as she felt herself starting to melt. "So that's what you've been telling yourself." He laughed out a sharp, staccato sound. "Would we have fought so hard for our lives if we really doubted for even one moment that we'd die if we didn't? You killed, Kotone. More than once. And you've never been more beautiful than when you had just fought for your life—and won it by taking someone else's."

"You can't do this," Philia said, resenting the plaintive sound of her voice. With a wave she dismissed the anti-harassment pop-up that could've easily ended this reunion and the emotional turmoil it had brought her—if she'd had the will to use that function and jail the person she once loved. She tried to imbue her words with the steel they needed, hardening her tone. "You can't just drop out of someone's life and then show up expecting to pick up where you left off. I walked away when you started doing privateer work, and after Kibaou's death you virtually disappeared. Now please, just tell me why you've come back to me, Vassago. Why are you here now, after all these months?"

Vassago's hands were maddening; he kept deftly touching her in so many of the ways he knew she liked to be touched, and it had been so long. After the second time the anti-harassment pop-up appeared she let it time out and minimize to her HUD so that it wouldn't keep nagging her. A part of her suspected that he was tormenting her in order to evade her question, but just when she had nearly managed the presence of mind to beg him to stop, she felt him cup her cheek from behind and turn her head so that he could bring his lips to her ear again. "Do you want to live forever?"

There was something about the way he asked the question that made it seem like more than a figure of speech, more than a larper's pointless dramatics. She felt his teeth on one of her sensitive, tapered ears, and gasped slightly. "Wha… what do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said," he whispered directly into that ear. "Immortality. Ageless freedom."

Just as his hands threatened to stray further, Philia twisted away from the embrace and stared intently at him, anger starting to rise in her again. "Enough, Vassago. You're not making any sense now. What's that supposed to mean?"

He simply spread his hands and gave her that chilling smile again, taking one slow step after another towards her. "Didn't you hear me? When I said immortality, I meant that you need never again fear death." He reached up and touched Philia's chin, tipping it up to look at him; she couldn't bring herself to pull away. "Just make a pact with her."

"A pact with… come again?"

"A pact with the Mistress," Vassago said yellow eyes glittering down at Philia. "Hel comes for us all sooner or later, but she rewards those who bring her souls—especially if the death was an imaginative one."

Horror began to wrap its way around Philia like a cloak that chilled rather than warmed. "You really did do it," she said, her own voice nearly a whisper. "I didn't want to believe it."

Vassago cocked his head. "Do what, kitten?"

There was a time when having him call her koneko rather than Kotone had stirred affection and desire within her. But under the present circumstances, it had precisely the opposite effect. She pushed away from him with a renewed surge of revulsion, backing herself against the overlook's railing with wide eyes. "You killed a kid," she said. "You really did."
Vassago's eyes narrowed slightly, one corner of his mouth rising in a hint of a secret smile. "Certain birds must be singing loud songs," he remarked vaguely.

"Just a rumor," Philia said, the last of her hope that she'd been wrong fading away. "It was your nickname, but I wanted to believe it was someone different."

Vassago nodded. "If you must know, I didn't kill the boy—XaXa did. But since Hel claimed XaXa for herself only minutes later, I wish I had. Her boons increase with every soul we take. And those boons could be yours, too."

Philia thought she felt the evening's meal trying to make a return trip up through her throat. She knew the feeling was false, purely in her head—the nausea was a psychological sensation. But that didn't make it feel any less real, or any more pleasant. She covered her mouth with one hand and half-turned away from the man she'd thought she'd known. "I don't want them. Not at that price."

Vassago reached out to touch her cheek, but his knuckles had barely grazed it before she jerked her head away. "Don't touch me," she said, shuffling to the side since she couldn't back away any further. "You've been poisoned by something dark inside you, something I want nothing to do with. I don't know who or what you are now, but you're not the man I loved."

"And that's where you're wrong," Vassago countered with a laugh and an awful smile. "Everything that made me what I am now is a part of me that you loved. You enjoyed the thrill of fearing my past, knowing that the hands that touched you had taken a life before. You admired my passion and drive, and where it could take you. And this so-called dark side that you want nothing to do with has always been a part of me. It gets you wet."

"Not anymore," Philia said, tasting the lie in the protest but letting her expression and voice remain cold. She began the slow process of walling off one thing from another within her, feeling the atrophied remains of her feelings for him start to painfully wither and die on the vine with every exchange of words. "We're done."

"Kotone—"

"And stop calling me that. You don't have the right to use my real name anymore, Prophet."

For a moment, the other man stopped and simply stared at her with a blank expression. Then, once more, that mocking smile crept back onto his face. "It's ironic, isn't it? That name. They called me the Prophet of Hell when I led our server in PvP kills. But in this world, I truly am Hel's prophet."

"Then you go have fun with that," Philia snapped. "Go spread your Mistress's word somewhere else, to someone else. I want you gone from my life again—for good, this time."

Prophet held her gaze in his for several beats afterwards, almost an exact three-count. "As you wish," he said with an eerily neutral tone. "I'd hoped to reawaken the killer that I know lies within you, but it seems you really are just an amateur after all."

The words tickled something in Philia's memory, something from long ago. She'd heard Prophet speak of people as 'amateurs' before—it was his shorthand way of referring to people with no spine, no pride in their work. People who lacked the commitment and will to do what had to be done. People for whom he had nothing but contempt.

Deadly contempt.

Their eyes met again, and a shock passed through Philia at what she saw in his; she took an involuntary step back.
Tearing her eyes away, Philia's gaze rapidly shifted from place to place, looking around and seeing no one at all nearby—she couldn't even see NPC cursors from her vantage point, and the night was completely still except for the flickering of sparsely-placed torches and the distant calls of animals or insects. A flashing in her peripheral vision arrested her wandering gaze, drawing it to the notification column in her HUD where a single icon was flashing to indicate it was about to disappear.

Blue eyes met yellow once more. A sudden blaze of panic hit Philia, and she quickly looked back at the flashing notification that had previously minimized to her HUD.  "The Anti-Harassment code has detected that «PoH» has violated your personal space. If this contact is unwanted, you have the option of immediately teleporting him to the nearest NPC jail for a 24-hour period. If this contact is welcome, you may either select «No» or ignore this prompt, which will not reoccur until it disappears. Do you wish to punish this player? Yes/No"

Prophet began to turn away. Angular, translucent black wings appeared on his back. "Goodbye, kitten," he said over his shoulder without looking back.

Philia looked directly at the «Yes» icon and blinked once. A blazing corona of blue light engulfed Prophet, accompanied by the rising and falling tone of the teleportation effect.

Then she leaned back against the nearest wall, sliding slowly down it with her arms wrapped around herself. "Goodbye, Vassago," she whispered for what she hoped was the last time, finally allowing herself to mourn the loss of what once was.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:
So, that recurring thing about not being able to promise an update schedule because of life foo?

Yeah. That. I appear to still be on track for finishing this story by the time SAO launches in 2022. Kidding—mostly.

There are a few Japanese elements in this chapter that I feel merit explanation for those who need it. They ought to be clear from context, as with anything else Japanese I include, but I've learned that not everyone picks up on this stuff.

Pin pon: Argo has done this a few times. It's one of the vast library of onomatopoeia in the Japanese language; this one suggests the ringing sound of a bell and is used, as a colloquialism, similarly to "bingo!" in order to express "yes, what you just said is absolutely correct".

Gnomey Mono: Appearing on the in-game sign as "Gnomey物", the sign could be interpreted as "Gnomish Things", but is actually a pun on the word nomimono, which means "drink(s)/beverage(s)" (nomu = to drink, mono = thing).

Hogehoge123: Argo says this when giving a made-up example of an item ID. In English computer programming, the word "foo" is what is referred to as a metasyntactic variable—a nonsense word that stands in for any word which would be valid in the current context, so that a concept can be explained without having to come up with valid
examples of every parameter or other variable. In Japanese, the nonsense word hoge is used the same way.

Anyway, sorry about the wait on this chapter, especially after the rapid pace of updates in November. Hopefully this chapter is substantial enough to make up for it. As always, let me know what you think in the reviews!
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The «Area Map» is an essential tool available to every player, and can be accessed from the top-level game menu. It is a fully interactive representation of any area known to the player, visualized as a two-dimensional slice of three-dimensional space at a given altitude. By default it is shown at the player's current position, but players can freely navigate through their map using the game's standard touch interface, set and recall navigation waypoints, and mark points of interest with icons and notes. The «Fog of War» voxel effect that obscures unexplored regions of the map is uncovered at a resolution of one cubic meter through exploration, and the resulting map data can be selectively traded with other players, turned in to NPCs who offer «Exploration Quests», or transcribed into a consumable item by a player or NPC with an appropriate crafting skill..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Area Map»

8 May 2023
Day 184 - Morning

By the time Griselda awoke the next day, almost everyone knew about what happened to Shriker's party.

The certainty that there would be an almost was what had prompted Chellok to send a message to her the night before, asking that she show up to the Depot much earlier than usual. The debriefings they had all gone through upon their premature return to Nissengrof had been almost as exhausting as the spider battle itself, and had eventually involved not only Chellok but the three faction proxies and the leaders of the clearing groups.

Small wonder that the other three members of her party had gone off on their own as soon as they could get away. Griselda had envied them the freedom.

But although rumors were already spreading like wildfire, rumors were not the same thing as experience. And as the leader of the only group so far that had survived an encounter with these new mobs, they wanted her to brief the other farmers before everyone left on their morning assignments, so that they could all benefit from—and possibly survive thanks to—the experience she had.

It was an honor, but it was also an enormous responsibility. After six months in Alfheim, she was used to carrying the lives of others on her shoulders—but now her words could very well be the difference between survival and death for hundreds of NCC contract farmers.

Griselda sincerely hoped that she would do right by them. Grimlock had gently suggested over dinner that she could be taking on more than she could handle, and she was inclined to agree with him. But although she appreciated his concern for her well-being—and made certain to tell him so repeatedly—this was something that she simply had to do.

If there was a chance that anything she had to say could save someone's life, she would do her best and hope that it was enough. Even if it meant going far outside of her comfort zone.

"You look nervous," Chellok observed as Griselda tilted her shield back and forth to get a good look at herself in the reflection. It was the best she could do without a real mirror, but it had the added bonus of distracting her from looking out the full-length windows of Chellok's office and seeing the sizable crowd gathered below on the warehouse floor.
Her emerald-green eyes turned in the direction of his voice while she tried to tuck a few strands of hair behind her long, sharply-tapered ears. "Why do you say that?"

Chellok snorted. "Miss, I've got twice your years and can tell when someone's about to fidget right outta their skin. Especially when you're sitting there fussing over hair that'll just revert to your default style anyway unless you get a tailor to change it. You ever do any public speaking?"

"Never," Griselda said after a moment, eyes briefly dropping to her feet and not coming all the way back up. "I mean, not like this. It's not my place, and my husband thinks I might be getting in over my head here. I really shouldn't—"

Chellok stopped her there with a slight gesture of his palm. "That's what I thought. Okay, look, we're short on time before you go out there, but here's the thing you gotta keep in mind: today, you are the expert. There is no one who knows this new mob better than you right now, and if you're going to go out there and teach what you know so that it sticks, you can't be tearing yourself down like that. Or letting anyone else do it."

Griselda did look him in the eyes then, although it was still uncomfortable enough that she couldn't maintain it for long. "I'm not sure I follow what you mean."

"Self-confidence, young lady. You need it, and you ain't got it." He leaned back in his chair with his fingers laced behind his head and fixed her with scrutiny that again made her bow her head deferentially. "Yeah, that's exactly what I mean. From what I've seen of you and that Lepu mechanist who works with Agil, I bet back in the world you were the ideal *Yamato Nadeshiko*, weren't you? Polite, humble, submissive and all that good stuff. You might lead your party in the field, but when your *riaru* husband's around, he the one who calls the shots. Isn't that right?"

This conversation had suddenly taken a turn that was making Griselda even more uncomfortable than the prospect of what she had to go out and do. She sat upright a bit more stiffly, unequipping her shield to send it to her inventory. "Forgive my rudeness, sir, but I am uncertain why a concern such as that should burden you. He is our guildmaster."

Chellok nodded. "Pitch-perfect courtesy even when *I'm* the one being incredibly rude. I don't think you could've picked a more humble, indirect way to tell one of your elders to mind his own goddamn business. And you're right—you're marriage isn't my business. But if you want to go out there and speak to all those people without melting down, you need to believe in yourself." He sat forward and tapped the desk in front of him with one thick, stubby finger. "Believe that you know the material, and that you can do this. Anyone who tells you that you can't, you just tell them to piss right off and quit tearing you down. That includes the voice inside of you that's sitting there right now telling you that you ain't good enough. And that includes anyone else in your life who does the same."

Griselda's lips were set in a paper-thin line as she absorbed what Chellok was saying and glanced back up at him. The intrusive question and even more intrusive follow-up had shocked her and made her extremely uncomfortable. But now that the shock was wearing off, she found herself having to fend off a very unfamiliar urge that she felt rising within her: defiance. Chellok must have seen something of that on her face; he nodded once again as if she'd replied with words. "Good. So there is *steel* in you. Someone who survived the Salamander Blitz and an ambush like yesterday's would have to have some. Hold onto that, and take it with you when you go out there."

A knock sounded at the door, and Agil stuck his bald head in a moment later, the noise of the crowd suddenly increasing when the door cracked. "Everyone's here now."

"Thanks. Get them to start settling down and we'll be right out." Chellok hadn't taken his eyes from Griselda during the brief exchange, and he did not do so now. "Anything you want to say to me
There was, but Griselda had been planning on holding her tongue until that prompt gave her permission to reply. "Yes, sir," she said as she came smoothly to her feet. "With great respect for your wisdom, I do not believe you or anyone else has enough information to fairly judge the relationship I have with my husband. He is a kind, gentle, and intelligent man who would do anything within his means to protect his wife… a wife who repays his love and devotion by willfully going out on her own every day and leaving him home to worry if—like Shriker—one day she might not come back." Griselda bowed, and held that position while she concluded her words. "I will think on what you've said, but I would be grateful if you would refrain from criticizing him. You don't know what weighs on his mind."

A smile tugged at Chellok's rugged face. "Yeah, you've got what you need in there somewhere. You'll be fine." The comment made no sense to Griselda, but she didn't have time to think it over before he nodded towards the door. "Now go on, they're waiting for you."

Griselda took note of the fact that Chellok hadn't really addressed what she'd said, but there was nothing for it now. She bowed once more in acknowledgement, and opened the door without another word.

"Jan—" said Schmitt.

Caynz's closed fist bobbed in the air with each word. "—Ken—"

In unison: "Pon!" Both Gnomes threw out a hand before them; each had the index and middle fingers extended like a pair of scissors. The boys sighed.

Yoruko's sigh was even deeper. Players had been trickling into the Depot for the last twenty minutes now, and with everyone asked to bring their entire farming group, what was usually a modestly-sized meeting of a few dozen party leaders had become a sizable and noisy crowd. The other two members of her party weren't helping. "What are you two doing?" she asked finally.

"Playing janken," Schmitt said without looking at her, holding out a closed fist again.

"I can see that," Yoruko said, laughing. From his hunched, prepared posture, anyone would've assumed he was about to engage in combat. "I mean, what are you trying to settle? You've been doing that for half the time we've been waiting here."

"Surely the lady recalls the necklace that we wrested from the clutches of that foul named Jotunn yesterday," Caynz said. "The power within resonates strongly with Earth magic, which both Schmitt and I use natively."

"And no one else in the party does," Schmitt said unnecessarily. "So since it dropped for Griz, she said it was up to the two of us to sort out who gets it. Ready?"

"Ready," Caynz said. This time Schmitt's paper defeated his rock—a defeat which simply prompted them to start another round. That one ended the same way, and Caynz looked over at her, grinning a bit foolishly.

"So what's the score?" Yoruko asked, inching a little towards Caynz's side.

"Thirty to twenty-seven," Caynz answered after closing his eyes and taking a moment to think. He then gave her a mirthful sidewise glance, though he had to look down a bit to do so. "In case you
were wondering, I'm winning."

Schmitt pointedly cleared his throat, fist held out. "Not for much longer. Ready?"

"One sec. Yoruko, you okay?"

Her mouth was hanging open in a very impolite way, and Yoruko shut it quickly. She knew the two of them had been at it for a while, but she thought that was taking things a bit far. Her fingers wove through her purple hair and twisted the curls around one digit after another as her gaze went back and forth between the two boys. "So how does this end? It does end, right?"

"When Griselda comes out," Schmitt said quickly. "Whoever's ahead then wins. Which is why Caynz is stalling."

"I'm not stalling," Caynz said as he stopped transparently stalling. "Jan—"

Yoruko turned away and raised her eyes high towards the ceiling of the warehouse. A framework of metal and wood shelving formed aisle after aisle in the vast underground chambers, and a steep, narrow stairway of utilitarian design at the near one end of these aisles ascended towards the quartermaster's elevated office.

From her vantage point Yoruko could barely make out a pair of silhouettes within; the combination of torchlit sconces and orelight overheads cast odd shadows inside of the raised room despite the full-length windows. The big black man who seemed to be Chellok's assistant—Agil, that was the name, though Griselda had only mentioned it once—he was standing at the top of those stairs, and just as her eyes came to rest on him, the massive Gnome rapped on the door and leaned in for a moment.

"Hah! Got you!"

"Still a tie," Caynz said, suddenly invested with motivation he hadn't had a minute before. "Jan—"

Yoruko missed the outcome of that round; her attention was taken by a change in the noise of the crowd. It wasn't that they got louder or quieter, per se, it was that the overall pattern of conversation altered in some subtle way that made her think something had happened without really being able to quite put her finger on why she knew. When she glanced back up at Chellok's office, it was obvious that both of the players inside had stood up, and the door opened a moment later.

"Hey, you guys—"

"One more!" Schmitt said, holding out his hand. Caynz obliged; they both played paper just as a sharp metallic sound echoed out from above. Agil was rapping the pommel of a hammer on the railing, calling for silence.

"No, one more! It doesn't count if the last one's a tie!"

Caynz wasn't having any of it. "If we play again we could end up with an actual tie score. It's over, good sir."

"Shut up!" hissed someone nearby.

Yoruko swallowed nervously, no longer caring about the results of the stupid game. She knew that Griselda wouldn't betray her promise and say anything about Penny, but she wasn't sure how her party leader was going to explain how they got all of the information they did, or how they were forewarned about the spiders before the attack. She'd been tempted to ask Penny to stay home for the meeting, but she had no idea if they were going to get to go back there before heading out for the
day, and she hadn't wanted to explain it if she asked.

"You're worried, oneechan," Penny said, poking her head up within Yoruko's collar just enough to speak into her ear. "It's okay. I don't sense any danger."

Yoruko shook her head; she couldn't really respond to the Navi-Pixie without being obvious about it, especially not now that the crowd had largely fallen silent. Griselda was standing in front of Agil, with Chellolok at her side giving her a brief introduction. After a few moments of looking out over the crowd, her eyes briefly met Yoruko's, and the two exchanged a smile. That seemed to break something in Griselda's reserve; she seemed to relax slightly and began speaking, though Yoruko couldn't quite make out the first few words.

She apparently wasn't the only one. "We can't hear you!" called an unseen voice. Then another.

Caynz and Yoruko had both learned how to control their breathing in their respective schools' theater and band clubs, and they had tried to give Griselda a few tips for projecting her voice. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to work quite exactly the same way within ALO as it did in the real world—their avatars didn't really have lungs or a diaphragm, only animations that approximated the outward signs of such when the game determined it was appropriate.

Most players probably never noticed the difference. It was realistic enough—she could take a deep breath, and the game seemed to understand that in a general sense, and simulate how it ought to feel so that it wasn't a completely jarring experience. But she could still tell that it wasn't really simulating a volume of air being moved—it was just an animation and a set of pre-programmed tactile sensations which had probably been recorded during the Nerve Gear's lengthy calibration.

As frustrating as it was for them to have their bodies not work the way they expected from long practice, Yoruko was certain that Griselda had to be enjoying it even less at the moment. The Sylph woman's smile faltered a bit, but after a few moments of embarrassment she recovered and tried to speak up a bit more loudly.

"Sorry, is this better? Okay, thank you. Well, to start with… as Chellolok said, my name is Griselda, and my group is assigned to farm out to West Glita A3. For those of you who don't work topside in that area, it's in Western Glitafrost, part of the dogleg between Tyrsong Canyon and the northern border of Greater Snjarholt."

Griselda looked a little uncomfortable for a moment, but she mastered whatever thought had put her off. "By now you've all heard rumors that Shriker's group was killed by some kind of new mob. These rumors are, to our sorrow, true. Yesterday we encountered those mobs, and we learned how and why they killed one of our best teams."

"The mob is called a «Cloaking Arboreal Spider», and we saw them spawn at around level 18 or 19." They actually knew exactly what level the mobs had been, thanks to Penny—but Yoruko had urged Griselda to be vague about it so that people would think they were estimating based on cursor color. She breathed a little sigh of relief.

"As the name suggests, they are an arachnid-type mob that can turn invisible, and they ambush players from above in linked encounters of three. And by invisible I mean truly invisible—this is a new ability that we haven't seen before."

The reaction from the crowd of players was not the least bit surprising to Yoruko. Mobs that could
use the «Transparency» spell or an effect like it were bad enough—at least you could still see those if you were paying attention, or in a well-lit area with good background contrast. As far as Yoruko knew, there wasn't even a spell for true Invisibility, and before now there hadn't been any mobs that could completely disappear either. The others took the news more or less the way she would've expected; some had started shouting out questions that just overlapped each other. Agil banged the pommel of his hammer on the railing again; Yoruko winced at the sound.

"Please, I understand that this is a frightening new thing that we're dealing with, but I am alive to tell you this now because they can be dealt with. I am going to tell you how to detect them and beat them. But first I'm going to tell you what doesn't work, so please be patient while I go through this. I'll do my best to answer questions when I'm done.

"Searching will not pop a cursor. We tested the «Tracking» child skill on our way out, and it shows where they've pathed if they were on the ground. But it won't distinguish their path from any other mob's, and they don't come down except to attack anyway, so that doesn't help unless they've done so recently. They make no sound until they attack—and that is only because they have to go visible in order to do so, and the effect of dropping invisibility has a very distinctive sound effect associated with it. It is important to detect them before they strike. Otherwise you will have only moments to react to an attack from above, and their poison inflicts «Delay» status.

"The only way that I was able to see through their invisibility cloak was with the use of a Magnitude-6 Wind Magic spell called «Detect Movement». As the spell description says, it will reveal the location and approximate shape of any moving entity within the spell's range. When I activated this spell, I could see the spiders slowly moving around until they were directly above whoever they were about to attack, though I still didn't see cursors."

The fact that an invisible opponent didn't have a cursor was, as Schmitt had pointed out, quite possibly the worst part. An entity's cursor was what allowed a player to target it using the Focus system—without a cursor, they were effectively completely untargetable even if they were standing right in front of you. Any attacks, whether physical or magical, would have to be manually aimed at an invisible target without the benefit of System Assist or Focus, although one of the senior Gnome clearers had speculated that untargeted AOE's might still hit them—they weren't invulnerable, after all.

Griselda had to wait for Chellok to quiet everyone down again; the assembled farmers were growing agitated, and Yoruko could hardly blame them.

"I said they were moving slowly, and this is a very important detail. While cloaked, they never moved at much more than a person's normal walking pace, and as we saw after they attacked, they were capable of moving much more quickly when visible. This means that until they attack, it is very trivial to avoid them—just keep moving and don't stop for very long in one place."

Griselda's expression took a grim turn. "Unfortunately, we think this is exactly how Shriker and his group died."

Yoruko relaxed a bit more, beginning to tune out the now-familiar story. There was no way to know for certain, but several of the clearing group leaders had managed to piece together a solid theory during the group's second debriefing. Shriker was known to have a very methodical approach to farming his territory, one which he'd taught to many other farmers. His group's route covered their designated area in long stripes that took them from one side to the other, then switched back the other direction for the next stripe until they'd crossed and cleared the entirety of their assigned territory as if mowing a lawn.

Normally this would involve pulling any aggro mobs they saw along the way that were within the
clearing path. But the spiders were drawn by noise, and once aggroed they kept following the player that had unknowingly aggroed them—invisibly, but very slowly. An efficient, overleveled group like Shriker's would rarely stop in one place for longer than it took to burn down a mob, and by the time the group took an extended break, they had probably been training a very large number of spiders.

Those mobs would've caught up with and ambushed them at the worst possible time: when they were tired, low on supplies, weighed down with loot, and thinking that they'd just finished clearing themselves a safe area.

"I need to stress that a single encounter of these mobs is not especially dangerous to a properly leveled group that's expecting them," Griselda said, raising her voice to be heard above the rising murmurs. "They have minimal resists, low HP, widely-spaced spawns, and in a stand-up fight they go down fast. Your best defense is to know they're there in the first place." She punctuated each of the last words with a gloved fist in her palm. "Here's how we knew to look."

Yoruko froze again.

"Although you cannot see them until they attack, and Detect Movement has too long of a cooldown to keep it active all the time, you can guess that there may be invisible mobs by what's around you—or really, what isn't. If an area seems empty of aggro mobs, but you haven't cleared it yourselves, don't assume that it's really clear until you have someone check for movement. It was when we started wondering why the area was so empty of aggro mobs that I thought of using Detect Movement, and that probably saved our lives." Griselda paused for a moment, looking a bit uncertain. She glanced over at Chellok, who shrugged.

"Thanks, Griselda," Chellok said, stepping into the awkward silence and making the Sylph's voice sound tiny by comparison. "To be frank, I'd say that 'don't assume' is probably a safe best-practice to follow in general, especially now that we know all the mob spawns are changing. It sucks that we had to lose some of our best people to ram that lesson home, so hopefully they're the only ones we gotta lose like this." He panned a hard look across the assembled players. "Keep your eyes and ears open, use the wits your mamas gave you, and stay frosty out there."

"Hard not to in this cold!" Yoruko couldn't see the heckler, but the joke sent a ripple of laughter through everyone, and seemed to dispel some of the darkness that had fallen over them.

Chellok was no exception; his hearty laugh was one of the loudest, and he waved towards the outer doors. "Wiseass. Alright, you've all got jobs to do, and we're done here. Git."

Yoruko and the others tried to make their way towards the front to meet up with Griselda, but were having trouble doing so—she was surrounded by a cluster of players who were hitting her with follow-up questions about the spiders and their mechanics, some of the group leaders angling for any edge they could get.

It took several minutes for the players to dissipate. Once they found themselves face to face, Yoruko impulsively hugged Griselda, who seemed surprised by the gesture.

"Thanks for not saying anything," Yoruko whispered before letting go.

Griselda simply smiled. She might've been about to speak in response, but before anyone else could do so, Agil's bulk loomed in Yoruko's peripheral vision, with Chellok's stockier form at his side. "You did great," the Gnome quartermaster said without ceremony.

"You're very kind," Griselda said, eyes briefly going to her feet before coming party back up. "I was a bundle of nerves, and I'm sure I forgot a dozen details that someone really ought to know."
Agil shook his head, his deep voice reassuring. "You hit the most important points," he said. "You told them how to avoid being ambushed, what to look for, what the risks are, and how to beat them. And because they're hearing it from one of their peers, it's probably going to sink in better than if we'd stood out there and lectured them."

Chellok nodded. "That's right. I'm giving Shriker's old territory to Jargo's group. He's got a Wind-heavy buffer in his party, and with the info you gave them, they should be able to easily handle these goddamn demonic spiders. And anyone else should be able to adapt if they run into similar mobs elsewhere."

Yoruko figured that Griselda was probably as disappointed as she was. She knew that any group would have more seniority than theirs did, but they'd still had an outside hope that the information they brought back might have earned them the right to inherit Shriker's territory—and now that they knew how to deal with the spiders and not aggro the entire zone, she thought they could've handled it. But from Griselda's nod and expression, she did not seem very surprised.

"Well, I guess that partially answers that," she said with a smile. "I'd been wondering why we didn't get an assignment slip this morning, but I thought maybe it meant you were moving us to Snjarholt."

Chellok and Agil both laughed. "Sorry," he said. "Jargo probably would've ragequit if we'd given one of our best overland territories to our newest group—and an under-strength group at that. Besides, I had another idea."

The older Gnome now had their full attention, and his gaze wandered over to Caynz as he went on. "Kainzu, right? Late yesterday you turned in some map data for the Frozen Underways."

Caynz nodded, eyebrows arched in mild surprise. "That's right. Yoruko and I have spent some of our free time down there in recent weeks. Since we were all back by lunch yesterday, she and I decided to spend the rest of the day out exploring by ourselves."

Chellok drummed his fingers against his scorched apron for a few moments. "What made you decide to go map there?"

Yoruko's unease returned immediately and forcefully with a spike of cold fear. Caynz caught her gaze just long enough to give her the tiniest shake of the head before he turned a slight smile on Chellok. "Because nobody else has."

"That's because nobody with any sense wants to go there," Schmitt said with apprehension, visibly recoiling. "It's uncomfortably cold even with resists, there are no light sources at all, the layout is a tangled maze of tunnels and caves that are hard to navigate even with the map data, and there are demihuman mobs that use weapon skills and magic." He made it sound like he'd been there, which surprised Yoruko—he'd never mentioned it before.

"«Glacial Goblins»," Chellok confirmed. "They're rumored to have a city down there somewhere, but we've never found it—just run into patrols in the mid-level tunnels. We've been trying to get it mapped, but everyone we send just gets lost... or never comes back at all."

"And you want to send us," Griselda said. It was impossible for Yoruko to tell whether she was being skeptical or simply stating the obvious.

Chellok answered with a tip of the head. "I knew you were sharp."

"May I ask why? We're honored that you want our help with this, and I'm sure it's important work, but you said it yourself—we're an under-strength party, and virtually every ranger or farmer you
have is going to be more experienced. And it's only Caynz and Yoruko who've been going there. I've never been, and Schmitt..." She looked over at the fourth member of their party.

"Schmitt has been there and is not super-eager to go back anytime this century," the Gnome tank said without the need for any further prompting, emphasizing his own name.

"That's too bad," Chellok said. "Even though it was just one of the upper levels, the data your friends brought back is the most we've learned about the Frozen Underways in months. They even marked mob spawn locations and harvesting nodes, which is invaluable data for organizing farming territory." The praise made Yoruko swell with pride, even though she knew that how dependent they were on Penny for the level of detail in those results.

"Everyone wants to farm," Agil added. He had a rich, deep voice; Yoruko wondered if he was a singer, or if anyone had ever suggested he try. "To most players, it's an easy, low-risk job getting paid well for doing what they'd probably be doing anyway. Mapping unknown areas? Compared to farming low-level zones it's dangerous, boring work to get data that only has value to someone who doesn't already have it. Hard to find anyone except solo players who want to take the gamble on doing it—let alone anyone who's as thorough about it as you are."

"You're really selling us on this assignment," Schmitt opined.

Yoruko was starting to find Schmitt's negative attitude a little tiresome. Chellok, thankfully, ignored the comment and let out a low sigh. "Look, we're facing a serious problem. We're running out of critical and not-so-critical supplies, and it's starting to look like some of them simply won't drop anymore in the areas we're currently farming. We can trade for them with other factions, but it's better for us to be as self-sufficient as possible. It isn't just supplies for our clearing groups, it's everything—stuff we need in bulk for faction projects, even the offerings from NPC vendors are all dependent on what gets brought in."

He glanced over as the last of the other groups continued milling out through the exit. "On top of that, the more players who level up to a point where they can start handling the content, the more competition there is in the contested areas, and the more qualified applicants we have for farming contracts. We already don't have enough easily-accessible farming territory for everyone, and we need to start expanding into areas that are harder to reach. There's only so far we can go up or out... so it's time we started looking deeper."

In the midst of her excitement, Yoruko suddenly realized something. "This isn't a day trip you're talking about."

Chellok shook his head. "No, it isn't. We're already farming almost everything that's within easy day trip distance. Sure, you could try to come back here every night, but the deeper you explore, the more of your day you'd spend just backtracking to get home. Depending on how deep you go, I'd expect you'll be gone at least a few days at a stretch, if you want to be most effective at it. That's another reason we have a hard time getting people to do it."

Schmitt's armored forearms crossed before him. "What you just described is clearing group work. That's what they do—go off for long stretches, mapping and collecting intel on unknown, dangerous territory. Why not send our clearers?"

"Schmitt!" Yoruko said a little more sharply than she intended. "This is a huge opportunity we've got here. Would it kill you to be gracious about it?"

"If we're talking about a field trip in the Frozen Underways, yeah, it just might."
"Well, nobody's making you go."

"His question is a fair one, though," Agil allowed. "This is pretty much a clearing group assignment. That's basically what we're asking them to go do here."

"Aye," Chellok said. "But the answer's simple: we just can't spare clearers outside of the World Tree. A new zone opened up there after the last boss, and we got the first scouting reports in last night—that's why everyone was here when you brought back your news. Every clearer in Nissengrof is already on their way back to Arun today, and if we send anyone off to a comparatively low-level zone like the Underways, they'll start falling behind in levels."

That single argument spoke for itself. Getting behind the level curve was one of the worst things that could happen to a clearer—if you fell too far behind, you had little chance of ever catching up unless the clearing groups themselves got delayed progressing. While Yoruko and the others absorbed this solemnly, he glanced over at Griselda, who exchanged an unreadable look with him.

"In case you're wondering, this isn't an order—anyone with reservations or prior obligations doesn't have to go, and it ain't like I can make you anyways. These two are the ones who did the mapping, and it's their skills we need; if they're willing to go deeper, we'll send a tank along to protect them if that's what we gotta do." He paused for effect. "That said, the four of you are a guild, and you contracted to work for us as one—and you do that pretty well so far, which I'm sure you know. If it's just these two kids with one of our people, we'll pay them well above fair market rate for map data. But prove yourselves as a guild, and I'll also give you first pick of any new farming territory we open. As an official expedition of sorts, we'll subsidize any consumables you need for your trip from our stores, too."

After Yoruko exchanged excited nods with her boyfriend, she turned pleading eyes upon Griselda. There was no way this would work if they had to go out with any of Chellok's people—they wouldn't be able to openly take advantage of Penny's help to produce the kind of data they were looking for. She couldn't even say so—she had to hope that Griselda was smart enough to pick up on that.

Chellok's eyes made a lap of the party members, coming to rest at last on Griselda—which made her the unanimous center of attention in a way that was clearly incredibly uncomfortable for the woman. "Well? I'd like to give you all the time in the world to think this over, but we've got work to do. If you're in, I need to know that so Agil can start getting you supplied. If not, then I'm wasting my time and need to go look for someone else."

Conflict and anxiety were plain as day on Griselda's face as she looked between the members of her party. Yoruko and Caynz were obviously on board with Chellok's offer, and Schmitt was just as clearly opposed. When Griselda met the latter's eyes, his shrug drew a metallic scraping sound from his pauldrons.

"No offense to Caynz and Yoruko, but I'm not solo-tanking the Underways for them. I'll go if Griz does, but not alone."

It was an answer which put Griselda right back on the spot. "I… this isn't a decision I can make by myself."

"It's your party," Chellok said gruffly. "You're the only one left who hasn't said what you want to do. Seems like it is your decision."

"That's not what I meant," Griselda said, a slight edge creeping into her voice. "I can't simply decide to disappear for a days-long assignment without talking to my husband first. It's rude."
Chellok started to sigh, but Agil seemed to catch the reaction and gave the shorter Gnome a nudge with the back of one broad hand. "Ever been married, chief?"

"Good grief, no," Chellok replied. "And this old man likes it that way."

"I thought as much," said Agil, a broad white grin splitting his face. "Speaking from experience, the arrangement usually involves not vanishing for days at a stretch without letting your spouse know." Chellok snorted. "Besides, if we're sending them out as a guild, he is their leader."

"The tall one has a point," Caynz said, moving to stand beside Griselda.

Aside from a raising of his thick brown eyebrows, Agil wisely decided not to remark on any of Caynz's idiosyncrasies. Chellok chuckled and relented. "All right, tell you what. For today, why don't you stick to the parts of the Underways that the kids were exploring yesterday—somewhere you can come back from around your usual time. Call that your farming territory for the day, except I want your expert mappers doing their thing. Bring back more like this, and I'll make sure you're paid well for it."

Agil nodded. "Meanwhile, I need to go check on your husband's latest Construct after this anyway, so I'll raise the subject of longer assignments with him then. Deal?"

This time, Griselda's response was not long in coming. The counter-offer seemed to release her from whatever remaining sense of obligation was holding her back, and she even ventured a thin smile. "Okay," she said. "We'll give it a shot. Now… what's this you were saying about supplying us with consumables?"

Kirito's day began with the smell of bacon.

So far as he was concerned, there were far worse ways to wake up. The aroma brought memories of his old life into his drowsy awareness—it hadn't been the least bit unusual for him to awaken to the smell of whatever his mother or sister were cooking, especially on a day off. Because of the way ALO's game engine handled odor propagation, a player wouldn't be able to smell anything of the sort from within an interior space unless they left a window open—something Kirito would never take the risk of doing in this death game, even though he knew all rented rooms would have their PvP flag toggled off by default.

As always, one of the first things to penetrate the fog of receding sleep was the awareness of his HUD. It was always there, projected onto a player's peripheral vision like an invisible, gently-curved plane hanging in front of their face—these days, he often even had dreams with a HUD, no doubt because of how ubiquitous it had become in his life. Even Blindness status would not interfere with the HUD layer of a player's interface, and by this point he took it for granted in much the same way that a person who wears glasses stops noticing the frames.

But when his eyes were closed and he was still coming awake, it was the only thing that existed in the darkness behind his eyelids.

In the upper left, of course, was his HP gauge and party display, with both his and Asuna's bars reassuringly full. Just to the right were the slanted rhomboid icons of the Active Effects row, with only a handful of effects currently showing—including one which Kirito hadn't expected to see; from the tooltip text it was apparently some kind of minor buff from eating a player-crafted meal, and was on the verge of expiring. In the center top—at least, in the UI layout Kirito preferred—was a clock that read 9:36, letting Kirito know just how much he'd overslept.
As he'd hoped, the stylized envelope icon of the «New Message» alert was flashing in the notification column, seeking his attention. Kirito experienced a momentary rush of excitement at the thought that Lisbeth had gotten back to him already, but that rush faded the moment he saw a completely unfamiliar name beside the icon. Disappointed, Kirito let out a sigh and indulged in a full-body stretch as he ignored the notification for now and began to open his eyes.

"Oh, you're awake!"

Details that Kirito had not yet awakened enough to process suddenly hit him, beginning with the reason why the maddeningly mouth-watering smell of braised pork belly was filling the inn room in the first place. He lurched upright from where he was lying on the floor, the sudden movement shedding the black overcoat that had been draped over him like a blanket. He looked down at it in short-lived confusion; he distinctly remembered being the one to cover Asuna with his coat the night before.

He also now remembered a few other things with equal clarity—such as the fact that Asuna had fallen asleep leaning on him, and that he'd been unable to completely extricate himself before giving up and just leaning back until he found his own slumber. He'd been hoping that he would wake up before she did, and that he'd have another chance to fix his embarrassing predicament before he had to explain himself to her.

Obviously that plan was now moot. But when he followed the sounds of Asuna's voice and the delightful cooking smells, he saw only a smile on her face. "Good morning, Kirito. I figured I'd try making *kakuni* with the rest of the Frost Drake Meat while I waited for you to wake up. You seemed like you needed the rest."

"I uh…" Kirito's mouth raced ahead of his brain for a moment, trying to reply before he'd quite figured out what to say. But Asuna didn't seem to share his discomfort—and she hadn't said a word about the way they'd gone to sleep, or what she might've been thinking when she woke up and found she was using his lap as a pillow. Assuming, that is, that neither of them had shifted position during the night.

None of this was playing out the way he'd imagined—or rather, the way he'd feared. But all things considered, this was one case where Kirito preferred reality over his imagination. And reality was currently looking at him expectantly, amusement on her face.

"I got enough," Kirito finally replied. "The floor isn't exactly comfortable, but at least in ALO you don't wake up with sore muscles if you sleep wrong." Hesitation stayed his next words a bit longer; he might well have been preparing to open Pandora's Box. "Did you sleep well?"

Asuna turned back to the pile of ingredients arranged on the counter and glanced at the cooking pot, but not before favoring him with another smile. "Yes, I did." She gestured in a way that looked like she was closing a number of UI windows, a process which took some time. "You'd make a better pillow if your gear didn't have so many buckles on it, though. Do the ones on your waistcoat actually even do anything?"

None of this was doing anything to help Kirito re-establish or maintain his mental equilibrium. He decided to answer the question posed at face value. "They look cool?" he answered, glancing down at the straps that criss-crossed each other.

The skeptical look that Asuna donned then was familiar ground for Kirito. "What?" he said. "It's a perfectly valid reason."

"If you say so," Asuna said unconvincingly.
"It's not like I designed the thing," Kirito said defensively. "Besides, it has really good stats and a stealth proc for the Hiding skill."

"I'm sure the decorative buckles really help with that." She was still smiling as she said this, which helped Kirito take the comment in the manner it was probably intended. "Any word from this crafter friend of yours?"

The question reminded Kirito that there was a message waiting for him, one which he'd set aside for the moment after seeing that it wasn't from Lisbeth. "No such luck," he said with a glance at his HUD. "Just a message from some random player."

"No idea who they are?"

"None," Kirito confirmed. "To be honest, I haven't even read it yet."

Asuna laughed, making a shooing gesture. "Why don't you finish waking up and reading your messages, then. This won't be ready for another few minutes anyway."

Kirito gave her a grateful look and nodded, returning his attention to his HUD. A glance and a blink expanded the unobtrusive notification icon into a message window in front of Kirito, the unfamiliar player's name in the header.

「You don't know me, and I'd just as soon keep it that way, so don't bother replying. But I heard you're looking for Prophet, and you'll find his ass parked in the Penwether jail until tomorrow around this time. Have fun with that, just leave me out of it.」

Kirito’s gaze snapped up to the message header, which said it was sent just after midnight. He must have made some kind of sound; Asuna looked up from checking the timer on the stove, concern in her tone. "What is it?"

"Someone sent me a tip," Kirito said, coming quickly to his feet and opening his game menu. "They said Prophet is locked up in the Penwether jail."

"You're kidding!" Asuna exclaimed, nearly dropping the bowl she had just materialized from her inventory. "Did they say how long he'd be there?"

"They said 'until tomorrow around this time.' That was sent a few minutes after midnight."

Asuna's expression clouded briefly in thought. "A day in jail… it sounds like he violated the anti-harassment code on someone."

"That is exactly what it sounds like," Kirito said as he re-equipped all of his gear with a flurry of gestures. "And that means I have to leave now. There's no telling if he'll ever make a mistake like this again."

His words provoked immediate resistance from her; she set the bowl on the counter and stepped around it towards him. "Oh no you don't. You are not leaving me here while you go face him alone, Kirito!"

Kirito didn't have time for this. A few long steps brought him in front of Asuna, and her eyes widened as his hands came to rest firmly on her shoulders. "Asuna, listen to me. This could be the break we need."

"Obvious trap is obvious," Asuna said. "How do you know this person isn't just another of Prophet's flunkies trying to bait us away from here?"
"I don't," Kirito replied. "But what if it's not? If it's not a trap, then we have Prophet exactly where we want him. And if it is a trap, you'll be defenseless while he'll have safe zone protection." Asuna looked deeply displeased at being reminded of that fact. Kirito pressed the advantage. "Even if we both go, there's no getting around the fact that you will always be the 'soft' target in Penwether—they'll go after you every single time. They've already tried once."

"An attempt that I survived because we stuck together," Asuna pointed out.

"This is different," Kirito said emphatically. "You're in Nissengrof now—this is one of the safest cities in Alfheim. If they come after you here, they won't be protected by the safe zone—you'll be on even footing. If I go to Penwether, there's nothing they can really do to me. But if you go, you'll be a walking target with no way to defend yourself."

"Which is why we should both go," Asuna said, hands on her hips. "I don't have to go into the city itself, but I should be there to back you up."

Kirito had no intention of budging on this point. Never again was he going to put Asuna in a position where she couldn't defend herself against Prophet or any other Spriggans who might be helping him, and bringing her back to Penwether would be doing exactly that. "Let's say we both do go, and it turns out to be a trap. Let's be optimistic and say we both survive. That puts the two of us right back where we were yesterday: with no leads other than finding the smith who forged this weapon, having wasted the three days it took to get here, go back to Penwether, then come back here."

He held Asuna's gaze, his eyes pleading with her to listen just this once. "We can't put all our hopes on one possibility, Asuna—we need to pursue both. But we don't have time to do both."

He could tell the argument was getting through—and that she wasn't very happy about it doing so. When Asuna looked down and away, he let his hands drop and re-opened his menu, materializing «Aloof Negotiator» in its sheathed form and presenting it to her. "You'll need this. Lisbeth's smithy is on the north side of the Cauldron, but if she's not there—and with this conference going on, she might not be—go to the Supply Depot and ask for a Gnome named Agil, tell him I sent you. Huge bald guy with dark skin, can't miss him. Both of them are well-connected within the NCC, and either should be able to find this smith we're looking for."

"I don't like this," Asuna said urgently, keeping up with him as he plucked his overcoat from the floor and re-equipped it. "You're the one who knows these people, Kirito. You should be here to talk to them." When he turned and began to move towards the door, she reached out and grabbed at the elbow of his coat. "Kirito, wait!"

"No!" Kirito said with even greater urgency, capturing her hand with his when he spun to face her after being accosted. After seeing the look on her face, he went on more calmly. "Asuna, please, listen to me. The anti-harassment code only imprisons someone for 24 hours. Whoever this person is, they sent their message after midnight. It's almost ten in the morning now, but with the coastal storm behind me I should still be able to make it in time—barely. But only if I leave right now."

He'd been expecting further argument, and was prepared for it. But Asuna wasn't looking at him now, and if she had words to say they weren't coming out. Her cheeks were flushed pink as if from the cold, and her eyes were dwelling on his hand where it had closed around hers. A space of a heartbeat passed where he felt a momentary urge to snatch back his hand as if burned…but the urge came, and this time it went just as quickly. In the awkward space it left behind, he found himself still holding Asuna's hand, neither of them making any move to pull away.

Instead, Asuna finally turned her hand slightly so that rather than being constrained, it ended up clasped in his, palm to palm. She seemed to take no more notice of the anti-harassment pop-up than
he did; eventually it minimized.

Perhaps it was the fact that Kirito was already running on a sudden adrenaline spike, or that he was intently focused on getting out the door and on his way to Penwether. Maybe it was the events of the night before that had made this… *closeness* with Asuna a bit less alarming. Whatever the cause, Asuna's motion managed not to fluster him as it might have otherwise. He squeezed her hand once, wordlessly, a gesture which she returned before they both let their hands go slack and drop.

"Don't take any chances," Asuna said, calmer now but still looking bothered by the necessity of splitting the party again. "If it looks like a trap, if you have any doubts at all, or if things go badly... don't mess around with them. Don't try to be clever, don't try to be the hero—just come back right away, and we'll try something else." Her eyes locked on his, and he found it impossible to tear his gaze away from the earnest worry in their depthless blue. "Okay?"

Long moments passed as they remained like that, Kirito's thoughts a whirlwind struggling to reach a state of rest. At last Kirito inclined his head. "Okay."

An electronic tone sounded from behind Asuna, originating from the stove in the inn room's open kitchen. She didn't look away, but at least managed the ghost of a smile. "You shouldn't fight evil on an empty stomach, Kirito. At least let me pack a **bento** for you to take with you."

Kirito opened his mouth to object to any further delay, but found himself overruled by a stronger objection from the void in said stomach before he could muster even a single word.

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When Chimiro returned and slid the door shut behind him, the Sylph assistant was mercifully unaccompanied by anyone who might've threatened to complain about anything whatsoever. Sakuya returned her steeply-inclined chair to an upright position and continued rubbing at her temples, mildly annoyed that it wasn't doing anything to make her head hurt less.

That was one of the worst things about Alfheim, in her opinion—the fact that nothing you ate or drank virtually could create real chemicals or drugs in your brain meant that you couldn't get drunk, but it also meant there was essentially *nothing* a player could do about it if they had a headache. You couldn't even do more than distract yourself from it by applying pressure. You just had to deal with it until it went away.

*Ibuprofen, I'm so sorry I ever took you for granted.* There were times when she would've gladly traded the lack of injury pain in ALO for the simple luxury of being able to swallow an over-the-counter painkiller and let it do its thing.

"Please tell me that's the last of them," Sakuya said, fruitlessly squeezing her eyes shut again.

"If by that you mean to ask whether there are any further petitioners waiting," Chimiro said, drawing to a stop before her desk and clasped his hands at the small of his back. "Then no, Lady Sakuya, there are none at present."

Sakuya allowed herself to smile and make the tiniest of happy sounds. That was the best news she'd heard in hours.

Chimiro cleared his throat. "You did ask me to set aside a few minutes for a late morning appointment with Argo and Thelvin before they leave. It is time."

A glance at her HUD told her that Chimiro was—as usual—completely on the ball when it came to scheduling. That was a quality she greatly appreciated. It was no mystery why Skarrip had delegated
most of the high-level administrative work to him, and she was only just starting to get an idea of the extent of that delegation. She had spent a significant amount of time studying the Faction Leader menu and game manual since her succession, and for a moment she'd been shocked when she discovered that Skarrip had granted Chimiro nearly every Faction Leader privilege or permission that the game allowed him to assign to a selected deputy—permissions which the game then, upon opening that submenu for the first time, prompted her to confirm one by one.

The man was, for all intents and purposes, the shadow leader of the Sylph faction; for the time being Sakuya had little choice but to continue to rely on him if she wanted things to keep running smoothly while she figured out what she was doing. The discovery had left her very unnerved by how little she understood of the implications of all these permissions, and one of the first things she meant to do that evening was further familiarize herself with them.

"Lady Sakuya?"

Sakuya banished her wool-gathering with a creak of her chair as she sat up completely. "Yes, Chimiro, I'm sorry, please send them in." A few footsteps later, she leaned forward and hastily spoke again. "Wait."

Chimiro turned and regarded her patiently. "Yes, my lady?"

While Chimiro's larping was considerably less annoying than some others she knew, she still sometimes wished she could do away with all the pretentious titles. Nevertheless, at least in his case it seemed harmless and well-meaning, and she reminded herself to let the little things go. She chewed at her lower lip while she thought of how to phrase what she was going to ask. "How much of Skarrip's job did you really do, Chimiro?"

"Lord Skarrip was a man of great vision," Chimiro replied, seeming at first to be answering a different question than she'd asked. "It was he who came up with the idea of a cell-based organizational model for the Sylph Militia, which allowed a community of individuals and parties to respond to Salamander attacks much more flexibly, and absorb losses with less disruption. He knew this world's lore better than anyone else, and he used his knowledge to focus our early clearing efforts where they would do the most good. We owe to his experience and brilliant plans the fact that we all survived the first month of the game."

Sakuya realized what Chimiro was trying to say in between the glowing words of praise. "Implementation was not his strength."

Chimiro hesitated. "I wouldn't really put it that way," he said. "He was extremely competent. It was more that he seemed to find the sterile logistical details uninteresting. The only time he invested himself strongly was when it was necessary to decide who to assign to a given task, or when there was a player dispute to mediate. Lord Skarrip was always very interested in what I would classify as 'human resource' issues—questions of who was doing what, when, where, and with whom, or the larger implications of such."

_All the better for Loki to manipulate them and screw with their heads._ "Was there a point where that seemed to change in any way? A time after which he seemed to develop this obsession, or where it seemed to intensify?"

Chimiro's jowls shook with his head. "Not that I ever noticed. He became more and more narrowly focused over time, but there was no point I could single out as a milestone of any sort."

Sakuya's head bobbed slowly along as Chimiro spoke. "Okay. Thank you."
"Was there something you were trying to learn, Lady Sakuya?"

"Learn?" Sakuya took a moment to order her thoughts and review her motivations, staring into space in an unfocused way. "Perhaps. I'm still trying to make sense of everything that happened." Her eyes drifted back to Chimiro after a few moments of unanswered silence. "Did you know Skarrip in the beta, Chimiro?"

It wasn't the sort of thing you were generally supposed to ask; larpers in particular seemed to respond poorly to anything that reminded them of the real world. The tense set of Chimiro's jaw reminded her of as much. But his face soon relaxed. "That is not an experience I have in common with you and Sigurd, Lady Sakuya."

Meaning he probably hadn't been in the beta at all. Sakuya was a little surprised, considering how well he seemed to know the faction leader interface. "Well, as you say—I did. Not well, mind you. I wouldn't have called us close. But I partied with him a few times, and spent a fair amount of time in his presence here in Sylvain. He didn't turn into a larp until after the game launched."

A disapproving frown further creased Chimiro's lined face. "We all respond to the stresses of life-or-death situations differently, my lady."

The man was very easy to read, even to her. "You don't care for the term 'larper', do you?"

Chimiro seemed to think over his words before speaking. "The term itself is value-neutral. The way it is used is what makes it mildly offensive. If I might offer a piece of advice?"

Sakuya extended a hand, palm-up, in a gesture encouraging him to go on.

"As I am certain you are aware, Lady Sakuya, you are in a precarious position. That position does not afford you the luxury of alienating potential allies, and it is poor form in any event for a leader to mock those they lead, regardless of whether or not you approve of their quirks. I would suggest that you make every effort to erase the term 'larper' from your vocabulary entirely."

His gaze was uncustomarily direct, and Sakuya found herself having to look away from it. He was right—the term was, at best, gentle mockery. She knew what her opinion of larpers was like, and coming from her mouth, at times it had the flavor of a slur. "To be replaced with what?"

"It is an overly-broad generalization. Need it be replaced with anything?"

Sakuya imagined that she looked as blank as she felt. "I am not following you."

Chimiro sighed heavily and looked around as he visibly struggled for words. "Lady Sakuya, there are a great many Sylphs who, to one extent or another, find harmony in becoming a part of Alfheim and its ways for as long as we must be here. Dwelling on the artificiality of this world only serves as a painful reminder of the lives that were taken from us. However." His gaze sharpened again. "That is about all I have in common with someone who, say, swears to Norse gods or tries to hold conversations with NPCs."

"Which is the sort of roleplay that Skarrip did more and more as time went on."

He shrugged. "Call it roleplaying if you must—I don't think there's anyone so far gone that they actually believe themselves to be a fairy. But if indulging in the illusion of this world makes our burden even a little bit easier to bear, what gives you or anyone else the right to judge?"

Sakuya nodded after it was clear he had no more to say, appropriately chastened. "I see. Thank you for your honesty. I apologize if I gave offense." She felt more than a little ashamed of her attitude,
now that she had a better perspective on what lay behind the pretenses, and wondered just how many people she had needlessly hurt by being so judgmental. She resolved to try to amend her use of language—surely there had to be some way of collectively referring to larpers without offending them.

"Will there be anything else, my lady?"

"No, thank you." Fully processing this new insight was going to take time that she did not presently have, and she set the conversation aside as fully as she could. "Please send in the Caits."

"Yes, my lady. Please try to keep the meeting brief—the clearing group leaders will be arriving soon to review reconnaissance data from the new zone."

Now that was a meeting that Sakuya was eagerly looking forward to. She'd participated in well over a hundred of these meetings as a senior clearing group leader, and this, at least, was something where she knew more or less what was expected of her.

She didn't allow herself more than a few moments to think about that; Argo and Thelvin were already on their way in. "Thank you for stopping by," said Sakuya. "I know you're anxious to be on your way, and I have another meeting soon, so let's keep this high-level and drill down if we need to. What do you have for me?"

Argo had some kind of food or candy in her mouth; she shifted it over to her cheek so that she could answer. "Okay, here's the headlines. Mood on the street can be best summed up in three words: wait and see."

"That's all?"

"You wanted the overview first," Argo pointed out. "Honestly, Sakuya? The Sylphs, collectively, don't know what the hell to think. A leader most of them never really knew was killed by the clearer who took out the last boss, and now she's the leader. That's pretty much all anyone knows for certain. There are tons of conflicting stories about how it happened, and they keep getting crazier every time someone repeats them. But that's all good news for you."

Sakuya gave Argo a puzzled look. "Explain, please."

"If there's only one story, most peeps are gonna believe it unless they've got an obvious reason not to, even if it's an idiotic conspiracy theory—because that's all they've got. If there are two or more stories, which one do you think they're gonna believe?"

"The more reasonable one?"

"Sure," Argo said. "But reasonable according to who? See, here's the thing: the average chump is gonna latch on to the least ridiculous story that matches what they already think. Their minds are made up before they even hear a word of the story. But most of them still wanna think they're reasonable people with good judgment. Get me?"

"Yes, I get that 'sheeple' are stupid and gullible, but I'm still not really understanding why this means it's good for me that there are so many crazy stories about what happened."

Argo blew out a puff of breath, which had to be a deliberate expression rather than respiration. "Because nobody wants to believe they're an idiot, Sakuya. Nobody wants to think they're a sucker who's easy to fool. And the stupider they are, the more likely they are to think that they're not—it's called the Dunning-Kruger effect. So when they hear a version of the story they just know is total transparent bullshit, it makes them wonder what else they're hearing that's total bullshit. They start
looking more skeptically at any story that has stuff in common, assuming that those are also likely to be bullshit—not only because they don't want to be fooled, but because it makes them feel smart if they spot it for themselves."

"So what you're saying," Sakuya began, speaking slowly while her thoughts coalesced, "is that the more ridiculous stories that are easy to dismiss are, in a sense, like a vaccine—weaker versions of something dangerous which serve to inoculate the public... so that they will ignore the more plausible story that poses a greater risk."

Argo went completely silent for a few beats. "I'm so stealing that," she said. "I've never heard a better analogy for this technique."

The word technique spurred a new line of thought for Sakuya, one she didn't care for at all. Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Argo," she said, "I don't suppose you have a name for the player who started the more ridiculous rumors?"

By now, Sakuya had learned to recognize the completely blank look that Argo put on when she really didn't want to answer a question, despite the way that her feline features made her harder to read. It was short-lived, but she was certain of it. Then the Cait Sith girl smiled toothily, tiny fangs peeking out. "I do have that information," she said. "I'll tell you for 250,000 Yuld."

"Argo." Sakuya and Thelvin both spoke the name more or less in unison, and in much the same tone of voice. Sakuya looked at him in surprise before eyeing Argo again.

The subject of their scolding did her best to look confused, alternating glances between each of them.

"What?"

Sakuya wasn't buying. "I'll save you the trouble. You spread those rumors. That's what you meant by 'technique'—it was deliberate."

Argo shrugged. "I said I would tell you for a fee, but keep in mind I don't burn sources."

"Shall I call your bluff? You know perfectly well that I could come up with a quarter million Yuld if I had to."

"I do now."

Damn. Sakuya's eyes went over to Thelvin. To anyone else, he probably looked completely indifferent to what was going on. The way he was subtly tapping each fingertip against the pad of his thumb in a repeating cycle told her otherwise; it was an old tell of Michisuke's that indicated he was getting irritated. She regarded Argo again.

"If it was a source, you would've just refused instead of setting a price. You just want to make finding out more painful than it's worth."

Argo's sigh was filled with exasperation. "If it was information that was important for you to have, I would've told you already instead of setting a fuck-you price on it. Can we move on?"

Sakuya tamped down a surge of anger. "Considering the stakes, I would prefer to decide for myself what information is important."

"We're wasting time getting sidetracked," Argo said, tail irregularly thumping against the back of her chair as it tried to thrash a hole in the seat. "Do you want to know the rest or not?"

She and Sakuya stared at each other.
This went on for a number of what felt to Sakuya like very long seconds, and ended only when Thelvin cleared his throat, drawing the curious gazes of both women. "I don't wish to interrupt your bonding moment," he said softly, "but I'd like to point out that you're both well aware your avatars don't have to blink. We don't have much time and you're both wasting it on this puerile dominance game. Please grow up and do it quickly."

This time, the caustic looks that both Sakuya and Argo gave Thelvin were more hostile than distracted. Sakuya was too stunned to respond. Thelvin was usually painfully polite; surely he'd known what kind of reaction he was going to get. The Cait Sith man, in response, simply regarded them mildly and shrugged. "Or not. Your choice."

Sakuya was on the verge of telling him just how out of line he was when she was stopped in her tracks by a sudden thought… and once it penetrated, she started to laugh. She simply couldn't help it, and by the time she choked off the reaction, it was too late to take it back. In response to the confused expressions her truncated laughter drew from the others, she waved a hand at the air. "I'm sorry. It just occurred to me that Thelvin, who has always played tank roles, just responded to a conflict by using a taunt to take aggro off of his friends." She at least managed a faint smile, looking at Argo. "Who've managed to aggro each other."

The corner of Thelvin's mouth moved; Sakuya was certain of it. Argo snickered, and then sat up. "Social agg is the worst," she deadpanned. While Sakuya rolled her eyes at the awful joke, she went on. "So yeah, basically everything I'm getting as far as reactions to the Skarrip thing is that by and large they're probably gonna sit on their hands, wait and see if you turn out to be a Mortimer or a Kibaou."

Sakuya winced. "Not the analogy I would've preferred."

"Aside from that, I got a few people running down leads on some things Skarrip might've had his paws in while he was larping it up."

"That's awfully vague."

"That's 'cause vague is all I got there that's solid enough to pass on. But there's information you probably have access to that could help a lot in sorting out just what he was up to. I was hoping I could pick your brain—actually, your faclead interface—and this I will pay you for."

Sakuya found her phrasing curious. After a glance up at the top of her vision, she gave a tiny nod. "We don't have the time now. Send me a message later with the specifics, and we'll discuss whether or not I can give you what you need." She raised one thin green eyebrow. "You sound certain that he was up to something."

"Yeah, I've been kicking this around in my head all night," Argo said, slipping off of the chair and starting to pace around; Sakuya gathered it was something she did to help herself think. "You said it was Sigurd who told you that Skarrip hired these assassins, right?" When Sakuya nodded carefully, Argo stopped mid-pace and turned back to Sakuya. "Who told him?"

It wasn't a question that Sakuya had been expecting to be asked, and it caught her off-guard. "I… you'd have to ask him."

There was a sudden, muted crunching sound. It took Sakuya a moment to realize that Argo had shifted whatever was in her mouth and started to chew it, all while staring blankly. "Yeah. 'Cause that's gonna happen. Anyway, what I'm getting at is: there's a chain of events here, and it took more than just one larping douchecopter to make it all happen. So Skarrip hired these assassins. Who sourced them for him? Who paid them, and how? Who were his contacts, flunkies, and
"gofers?" In response to Sakuya's own studiously-blank look, Argo threw up her hands. "Fine, Sakuya, so there's stuff you can't tell me. We all got our reasons. But you asked for my help figuring this shit out. Might wanna start thinking about which of your secrets could be the detail we need to break this whole thing open."

"You'll pardon me," Sakuya said evenly, "if I find a lecture about secret-keeping unpersuasive coming from you." Then her smile twitched again. "If it was information that was important for you to have, please be assured—I would have told you already."

Argo gave a clipped, unladylike snort. "I deserved that."

Before she could go on, a soft knock sounded just before Chimiro slid the door open. "The clearing group leaders are here, my lady."

"Thank you, Chimiro. Please tell them I'll be with them in just a moment." After the man bowed and withdrew, Sakuya rose from her seat. "I'm afraid you'll have to either return later or send me the rest in PM, Argo."

"PM then," Argo said. "We both gotta be getting to Arun. With the changing mob spawns, we'll be lucky to make it by nightfall as it is, especially if we have to avoid Lugru." She glanced up at Thelvin as the armored footsteps of the much taller Cait Sith brought him to her side. "Ready?"

"As can be."

"One moment," Sakuya said, stepping around her desk and gesturing towards the door. "I'd like a word with Thelvin. Argo, if you would please."

Argo's mobile ears raised as her eyebrows did. "Whatever," she said, and made herself scarce.

Thelvin had one of his own eyebrows raised in the same expression of bemused curiosity. When the door clicked shut behind Argo, Sakuya closed the space between them until she stood a respectful conversational distance away. She knew what she wanted to say, but not quite how to say it.

"If this is about your clearing groups," Thelvin began, glancing back over his shoulder at the door beyond which Sigurd and the others were no doubt waiting, "Alicia and I have been discussing what we can do to better coordinate with them going forward."

"I'm sure she and I will have a lovely talk about that later," Sakuya said. "Just as I'm sure you know that there were already talks about an alliance before…" She waved a hand expansively, as if to encompass all the events of the last few days. "Before. Perhaps we'll even get to make that happen."

"Perhaps," Thelvin said. "To that end, it might be helpful to set aside your differences with Argo. It is not her fault that your friendship with Alicia is not as close as it was before the beta. It was almost inevitable when you chose to play different factions."

Defensiveness flared up in Sakuya, an emotion which she tried not to direct at him. She couldn't be certain whether or not there was a double meaning there—a reference to one of the contributing factors in their own breakup. "I'm trying, I truly am. But you know how she is, Thelvin. The little brat thinks she's the smartest kid in class and wants to be sure everyone knows it wherever she goes."

"Let her."

Sakuya blinked, certain that she looked as confused as she suddenly felt. "What?"

"If it is important to Argo that she feels smart, let her," Thelvin elaborated. "She means well, and you
both want the same outcome here... so indulge her idiosyncrasies if it gets results. Patience costs you nothing except pride."

"And time," Sakuya said. "She's wasting time I don't have, and keeping things from me that could get me killed."

"Aya," Thelvin said, quietly but firmly.

The shock of hearing her own name after so many months—even the shortened version she vastly preferred over Ayanomiya—brought her eyes sharply to his. "What is it, Michisuke?"

As she well knew, the man was annoyingly difficult to fool. "You didn't delay me in order to say all of this," he said. "Is there something specific that you'd prefer to keep from Argo?"

Sakuya paused just as she brought up her right hand. "Many things, but that's not the reason," she said after taking time to think. "There's just something I wanted to do before you went."

Thelvin's brow rose just a touch higher. "Do, or say?"

Her hand was still in the air before her, frozen in place as if seized. She let it hang there for a few more beats, carefully considering the action she was about to take. Then, in one smooth motion, she drew her first two fingers downward, and focused on Thelvin's cursor while she operated the game menu.

Thelvin regarded the friend request silently.

"You don't have to accept," Sakuya said. "But it might make communication easier now that I have to keep my PMs locked down."

It was impossible to gauge what was going on behind Thelvin's eyes. They came back up and remained there, as if his keen scrutiny was aimed at sorting out what her own motivations might be. That was fair—Sakuya wasn't entirely certain she knew, herself.

When her gaze refocused, a soft chime played in her ear and she saw a notification alerting her that Thelvin had accepted her request. He bowed once, holding the position there for a single breath. "It's always good to know who your friends are," he said.

"Or to be reminded of who they've always been," Sakuya replied. "Safe clearing."

「Thank you, but I'm fine,」Asuna wrote, the concerned inquiry in Yuuki's message bringing a smile to her face. 「I'm worried about him, of course, and I'm still not sure if I forgive him for ditching me here like that. But he wasn't wrong, either. For all we know, the tip he got could be a ruse to distract us from tracking down the player who made Fausta's sword. What about you? Any progress?」

「Nah,」Yuuki responded after a few minutes. 「I'm still waiting for my contact to get back to the city—Kumiko says she's expected back tomorrow.」

It wasn't the first time Yuuki had mentioned the other Imp clearer by name—in fact, she'd done so almost every day when they exchanged PMs. From what she'd said, the woman was very senior in the Imp hierarchy, which made Asuna a little nervous—they were still allied with the Salamanders, after all. 「Are you sure it's safe to trust her?」
Yuuki's eventual reply came while Asuna was in the process of trying to decide what to equip for her journey out into the city. "Kumiko's been really kind to me. She pays for food and stuff even though I've got money, and she's just... I wish you could just meet her, Asuna, then you'd understand. She gets very protective about the people she cares about —she kind of reminds me of you like that, and I think you'd get that about her right away. It bothers me a bit, how much she seems to hate Salamanders—she doesn't really see them as people. But I understand what she's been through, too."

It was also far from the first time that Yuuki had hinted at some kind of traumatic experience from her first days in Everdark—an experience that she'd never described to Asuna in detail, and about which Asuna had never felt it was right to pry. As for the rest... it was difficult to fault someone for having hard feelings against the Salamanders, after everything that had happened because of Kibaou's invasion. Especially an Imp—despite the fact that a significant number of them had been conscripted into privateer and PK groups, Asuna knew from Yuuki that many of them were victims just as much as the Sylphs and Undines had been.

Asuna had to wonder just how much more extreme her own feelings might have been, if she'd come into the game as an Imp and not only had to go through the kind of things that Yuuki and Kumiko must have, but ended up having to work under the Salamanders ever since.

How badly might she hate them, if she'd had to live through that for the last six months?

"Well, please give her our thanks for any help that she can provide—and my personal thanks for looking out for you. I should get going—no telling how long it'll take me to find this smith. As always, be careful. I miss you!"

Once their exchange was concluded, Asuna leaned against the sill of the inn room's window and rested her chin on her folded arms there. Kirito hadn't been gone for long; she could still smell the breakfast that she'd cooked for the two of them, hastily converted into a portable version. It still struck her as a little bit odd, the way the windows didn't seem to radiate the cold in quite the same way as the real world. Sitting where she was, she should've been shivering as cold air poured down on her like an invisible waterfall. Instead, the ambient temperature in the room seemed to remain constant as long as it remained sealed off—she'd tried opening the window briefly just to see if the game would let her, and her answer had come with a surge of cold air and snow particles that didn't remain for long after she hastily shut it.

As with many of the other surreal elements of Alfheim physics, it did feel a little odd—but Asuna wasn't complaining. There was something peaceful and relaxing about sitting by the window, gazing out at the gentle chaos of the falling snow and the only slightly less-chaotic dance of NPCs and players alike hurrying about their business. She admired their defiance of the way the northwesterly storm was picking up and deepening the white carpet that covered the surface streets—their insistence on pushing forward with whatever they had to do was inspiring when she thought about it.

And just as she'd told Yuuki, it was getting about time she did the same herself. Asuna sat up a little straighter so that she could open her game menu, re-equipping not only her usual default gear set, but also the cheap parka and leggings with built-in bonuses to Cold Resistance that would make the outside temperature feel a bit more comfortable to her. Even with the Undine-blue hem trim she thought the thick white clothes made her look pretty goofy, and they seemed to reduce her AGI a bit, but it was better than being even more uncomfortable—or worse, losing HP if the temperature dropped too low.

Any remaining concerns over looking silly were dispelled by the fact that most of the other players she saw were similarly swaddled against the simulated elements. Even once she descended from the
surface streets into the city proper, the majority still wore what looked like an extra layer of warmth until her path took her deeper into the city. There came a point where the heat radiating from the Cauldron compelled even Asuna to finally shed the parka, but she decided the leggings could stay; a few seconds of test exposure had convinced her that bare legs weren't advisable even in the allegedly-warmer air far from the surface.

It wasn't until she reached the wide open, busy hallways of the Service Quarter that less bulky attire became the norm. There still the designs were considerably different than in the more temperate areas of Alfheim's rainy, overcast eastern coast or even the melting pot of Arun; Asuna thought she could identify distinct racial styles, and while she continued onward she kept an eye out for an NPC tailor.

Another Asuna, another day, might have remained doggedly focused on the task at hand, with no room for distractions or detours. Even if Kirito had stayed, they probably wouldn't have gotten sidetracked despite his inclinations to such.

The circumstances had changed, now. With Kirito in transit to Penwether for the majority of the day, and her needing to stay where she was until they learned whether or not Kirito would find Prophet at his destination, Asuna realized that she was going to have a lot of time to kill.

Which didn't mean that she could afford to goof off all day. It did, however, mean that when she spotted a Leprechaun player with a fur-lined outfit that managed not to make his slender frame look like he was wearing his parents' clothing, she had to stop and ask where it had dropped.

The dark-haired Leprechaun put two fingertips to the bridge of his glasses and pushed them up slightly. Asuna nearly laughed out loud when the adjustment made them catch the cool glare of the overhead orelight, but thankfully managed to restrain the urge. "I'm sorry, young lady, but I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"Can't?" Asuna asked, taken aback by the unexpected answer. "Or won't?"

"Can't," confirmed the older player with a faint smile. "Due to the fact that each piece is crafted, and thus did not drop from any mob."

"Well, it all looks really nice," Asuna said. "Is the Cold Resist good?"

"With the full set, fifteen percent base," answered the man. "Before upgrades," he added unnecessarily.

Asuna was impressed. She couldn't even get 15% Cold Resist out of her entire clearing gear set without all the added bulk of the parka and leggings, and she could feel how much slower she was from the AGI penalty all that encumbrance was adding. "I think you just sold me," she said. "Could I trouble you for the name of the crafter?"

"She calls herself Ashley," answered the Leprechaun man. Periodically his gaze would wander while he or Asuna spoke, as if he'd been waiting for someone before being interrupted. From the smile that her non-reaction drew from the man, Asuna guessed that he'd been expecting her to know the name. "If you didn't already know that, you must be new in Nissengrof, young lady. Ashley's style is unmistakable."

"My name is Asuna," she said with a slight bow, trying not to bristle at being called ojousan again—the appellation reminded her far too much of her family, and the empty pleasantries of the suitors they brought to meet her. "And yes, I just arrived last night." An idea struck her then as she straightened. "And thank you for the recommendation. I'm terribly sorry to trouble you further, but I don't suppose you're familiar with the blacksmiths in the city?"
Now the man laughed, and it was his turn to bow to her. "Miss, you are now speaking to one of them. My name is Grimlock, and my specialty is Constructs."

"Constructs?" Asuna had heard Jahala and a few other clearers use the word to refer to magically-infused mechanical devices in passing, but she had never seen one. "Is that what you call those?"

Following her gaze and upturned palm towards the clanking, vaguely dog-shaped robot accompanying a full party of players that looked like they were selling off vendor trash, Grimlock nodded, again adjusting the thin rims of his glasses after the motion. "It is. Though they are more properly named Mecharcane Constructs. Lovely things—quite useful to solo players and parties alike. If you're interested, I might be able to help you. What kind of work are you looking to have done?"

Asuna hastened to clarify her intention. "I'm not…" Then she stopped there, rethinking how she ought to answer that question. "Thank you, but I'm looking for a particular smith. His name is Nezha—do you know where I could find him?"

Apparently that was a name known to Grimlock. Storm clouds crossed his face momentarily, and when they passed by his smile did not return. "Where did you hear that name?" came the oddly terse reply.

A chill washed over Asuna at the reaction Nezha's name brought. Could my luck be so bad that I ran into one of this guy's co-conspirators? She considered the words that came next extremely carefully. "I saw some of his work, and it was really nice. I was hoping to meet him."

After a moment, Asuna realized that Grimlock's smile hadn't completely fled—but it was currently a weak, understated thing that was easily missed. "The storm winds bring curious visitors to this city of steel and stone. You were so impressed by Nezha's handiwork that you had to come all the way from Parasel to Nissengrof in hopes of meeting him?"

Asuna was getting annoyed, and more than a little fearful. "What if I did?"

Grimlock's expression softened slightly. "Then I must tell you that you have, regrettably, wasted your time. Even if you could find Nezha, you don't want to take your business to him. There are many, many better choices here in the Service Quarter. Smiths who will give you far better service."

Asuna realized, uncomfortably, that she might have been reading too much into Grimlock's reaction. It was starting to sound more like she'd stepped into the middle of a business rivalry. Still—that in itself could be useful if she played her cards right. "And I suppose next you're going to tell me that you would be one of those much better choices."

"I am," Grimlock said, bowing again. "But I am far from the only one, and depending on what kind of item you need, there are others whose specialty might better serve you—in which case I will be quite glad to give them a recommendation. But I beg of you, young miss: forget about doing business with Nezha. Whatever it was you saw in his work, I promise you that there are other artists with greater skill and better ethics."

"That may be," Asuna allowed. "But I'm afraid I absolutely have to find this one person in particular. Why are you so keen on chasing me away from him? What did he do that's so bad you don't even want me looking for him?"

The Leprechaun regarded her from behind the circular lenses of his glasses, humming a tone slightly as he visibly mulled over how to respond. "Come with me."
Asuna took an immediate step back. "Why should I?"

Grimlock gave her a knowing, secret smile. "Because you want to know why you shouldn't do business with Nezha, and what it was that he did. Which is quite fair. The short answer, my dear girl, is that he's a scammer who's been blacklisted from doing business in the NCC. The long answer… is easier to show than to explain, and since you seem to mistrust me, it is probably best that you speak to one who was involved. Would you take a walk with me?"

Asuna's curiosity was piqued. When she stopped to think about it, the point wasn't necessarily to find Nezha himself, in person—they needed to find out whether or not he could lead them in some way to Prophet's group. If this Grimlock person was telling the truth about what Nezha had done, it made it a lot more likely that he was up to something potentially shady. And if she could learn more, she might even be able to get the NCC leadership to take action.

Their assistance could make a huge difference. The offer was almost too good to pass up… which only served to feed Asuna's desire for caution. "Perhaps," she said a little warily, aware that Grimlock was waiting on her. "As long as we stay somewhere public. Where are we going?"

"We're going to where I expect you will find your answers," Grimlock answered as he pivoted loosely on his heel and headed towards the main boulevard that spiraled around the Cauldron perimeter. "We're going to the Nissengrof Supply Depot."

With all of the clearing group leaders present, Sakuya was the only person in the warmly wood-paneled conference room who didn't have the latest map data; the others would already have shared it amongst themselves. The first thing that Sigurd did was open a trade window and offer her nearly a million units of merged exploration data from a zone apparently called «The Halls of Judgment», which got her caught up with everyone else. Her map window took a few moments to update the sheer volume of new data, and once it did she turned her attention to Sigurd just as he made his own map as large as possible before setting it visible and turning it towards the others.

"The Halls of Judgment is a large hub zone that uses the Tumulus Interior 7 theme with a mixture of Religion and Prison assets to depict a vast Norse burial mound—although obviously," Sigurd added, "there is no such mound, this being the World Tree and not an overland zone. Mob spawns follow a typical density distribution and fall into expected level ranges—roughly 35 to 40 so far—with a six to one ratio of scripted trash to demihumans. The demihumans are a special case, and I'll get to that."

What followed was the part that Sakuya usually gave only part of her attention, and which she now knew she had to absorb a bit more deeply: a lot of numbers. One by one Sigurd ran through the trash mobs, their known archetypes and how they deviated from base types, approximate levels, observed attacks and damage, and experience reward ranges for each of them.

It was a lot to take in at once for someone who hadn't spent the last few days learning it firsthand.

"Usually we'd want to be farming the undead trash," Sigurd was saying. "However, in this zone your best EXP grind appears to come from the Greater Graveworms. As noted, they are a weak mob that spawns in encounters of five, and they seem to aggro on vibrations. While their numbers could make them lethal to an isolated player or under-strength party, a fully/geared clearing group can AOE them down in no time with minimal risk. Chihae, how many levels did you say your group gained clearing your part of the barrows?"

The tank who'd inherited leadership of Sakuya's group glanced at her new faction leader, and her armor plates slithered as she shifted uncomfortably, clearly a bit put off by suddenly being in the
spotlight. "All of us gained at least one. Batori is almost to a second, which is probably because he's new to the group and underleveled. As long as you have decent AOE DPS you're good to go."

"Everyone had better start drilling on AOE nukes when you're fighting trash mobs," Sigurd dictated to the chorus of nods that followed Chihae's statement. "I know I've been encouraging single-target focus for MP efficiency, but in an area like this that's heavy on linked encounters rather than tougher isolated mobs, we'll clear more efficiently by shepherding them."

"I'm sorry," asked the owner of a raised hand, a painfully young-looking mage from one of the second-tier groups whose name escaped Sakuya. "But by what-ing them?"

"Aegor," Sigurd said with obvious displeasure, "I'd like you to reassure me that I have not mistakenly invited Recon to this meeting rather than a clearing group leader, however new you might be." He bit off four syllables in succession. "O-i-kō-mu. It's not a complicated word and I refuse to believe you've never heard it used like this before."

"And what if he hasn't?" Sakuya said, butting in and drawing the gazes of everyone in the room. She glanced across everyone's faces at least once, and then turned to the abashed-looking Sylph. "Aegor, he just means train-farming. It's a variation on chain pulls, except you aggro a bunch of small mobs and AOE them down all at once. I'm guessing that's what Chihae's group was doing to level up so fast."

_Chiihae's group_. The words felt so odd to say. Only a few days ago, that would've been _Sakuya's group_ , as it had been since very early in the game—and she could definitely sympathize with the other Sylph's unease at the sudden change in roles. Chihae excelled as an off-tank, but she'd always had an extremely hard time pronouncing certain spell incantations—including some of the buffs that were essential for for a forward role.

Sakuya's departure had left a void, and there had been no one else to fill it. She gave the woman an encouraging smile, and then turned that smile on Sigurd, knowing that he'd hate it. "You said this is a hub zone. I assume that means there's side content to explore?"

Sigurd's fair green hair brushed his shoulder guards as he nodded, the neutrality on his face never reaching his eyes. "That's correct. We've discovered two branching zones so far, and a sealed portal that we think is keyed to the access quest that Romino's group picked up." He put two fingertips to his map and panned it around until he found what he was looking for, using the tip of a gnarled birchwood wand to point at certain POI icons. "The quest is called «Legacy of Interment», and the quest starter is a demi-human named mob found here."

"Is the mob non-aggro, or do you have to placate him somehow?"

"That is the explanation I was getting to," Sigurd said, glancing towards . "There are two classes of intelligent, skill-using mobs in the Halls. The first of those is a new non-aggro mob-type called an «Umbral Caretaker». We've run into a number of variants, but we have yet to identify a spawn point for any of them. It's too early to say for sure, but we believe that these mobs may have neither territory nor tethers. They can be found potentially anywhere in the Halls, ostensibly going about one maintenance task or another. They have been observed using Dark, Earth, and Wind magic."

Now _that_ was a curious combination. But the specific elements weren't the part that was making her think. "We seem to know a lot about the combat capabilities of a non-aggro mob."

"Yes, we do. Unfortunately, the Caretakers seem to have a very annoying tendency of coming out of nowhere and roaming into battles in progress."
"Goddamn adds," said another. "Nothing sucks more than roaming adds."

"Except for intelligent roaming adds who can use skills," Sigurd said, stabbing his finger at the tabletop. "Only one Sylph died getting all of this, and we should count ourselves quite fortunate."

Sakuya had already heard about the death of one of their mages, but not the details. This seemed an opportune time to raise the issue, which she did after turning her gaze on the leader of said mage group. "Jaqell, I understand we lost Tumuzikaze?"

The charms on Jaqell's robes jingled as he rose from his seat and bowed. "Forgive my failure, Lady Sakuya."

Sakuya leaned forward and hurried to reassure the man. "No, no, there is nothing to forgive. These things happen and we must learn from them. How did he die?"

When Jaqell raised his head, his eyes held gratitude. "As Sigurd implied, it started when we aggroed a Caretaker. We were burning down the last few Graveworms when it—" His voice caught there, and he hesitated, looking ambivalent about whether or how to proceed.

Sakuya tried to wait out the interruption, but when several seconds passed and he seemed no closer to getting the words out, she made a sound of clearing her throat. "Sorry about that," Jaqell said. "I'm just still debating whether to even bring up this detail, because this is a new area and I don't want to assume—"

"Jaqell," Sigurd said sternly.

"Any detail could be useful," Sakuya said before Sigurd could go any further; he seemed to be in a touchier mood than normal this morning. She was used to trading barbs with him, but he was usually more congenial with most of the other clearing group leaders.

"Well," Jaquell said, looking between the two of them with clear trepidation, "it was only for a moment, but when the Caretaker first appeared, I could've sworn it came through the wall just like the Graveworms do. I know for sure it didn't come down either end of the corridor, and there wasn't any kind of spawn or teleport effect."

Sakuya made the obvious suggestion—obvious to her, at least. "Could it have been Transparent? If you were in the middle of burning down other mobs, it would've been noisy and distracting enough to miss it."

But Jaqell shook his head firmly. "No. We'd literally just done an AOE Dispel to get rid of the Stoneskin buff the Graveworms use, and we all know what Transparency looks like when it drops. That wasn't it."

"Perhaps they do come through the walls then," Sakuya said. "You did say the Graveworms do that."

"Maybe... but it seems out of place for the kind of mob they are," Jaqell said, a troubled look crossing his face. "The Graveworms I get; they're diggers. But the Caretakers? They look like they're supposed to be workers of some kind—groundskeepers, essentially. They're just... well, borderline NPCs, there for flavor. They honestly don't even put up much of a fight—sometimes the weaker ones end up dying in an AOE before we even knew they've pathed into us. This is the first time we've had to lock one down."

Sakuya was simply confused now. "Then I'm not sure I understand the problem. If they're not very dangerous, then how did we lose someone? Every one of our groups is competent enough to handle
"We are," Jaqell said, seeming to recover a bit of his pride. "We should've been. We did everything right—as soon as we realized we'd picked up an add, Tumuzikaze hit it with Root and Silence to neutralize it while we finished the encounter. We switched to single-target burn on the Graveworms so we wouldn't break the Caretaker's Root, and managed to get the last one down just as the Silence ended."

"Leaving you with a single weak, Rooted mob to deal with," Sakuya said simply, as a prompt to continue. Clearly there was more to this than it seemed. Then, before he could go on, a thought suddenly struck her. "Sigurd, you said the Caretakers were one of two humanoid mob types in the Halls. What was the other?"

"The other," Sigurd said, seizing control of the discussion again, "is the mob that killed Tumuzikaze. Or more precisely... the mob that dealt out enough OHKs to Jaqell's group that Tumuzikaze was left without a rez." He gave a sidewise look to the mage, who looked ashamed again at failing his party member.

Sakuya sat up straighter, voice rising in alarm. "Wait, there's a floor mob that's one-shotting people?" The thought filled her with horror. A gateway boss might one-shot a mage, or anyone who wasn't properly geared or buffed—even a named mob could do it occasionally, if the level gap was significant. But barring an unlucky crit in the right location, it ought to be flat-out impossible for an ordinary floor mob to deal out that much damage in a single hit to a clearer, even if the player unequipped everything.

Which went a long way towards explaining Sigurd's attitude. He dismissed his enlarged map window with a wave of his hand. "That is what Jaqell claims."

It was impossible for anyone present to miss the implication. Jaqell's head remained bowed, but Sakuya was sitting on his side of the table, and could see his fists clenching at his sides. Her emerald eyes snapped up to Sigurd's, and she tried not to spit out the words. "You have your doubts. Why?"

"Me?" Sigurd's rhetorical response was laden with sarcasm. "Why would I doubt that an unknown mob shows up out of nowhere, one-shots a party of veteran clearers, but then decides to leave two of them alive and break the encounter with no explanation?"

"Lives could depend on every one of our clearers knowing what to expect," Sakuya said crossly. "You've obviously already debriefed everyone, so perhaps you would like to share what we collectively know about this mob."

"What we collectively know for certain," Sigurd said, sounding quite displeased about the fact, "is very little. The mob is called a «Norn Custodian», and in terms of abilities it seems to fall into a 'debuffer' role. As we have only encountered the one so far, it's difficult to say much more, but it was observed using both Holy and Dark magic, as well as a mix of other types—some of which we have never seen before." His frustration came through in every word that he spoke to the room full of clearers. "We simply do not yet understand why they do so much damage to some players and less to others, but I believe it has something to do with one of the new status effects they use, or the way those effects synergize with each other."

"I told you, Sigurd," Jaqell said, finally compelled to interrupt. "It's not the Noruna Domuru effect. I was watching the party list closely to keep everyone buffed after the first wave of OHKs, and we all had that debuff the whole time—nothing I did could get rid of it. Hyriel took hit after hit from the Norn and was still standing, while Doc Karlute and Tumuzikaze kept getting one-shotted. Even Chandler dropped in two hits, and he was geared and buffered for tanking."
Sakuya's mind was racing now. "Where's the pattern?"

"Pardon?"

"The pattern," Sigurd put in. "There's a pattern to who's getting hit, and how hard. There must be. We just don't know what it is, so we can't defend against it."

Jaqell frowned. "Why does there have to be a pattern?"

"Because that's how games are designed," Sakuya said, startling Sigurd by speaking up in support of something he'd said.

"Then maybe it's just bad design," said Chihae, breaking her silence.

"Maybe," Sakuya said. "But we're still dealing with software here, and software does what you tell it to. I know the larp—" She hastily caught herself. "I'm sorry, I know some of you don't like to break immersion like this, but it is a fact that we are living inside of an artificial world made out of code in a computer, and someone programmed that code to do something specific."

"What Lady Sakuya is getting at," Sigurd said, the style attached to her name drawing a raised eyebrow from her, "is that there must be consistent mechanics behind this behavior. If the same mob in the same battle does wildly different damage to different players, it logically follows that there is some unseen difference between the players to account for it. Now, Doc Karlute is a Gnome. Tumuzikaze had a lot of HP for a mage, and Chandler is your tank. It may not be a coincidence that the three people with the highest HP in the party got hit the hardest."

Sakuya frowned slightly. Something about Sigurd's idea didn't quite add up, but she couldn't put her finger on it. "That... seems a rather ridiculous effect range," she said slowly, still thinking it through. "Hyriel, a squishy DPS mage, takes—as Jaqell put it—'hit after hit', and doesn't fall. A Gnome healer and a high-HP DPS mage get one-shotted, while Jaqell himself survived by..." She glanced at the Sylph buffer.

"I honestly don't know," Jaqell answered with clear anguish. "It isn't like I didn't have any aggro—I burned through pretty much every cooldown I had getting people rebuffed after Doc rezzed them, and we all know that generates a lot of hate. Hyriel's DPS might not be the best, but he still had all the agg after Chandler dropped and was soaking hits like he was wearing armor instead of robes. Once it was down to just the two of us, I hit him with my emergency hate reset, and the thing just... stopped."

"Stopped?" Sakuya was incredulous. "It didn't target you at all?"

"No, it didn't," Jaqell said, unable to meet her eyes. "It just went non-agg, said something that sounded foreign, then turned away from me and disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Sakuya echoed. She was still having trouble wrapping her head around this.

Jaqell nodded, still looking shaken at the memory. "I had just enough time to use my one rez on Doc Karlute, and Tumuzikaze was the only one who wasn't in Doc's AOE radius—he'd tried to run."

"Disappeared," Sigurd repeated once more, his tone flat. "It just... randomly decided to ignore you."

"I don't care if you don't believe me," Jaqell said, chin lifting slightly. "I'm no fool, Sigurd. I may not have been in the Militia like you and Sakuya, and my party may not be first-tier raid material, but we've been trailblazing the World Tree for months, and we do have several war veterans. They'll all vouch for what happened, and how."
"I'm not doubting your word," Sakuya said, throwing a look at Sigurd. "It's just very difficult to reconcile what you're telling us with what we know of mob behavior. Most mobs are very simple, straightforward things—they don't pick and choose their targets like that." The thought came and went before she could help it: Loki.

"The mobs spawns have changed," Chihae pointed out. "We're seeing new things in the Ancient Forest and Yggdrasil Basin that we never have before. Why shouldn't this be true in the World Tree as well, especially in a brand new zone?"

"You have a point," Sakuya allowed. "I'm sorry—we should all know better than to blithely assume that we know everything we can expect from this world. I think the problem is that we're trying to make sense of why this is happening, and we just don't yet have all the information we need to figure out what the pattern is. I'm not sure we'll get much of anywhere until we get back out there and learn more." She let her eyes drift across the others, keenly aware that most of the group leaders were holding their tongues. "No one else ran into this mob?" A chorus of shaken heads; she sighed.

"If there are no more questions," Sigurd said, clearly growing weary of the circular discussion, "perhaps we can move on to the access quest."

"One moment," Sakuya said, holding up a hand. "Jaqell, you mentioned the name of a new debuff."

"Noruna Domuru," Jaqell answered, again speaking the unfamiliar words phonetically. They sounded a bit like spellwords to Sakuya, though not like any Wind spell she'd ever cast. "We don't know what it does. The effect description just says 'Judgment of the Norns.'"

Sakuya glanced at Sigurd, who shrugged. "I didn't see the debuff myself, but the phrase *Norna Dómr* does more or less translate to that."

"Let me guess," she ventured. "It's a reference."

Sigurd's mouth canted slightly. Sakuya hated that smug smile; she didn't even have to hear the words that followed to know that they were intended as a poke in the eye. "Tell me, Lady Sakuya," he began, clearly relishing the opportunity to throw her own words back in her face. "How much do you know about Norse Mythology?"

*You just couldn't help it, asshole,* Sakuya thought fiercely. *You just couldn't stop yourself from taking a gratuitous cheap shot at an incredibly inappropriate time just to make me look stupid in front of everyone.* As she opened her mouth to begin taking him apart, she saw his eyes go to the left, and from the drift of his gaze immediately recognized that he was reading a PM. "This is a bridge too far, Sigurd," she said, quickly amending the impending scolding, "self-aggrandizing cheap shots are one thing, but you could at least be bothered to give me your full—"

"Shut up," Sigurd hissed.

Every other jaw at the table fell open. Never before had Sigurd been so openly rude to her in front of others, especially since she became faction leader—he'd actually been doing his best to keep a lid on his contempt, at least when in public. "I beg your—"

"Save your fucking breath," Sigurd, said hotly, apparently so upset now that he was unable or unwilling to hold back any further. His arm slashed a green blur at the air as he closed a window and came immediately to his feet, hands still moving before him. "We have an emergency to deal with. Lennet, Jaqell, Chihae, call your groups and mobilize them heading northeast, I'll send a message shortly with an explanation and grid ref. Aegor—"
Sakuya was on her feet now as well, as was everyone else. The room had become a flurry of motion, with hands and fingers waving everywhere she looked as players frantically sent messages to the members of their respective parties. "Sigurd, what the hell is going on? What are you doing?"

Sigurd stopped to give his faction leader a contemptuous look, every bit of his stiff body language and self-righteous tone proclaiming superiority. "My job as leader of the Militia, Lady Sakuya," he said acidly, sketching a bow that was not the least bit respectful. "The Salamanders have come again to the Ancient Forest, and we are going to go remind them of the price they previously paid for that folly."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note 7/4/15: I swear, the thing about being on track to finish the story in time for the "real" launch of SAO in 2022 was a joke. It really was.

I got nothin'. Life is what it is. Although it is a bit ironic that one thing that inspired me to get off my ass and finish this chapter was getting sucked back into an MMO that is about as opposite of ALO as you could get. Post-hoc rationalizations ahoi!

Anyway, for those of you in the States who do the thing, happy Fourth. I'll be in my cave playing video games, hiding far away from traffic, fireworks, and drunk people. Please enjoy the chapter, and let me know what you think. Some very interesting things are afoot, and they are all connected in ways that I doubt most will see coming. Feel free to speculate, just don't ask me to confirm or deny said speculation. XD
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Whether jailed for a violation of a «Faction Law» or by the «Anti-Harassment System», a player with «Prisoner» status is subject to certain restrictions: they cannot see or interact with any part of their UI, fly or teleport, use or materialize combat-related items, cast Malign spells or spell effects, target any other player using the Focus system, or deal damage in any way. However, a Prisoner in a jail cell has certain protections as well: most notably, they are flagged «Untargetable» and «Immortal Object» to prevent abuse of their status. Moreover, in the case of imprisonment in a faction jail a Prisoner cannot be detained for longer than 48 hours, and is automatically freed either after that time passes or in response to being the victim of any Anti-Harassment System violation. In all cases, a Prisoner retains both protective flags for thirty seconds after their release, further mitigating the potential for abuse by preventing indefinite chain-imprisonment exploits or summary executions..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Prisoners»

8 May 2023
Day 184 - Midday ~ Evening

There were a great many questions that Tetsuo wanted to ask of his group leader, once the skirmish had died off and he could afford the luxury of thinking. That was often true; the old man was rarely at a loss for some piece of keen advice or philosophical musing, and what he had to say was usually useful in some way—if not outright life-saving.

But at the moment, there was no question that weighed more heavily on Tetsuo's mind than the open-ended one that finally made it past his lips.

"Why are we here?"

Heathcliff didn't answer—did not even divert his gaze—until the last Sylph had fled the wide, dry stream bed which cut through the «Ancient Forest» zone just west of «The Arid Highlands». The sharp, varied sounds of spell attacks were still echoing across the clearing and through the forest for several seconds after their visual effects had faded, and eventually left behind only short-lived scars in the mutable top layer of the game's world geometry. "Because those are our orders."

Tetsuo refused to believe that his group leader had misunderstood the intent of the question. As he opened his mouth for a follow-up, Heathcliff stilled him with an upheld palm, eyes scanning across the treeline. "Seven," he said, using the nickname almost everyone used instead of Seventh Sun's actual player name.

He'd made no request, but Seven had done this job long enough that he didn't need one. His chin-length, brick-colored bangs swayed with his curt nod, and the young Salamander's eyes glowed brightly green even in the midday sun. "Oh, they're still there all right," he said with a grimace and a notable lack of surprise. "From the size of the cursors, maybe thirty, forty meters back from the treeline, holding position and staying below the canopy. Just keep in mind some of them might have a higher Hiding skill than my Searching."

"I'm not worried about spies," Heathcliff said mildly, sheathing his sword while keeping his kite shield on his arm. "They are welcome to take a good look at what we're actually doing here. Perhaps doing so will persuade them that another probe like the last is unnecessary."
"Doubt that'll happen unless they start taking losses," Denkao said, the older man's face fixed in an expression of distaste.

Tetsuo was appalled enough to give their healer an incredulous look and actually say something. "I can't believe you're suggesting we *try* to kill them."

"Keep your pants on, Tetsuo," Denkao said, returning the look with one of mild weariness. "I'm not suggesting anything of the sort, 'specially after Heath said to let 'em retreat. I'm just pointing out that as long as what they're doing has no consequences, they've got no incentive to knock it off and every reason to keep trying. We *are* farming their territory, after all. Anyone here who doesn't think this was utterly goddamn predictable?"

As usual, Heathcliff maintained an attitude of aloof calm in the face of a tense situation. Tetsuo had no idea how he did it so consistently, but thought it admirable all the same. "First of all," he began, eyes still to the west, "we are not farming this territory. We are temporarily providing security and a show of force to discourage the Sylphs from farming here or attacking our farming groups. Secondly…" His gray eyes fell sharply on Denkao as he repeated their faction leader's reasoning for this mission. "Strictly speaking, this is not Sylph territory."

Denkao let out a dry snort. "Could've fooled me, yeah? Not many forests in ours."

Heathcliff opened his system menu and turned his Zone Permissions submenu to face his whole party, then pointed to the list. "What do you see here?"

Denkao waved a hand brusquely. "Yeah, yeah, I know it's a contested zone that doesn't actually belong to anyone. I don't care what Corvatz says, it's a retarded rationalization and it was one hundred percent predictable that the Sylphs would have a problem with it."

Heathcliff's slight shrug expressed a great deal of indifference in an economical way. "Of course. That is why we have several of our clearing groups here to back up our patrol groups. It takes some of us away from scouting the Halls, but the same is true for the Sylphs as long as they choose the path of conflict."

"Ten to one our leader'd not only throw a shit-fit if the Sylphs did the same thing to us, but wouldn't think his reaction was at all hypocritical."

Heathcliff's response to that was directed at Denkao, but their group leader's eyes came to rest briefly on Tetsuo as well. "I assure you, these points were all quite exhaustively discussed during the meeting that led to this order. While it is true that from a thematic point of view these lands are associated with the Sylphs, the fact is that they are no different than any other overland contested zone, such as the ones in Yggdrasil Basin. We have as much a right to farm here as they do, and we are here in force precisely because we don't expect them to accept this new paradigm quietly."

Their healer grunted. "Sounds like Corvatz is itching for a fight." Tetsuo was inclined to agree with Denkao's assessment, but wasn't about to say anything critical of their new leader in public. Corvatz had enough reasons to dislike him, and while he didn't think anyone in his group would rat him out… it wasn't a chance he wanted to take.

Another shrug from Heathcliff, this time accompanied by a head-shake. "Doubtful," he said. "Corvatz is a soldier who has seen actual combat. I doubt he *wants* a fight—he simply does not see the risk of one as any good reason not to assert control and secure essential resources. We *need* these mats for our clearing groups, and they are no longer dropping in the Aldrnari Desert or the Arid Highlands. Lord Corvatz would argue that we are not attacking their citizens. We are simply warning them away to protect our own, and responding with appropriate force when they attack or do not
heed our warnings."

"Movement," Seven said, stepping into the space that followed Heathcliff's lengthy response.

Their group leader's gaze snapped over to him. "Position and heading?"

Seven's eyes were still glowing bright green as he spoke; he'd never dropped Searching the whole time. "Six yellow contacts bearing South-70-West, about twenty meters inside the treeline, direct approach on the ground at walking speed. Definitely players, probably a full party."

Nephron nudged the thin-slitted visor of his helmet up onto his forehead and peered towards the forest as if he expected to see anything through the foliage. "Farmers who didn't get the memo yet?"

Heathcliff raised his voice only enough to reach the mage group that had been sent with them. "Pyrin, incoming party from the southwest on foot. Discourage them."

Pyrin pushed back the sleeves of his robes and barked out orders. "Mages! Line formation anchored on me, M6 Firewall on the southwest bank!"

Pyrin and his group's tank remained in place; as soon as he began speaking, the other four mages took flight and dispersed widely along the southeast treeline. Once the group had spread out from Pyrin's position, they each fanned out their arms at similar angles with the first two fingers pointed, and chanted nearly as one: "hitto famudrokke plemzure ralth tepnaga shippura kwedan!"

From five widely-spaced points on the opposite bank sprang fountains of flame to twice man-height, each then rippling outward until they formed walls. Tetsuo didn't often use the spell himself, but he knew that each wall would've been centered on a Focused point and terminated at the endpoints of imaginary lines drawn from the mage's extended fingers, to a length up to the limit of what a sixth-magnitude spell could generate. In all, the net effect was a violently churning wall of flames two meters high that stretched for hundreds of meters along the dry stream bed. It was spectacular.

It was also about as useless as wings on a scabbard. Tetsuo nudged Heathcliff, who was watching the flames intently. "What's the point? This isn't a dungeon; they can just fly over it."

"Certainly," Heathcliff said, never taking his eyes off of the conflagration. "But it sends a clear message: do not come here. And if they choose to attack rather than heeding that warning, it makes them the aggressors, and forces them to waste wing energy in order to fly up and over to reach us, where we are fully charged."

"Or just go around and flank us," Denkao said.

"Not much good it'd do them without surprise and greater numbers," Seven put in, eyes still filled with emerald aurorae. It had to take a lot of concentration to maintain Searching for so long. "They've stopped in front of the firewall."

Everyone already had weapons in hand, and Tetsuo's party started to spread out slightly behind the berm, split into two trios ahead and to either side of Pyrin's reassembled mage group so that everyone had clear line-of-sight. "Hold your fire until I give the word," Heathcliff said. "Let's see what they do."

Tetsuo caught sight of the Sylphs only moments after Seventh Sun's warning. Two green-clad forms, a mage and a melee type from the looks of them, rose up and over the barrier and touched down just on their side. Silhouetted now against the flames, Tetsuo could clearly see that the fighter was a woman's form, and she began walking slowly towards them, with the mage—or perhaps a healer—hanging back a few meters. Her weapon remained at her side, sheathed.
Tetsuo was tentatively hopeful. "It looks like she wants to talk."

Heathcliff's eyebrows rose. "How interesting."

"I got some words for her," said one of their own mages. "They start with hi—"

"Can it, Hamashin," growled Pyrin, smacking the mage's arm solidly before the idiot actually ended up casting a spell. "Heath, orders?"

A slight smile was threatening Heathcliff's reserve. He sheathed his own sword and looked across each member of his group. "Let us see what she has to say. If the mage starts to cast anything, lock him down. Otherwise respond only to hostile action. Tetsuo, Denkao, with me. Nephron, stay here with the others and defend Pyrin's group."

Now that they were much closer, Tetsuo was certain that the Sylph woman was a tank; he knew from experience that melee DPS roles needed to be quick on their feet, and didn't usually go in for armor as heavy as hers. Her dark blonde hair was mostly contained by her winged helm, and her booted footsteps sent rocks skittering along the parched dirt of the stream bed. She had a lozenge-shaped shield on her arm, but her sword remained sheathed, and Tetsuo hoped it stayed that way.

"Would you care to explain your presence here, Salamander?" the woman said just as both parties drew within a few meters of each other.

"I am Heathcliff, and I am authorized to represent Lord Corvatz in the field. We will be farming here from this point forward, and desire to avoid conflict between our farming groups. Please communicate to your leader that no Sylph is to cross the Willowbend."

"You've got some nerve, trying to tell us where we can't go in our own forest."

"Do not cross the Willowbend River," Heathcliff repeated firmly. "This is the only warning that will be provided. Any who attempt to do so will be turned back—with force, if they make it necessary. And any hostile action taken towards our farming groups will be met with lethal force."

There was fear in the Sylph woman's eyes as she took in the numbers arrayed against her, but her hands balled into fists. "That's against the Treaty."

Heathcliff regarded her unflinchingly. "Do not misunderstand. We have no intent of killing for the sake of killing. But our orders are quite clear: do not allow Sylph farmers to enter this region, and destroy any hostile force that attacks our own farmers."

"Destroy," echoed the Sylph, looking back at the mage who had accompanied her. "Natsuo, go back to the others and tell them this, fast."

"Chihae, I'll be damned if—"

"Go!" said the woman apparently named Chihae, her voice urgent. "Please! You know there's not much time!" It took another exchange of words to make the man leave; from the looks that passed between them, Tetsuo wondered if the two of them were a thing.

"A wise choice," Heathcliff said genially. "Now it is time for you to follow him. Please convey our stance to your leader. I'm afraid the terms are non-negotiable."

"You realize that your leader is starting a war here," Chihae said, one fist beginning to clench again at her side. She made no move to go.
"No," Heathcliff said at once. "He simply understands what you do not: that contested zones belong to no one, and that you cannot claim exclusive ownership of territory that you are incapable of holding. Our groups already avoid each other in the contested zones of the World Tree. We require you to make the same sensible choice here."

Chihae's pale face was bright red with anger. "This is different. We haven't poached each other's territory since Kibaou—."

Heathcliff seemed unmoved, cutting her off with a sweep of the hand that made her flinch. "Lord Corvatz is not Kibaou, and I will not debate the issue with you further. Heed these warnings and stay on the west side of the Willowbend, and there will be no war. But in order to protect our people and prevent conflicts between our farmers, we will turn back any who try to farm in this place—and make an example of anyone cowardly enough to attack our farming groups." He stared her unflinchingly in the eyes. "If war comes, it will be your people who have chosen it."

Chihae took a wary step back. Behind her, Tetsuo saw the wall of flames flicker and die out as the spell effect expired. "You can't do this."

Heathcliff looked unimpressed by her protest, even bored. "It is already done. Now please—"

The muted, low-frequency sound of a distant explosion turned everyone's heads towards the east. A few moments later, a fireball shot out of the treetops several hundred meters away and dwindled into the sky, the angle and straight path suggesting it had missed a target. Shouting voices could be faintly heard from that direction, but Tetsuo couldn't make out words.

"That's where Ziegler's farming group is!" Denkao called out.

Heathcliff's head whipped back around to Chihae, who was already backpedaling quickly with her shield held protectively in front of her. Her shout carried across the clearing. "I didn't—!"

"You created a diversion to keep our attention here while another party went around to attack one of our farmers," Heathcliff said. "That was the reason for your suddenly-urgent message to the mage. Did you really think we were the only group here providing security?"

"No, I was—"

Pyrin's mages started chanting. With a wordless cry, Chihae brought out her wings and rocketed towards the edge of the forest at the head of a trail of light. Two of the Fire Bolt spells struck her, but she maintained enough flight control to weave around a tree trunk and use it as a shield against the others, which sent spalls of bark flying. A yellowish-green streak shot out from the trees at frightening speed and exploded nearby, sending two of Pyrin's people scattering.

"Archer!" Seven shouted. "Five meters inside the treeline by that rise!"

Heathcliff's voice swept over them all. "Shields up! Pyrin, neutralize the archer and lay down suppressing fire!"

Volley after volley of weak fire projectiles rippled out from most of the Salamander mages, staggered so that the short cooldowns of the low-magnitude spells allowed them to maintain a steady base of fire—so to speak. The treeline began sprouting hot red blossoms, and into the smoke-filled cover of that distraction Pyrin himself spoke, sparks stirring around his robes and outstretched hands while golden symbols encircled him and fell into place. "Hitto nyafe jezut, kezathramplu, tepnaga jan!"

The angry flames covering Pyrin's hands pulsed, flared briefly into a cone, and then erupted into a crimson starburst which shot out at blinding speed towards the trees from which the AOE bow attack
had come. It struck somewhere not far within the forest and triggered there, a conflagration the size of a tennis court exploding outwards from the gaps in the trees and even licking through the canopy, incinerating any environmental materials that weren't flagged as Immortal.

If the Sylphs were relying on the directional protection of Defensive Shield spells, or the ability to heal through the explosion, it was a grave mistake. Tetsuo could tell immediately that this wasn't the usual AOE fireball that Pyrin had cast—it was a high-level Salamander-only spell called Hellfire, and anyone caught within its radius was not only going to eat the initial AOE, they were going to suffer a nasty DOT as long as they remained. It wasn't a spell that got used much in PvP—aside from the punishingly high requirements and tongue-tangling pronunciation, the residual effects could very easily finish off what the explosion did not kill.

Flashy and expensive, it did have the intended effect of thoroughly disrupting the Sylph attack. Shouts of alarm and dismay from the treeline were followed shortly by a few green-streaked flight trails which shot out into the sky. Tetsuo was still maintaining the Defensive Shield he'd thrown up at Heathcliff's order, which made it difficult to see details beyond, but he was fairly sure it hadn't been the full party that fled.

His train of thought was validated by Seven, who responded to a barked demand from their group leader. "One cursor out, three fled and holding position above the canopy. One's still inside, another on the ground holding at a safe distance."

"Probably trying to rez the one who dropped," Denkao said. "Whoever he is, I give him credit for balls, staying in the middle of that shit to heal. He wouldn't be able to see or target the Remain Light from outside of it."

"Let him," Heathcliff said, holding up a hand. "This time. Cease fire! Pyrin, another Barrier Hazard to discourage them from returning."

"I'm OOM after that nuke," answered Pyrin as he plucked a blue vial from the bandolier under his robes. "Osha, Nicky, Firewall!"

As the two named mages set about re-establishing a wall of flames in front of the fiery maelstrom that still burned at the edge the forest even now, Heathcliff's eyes went to each of his group members in turn. "We will not pursue," he said. "Hold position and continue to guard our farmers. We must trust that Benta and his team can protect Ziegler's group, and hope that this lesson will dissuade our foes from a third attack."

Denkao gave his leader a hard look. "And if it doesn't?"

Heathcliff's expression was equally hard—almost devoid of affect. "Then we ensure that there will be no fourth."

For a child, growing up was a procession of firsts. One of the tragedies of Alfheim was that the majority of the player base seemed to be in their teens or early 20s, and that meant that for many of them, they would experience those firsts while imprisoned in this death game—forever associating those first experiences with their time trapped in ALO.

Some of those firsts were more important than others. One of the more trivial, in Asuna's mind, was the fact that she had never actually been in a warehouse before, and wasn't really sure what to expect from the Nissengrof Supply Depot.
She wasn't completely ignorant—she knew it was probably a really big room with shelves and boxes where they stored stuff. But the room that lay beyond the sign announcing that they'd arrived at the Depot was... well, it was a lobby. A relatively ordinary waiting area that, if not for the fact that it looked like it had been cleanly hewn and crafted from living stone, wouldn't have been terribly out of place in some sort of themed resort back in the real world.

"A moment, please," said Grimlock, pausing just inside of the doorway and opening his game menu. "I need to set my badge."

Asuna's confusion dovetailed unpleasantly with her nervousness. "Badge?"

The question was answered moments after it was asked. She couldn't see what the Leprechaun smith was doing in his menu, but since her gaze had already popped his status ribbon for her, she was in a position to notice the rounded square of the guild tag beside his HP gauge flicker and change pattern with the kind of clipped, quiet tone that the UI made when an option was chosen. Before it had been a gold-colored silhouette of an apple against a pretty green background. Now it was a quartet of solid colors, with regular dotted lines dividing the square into quadrants.

When it was done, Grimlock's steel-gray eyes went to her expectantly. "My ID card, if you will."

"I still don't understand what you mean. I get that you're in more than one guild and changed which tag to show, but why?"

He couldn't have seen his own status ribbon, but he had to know where each part was—or at least, would be shown for others. He pointed up to where the tag hung in the air, always drawn face-on so that it was clearly visible from any direction. "Read it like heraldry. The brown in the upper left quadrant means the badge is valid only in Nissengrof. Orange in the next means it applies to the Supply Depot. The bottom two colors indicate my privileges in that context—in this case, denoting that I work here but need an escort to enter or withdraw resources."

Asuna had never, in her entire time in Alfheim, heard of someone using the guild system like this. Granted, this was her first time in the NCC, and she didn't know much about how they did things—and now that she thought about it, she'd seen the NCC clearers bearing guild tags like this before. But it seemed like a very odd, overly-complicated way of showing who was allowed where. "But that... that must mean that there's a different 'official' NCC guild for every combination of colors you have to use. And that some people would have to be members of more than a few."

Grimlock inclined his head. "That is so. But it works, and works well. Shall we go in?" He gestured towards a door on the opposite side of the room, and spoke a few words to the Leprechaun whom Asuna assumed must be a receptionist or guard.

Their brief address didn't seem to be necessary, though; the other Leprechaun was already rising from his seat as soon as his eyes went to Grimlock's status ribbon. "Morning, Grimlock. You're in late today."

"We run short on «Coastal Stabray Blood»," Grimlock answered, slowing as the three approached the door and reaching up to adjust his glasses. "I need a lot of it for a project, and it's to the point where it was easier just to pay the extortionate market rate for a stack."

The taller, short-haired Leprechaun who minded the waiting room seemed to scrutinize Asuna more closely. "Forget your tag, miss?"

Asuna shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't have one. Grimlock brought me here to see someone."
Grimlock inclined his head. "If you would be so kind to admit her as a guest, Laze. She has a question that I felt was best answered by Chellok or Agil."

"Sorry man, no can do—you know we had someone try to talk their way in last week. You won't mind if I call the boss down here before we go in?"

A shrug was Grimlock's answer. He followed it up momentarily with simple words. "As you will."

Laze wasn't gone long; when he returned, he beckoned to them with a downturned palm. "Boss is busy; he said to talk to Agil."

"Convenient," said Grimlock with a bow, the center part in his hair letting his dark bangs fall, curtain-like, to brush his cheeks. "That is where I would be going anyway after taking her to Chellok. Shall we be off?"

Agil—that's the name that Kirito gave me. Asuna felt her apprehension begin to lessen at the mention of that name, especially now that it was clear Grimlock was telling the truth about knowing people at the Supply Depot. She tried not to let her skepticism show on her face—he was putting his own job on the line vouching for her.

The secured doors at the far end of the lobby gave way to a long arched hallway with a number of side rooms, each bearing player-crafted signs marked with words like *Receiving* or *Staging*. That hallway, in turn, hooked around to the right and let them out onto a platform that overlooked one of the largest rooms Asuna had ever seen.

It had to be. The ceiling, decorated with a strong-looking lattice of steel supports embedded into the natural rock, must have been at least three or four stories above the warehouse floor, where a wide rectangular clear area branched off to either side into long aisles, each of which had row after row of aisles on either side. From the looks of it, what she could see from her vantage point was only a small part of the overall complex.

As they made their way down a wide ramp and headed towards an unlabeled doorway below, Asuna craned her neck to look down the aisles. She'd seen maybe all of five people, most of them Gnomes. "I'd have thought it'd be busier."

"Not during the day," Laze answered with a breezy wave at the ceiling. "Most of the farmers are out doing their thing, and the clearers are in Arun. We'd usually have more Combine crafters in here requisitioning mats, but most of them are at the Conference."

"Every month, crafters who work for the NCC gather in Nissengrof to share recipes and knowledge," Grimlock explained before Asuna could inquire. "Not all participate, of course, but many do."

"What about you?" Asuna asked.

The faint smile that Grimlock almost always seemed to wear broadened for only a moment. "There are not so many Leprechauns who care to dabble in Constructs as do Smithing. It is a far more complex craft which requires a logical mind, and the stock recipes known to all are, for the most part, quite boring and not altogether profitable."

"You won't be satisfied until you can build a Gundam that facerolls gateway bosses," Laze joked.

Grimlock's amusement was perfunctory at best. "Scoff if you will, good sir, but you would be amazed at the functional things players can create in an open-world sandbox. The logic gates and modules one can craft for Constructs, however individually crude, are an order of magnitude more
diverse than the Lego blocks you used to play with on your Minecraft server."

"So yeah," Laze commented aside to Asuna, more or less ignoring Grimlock's interjection. "Like I said, dude's gonna make a Gundam that replaces clearers."

"It is not a 'Gundam,'" Grimlock said wearily as they waited for a crude-looking motorized lift that seemed to be powered by some kind of crystal. "Nor is it a 'power suit', or a 'Boltron', or any of the other impenetrable otaku references that you find so humorous. It does not transform or shoot anything, and it neither walks nor flies. It is not even large enough for you to ride. It is merely a simple exploration device that has yet to so much as leave the city. And it is but one of my projects, an experimental one at that."

"If you know what he's talking about," Laze said to Asuna as he flapped his fingers like babbling lips, "Feel free to say something." She didn't, and so didn't.

A few bends later they drew close to a door labeled with an icon of an eight-toothed gear, which she thought looked very similar to the Leprechaun faction's sigil. "There you go, folks. Now disembarking for Mom's Basement Level 2: hikikomori, mad scientists, and Gundams that forgot how to Gundam."

"Do you have to deal with this every morning?" Asuna asked.

"No," Grimlock answered with a touch of long-suffering tolerance. "Only on days with names that end in -youbi."

It took Asuna a moment to realize that was sarcasm; it was the same thing as saying every day. She giggled slightly despite herself once she got the joke, and the Leprechaun blacksmith's smile became a little more genuine. "In all seriousness, pay it no mind. Laze is simply showing off in front of a pretty girl." While Asuna's cheeks warmed and Laze sputtered, Grimlock touched the door handle long enough for it to register that he had the correct key in his inventory, and pushed it open as soon as a click came from the lock.

The workshop was… so unfamiliar a scene that Asuna struggled to materialize her impressions as concrete thoughts. It was a medium-sized room with high ceilings, and there was a fair amount of open space on solid stone floors that bore scorch marks and scrapes; Asuna wondered if it had been originally drawn that way or if the environment could actually be damaged here. Workbenches and shelving lined the walls, and were thickly populated by bizarre, inert machinery in configurations that defied description, built for purposes at which she could not even guess.

"There you are, Grim," spoke a deep voice which filled the workshop. While not excessively bulky, the owner of the voice was one of the tallest Gnomes that Asuna had ever seen—even accounting for the way the game upscaled a Gnome player's avatar. When he rose from the bench his bald head easily topped two meters in height, and the shade of his skin was just a touch darker than her favorite milk tea. From Kirito's description, he couldn't be anyone other than Agil.

His intimidating appearance was thoroughly mitigated, however, by the wide, affable smile that split his face. He lobbed something small in a slow arc towards Grimlock, who juggled it awkwardly in his hands before barely managing to not drop it. "Good timing, actually. While you were out I went and saw Sendak, brought him that new module you needed to charge. Cooldown on my Enchant'll be a while, so I'm going to take an early lunch." Dark brown eyes came to rest on Asuna. "Picking up girls?" he said to Grimlock with a grin. "Your wife'll love that."

The words caused Grimlock to scowl, and her to began to bristle slightly. "Agil, my name is Asuna," she said. "I'm an Undine clearer, though I'm here for myself, not on their behalf. Grimlock said that
you could tell me about a smith named Nezha, said he was a Leprechaun."

The grin vanished from Agil's face in an instant. "Well now, there's a name I haven't heard for a while. Why would you want to know about that little shit? Not looking for a commission, I hope."

The clear hostility that both Grimlock and Agil seemed to have towards Nezha worked to loosen Asuna's tongue somewhat. "I have reason to think that he might be supplying a PK group. When we defeated one of them, she dropped a blade that was crafted by him." So saying, she materialized Aloof Negotiator from her inventory and held it out with both hands.

Agil took the blade with a scowl that was easily as dark as the one Grimlock had briefly donned. "I wouldn't be surprised," he said. "He's blacklisted from doing business in the NCC, or with any of our members. If he wanted to continue smithing, he'd have to go elsewhere. He moved to Arun months ago to do just that." A few taps brought up the item's status window, and he nodded grimly. "Yeah, this is one of his alright. Decent work, too—I'm surprised."

Grimlock had already gone to work in his own corner of the workshop and seemed uninterested in further conversation; Asuna glanced once at him and then back at Agil. "Why?"

Agil took a deep breath and held it for a few moments before sighing heavily. "Nezha was a terrible smith. And I mean really bad. He rarely crafted new items; his area of work was enhancements. And it wasn't just incompetence—he seemed to have the most awful luck, breaking a lot of people's weapons in the process. That's a random chance," he elaborated, "and a tiny one if you use the right mats. Most smiths have never had it happen even once."

Asuna sensed that there was more to the story; she recalled Grimlock saying something about a scam. "Let me guess: it wasn't bad luck."

A snort. "Hell no. Guy was running a really clever racket, swapping the customer's weapon for a finished product that couldn't be enhanced any more. Made it look like the weapon just broke, when what he'd really done was sent the customer's weapon to his inventory and replaced it with one that looked just like it. Got away with it for weeks before people started noticing a pattern and we staged a sting. Caught him red-handed."

Now Asuna could very easily understand the reactions of both players to Nezha's name. The scam they were describing… he was stealing a player's best weapon, something they had earned and relied on to keep them alive. She wondered what kind of greed or circumstances could make someone think that was okay. "I don't suppose there's anything we can do with this to track him down?"

"I doubt it. To be honest, this is weak tea anyway. If you got this weapon off a PKer, then it's just as likely that they got it from a legit player they killed." He looked down at the sheathed short sword again, and closed the status window before handing it back to Asuna. "As much as I'm inclined to blame Nezha for ice being cold, it's not really fair to go after him just because a PKer had a weapon made by him. Even if this PKer did commission it from him, nothing says Nezha had any idea who or what they were, and he probably didn't give a damn as long as they were a paying customer willing to do business with him."

Asuna silently digested this for a few moments, but found her thoughts interrupted by an excited shout from the other side of the room. "It works!"

Agil head turned quickly; he seemed to forget all about Asuna's problems. "Already? You're kidding me, I gotta see this."

"I still need to sort out how to best connect the outputs to a chassis and make that do something
useful," Grimlock cautioned, looking smug and triumphant despite his caveat. "But the so-called 'sensor' works."

Asuna had no idea what the man was talking about. "Show me," Agil said.

The angular workbench in front of Grimlock was covered with mechanical parts, orelight crystals, and what she recognized as various types of mats. He picked up a square metal device around the size of his fist and set it on the surface of the table with an embedded white crystal facing towards an empty corner of the room—empty of people, anyway.

There were distinctively-shaped recesses in the sides of the object, and as Asuna watched, he picked up another similarly-sized device that Agil had handed to him when they entered. This one was more complex in design, with a lace-like frame of filigrees surrounding a single dimly-lit green crystal. Some of the filigree patterns looked similar to the recesses on the other device; Grimlock carefully pressed them together until the crystal brightened and began silently pulsing in a slow, steady pattern.

"I'll use this to test," Grimlock said, plucking a tiny red crystal set in a gold frame from a bin with many similar items of different colors. He plugged that into another of the shallow recesses on the device Agil had brought him. "Just a simple orelight module that illuminates when powered. This logic gate should only pass a charge to the output port while the activator module is actively triggered."

"What triggers it?" Asuna asked, fascinated but quite lost at the overwhelming barrage of unfamiliar terms.

Grimlock made an expansive gesture towards the empty corner of the room. "If you would like to step over there, I will demonstrate."

Asuna tried not to take a step back. "I would not. I have no idea what the thing really does, and I don't feel like being a guinea pig when I'm not in a safe zone." It was the elephant in the room; none of them could possibly be unaware of the fact that she was able to take damage. Agil nodded in understanding.

"Ah, you have reason." Grimlock sketched a quick bow. "Very well then, I shall do so." He took several steps towards the indicated direction. At a certain point he seemed to trip some kind of threshold, the red light connected to the device shone brightly until he stopped. Smiling widely now, he waved a hand at the air; the light activated again and stayed lit until he stopped waving.

Asuna's awe had to be plain on her face; her jaw was loosely open. "Did it just… was it reacting to you moving?"

Agil clapped his hands onto Grimlock's shoulders, laughing heartily. "You did it! I'll be damned, man, when you told me about this idea yesterday, I thought it'd be weeks before you got anywhere—if it worked at all."

Grimlock's reaction turned towards modesty. "It is really not so surprising as all that," he said, turning back to his workspace. "We already know that most spells, when enchanted into a Construct module, behave in ways that are different from but directly or thematically related to what they do when cast by a player. Enchanting any module with Stoneskin, for example, makes these fragile items much more durable; a Tracer spell placed on an 'activator' module like this causes a mobile Construct to follow its owner. Is this creation not a logical inference from the function of my wife's Detect Movement spell?"

Asuna knew the spell; a number of the Undine mages used Wind, and she'd heard them call out
things they spotted with Detect Movement a few times while clearing. "So it does the same thing as the spell?"

"Not quite," Grimlock said. "The spell creates a visual effect in the caster's UI. Obviously a Construct has no UI, so it seems that the system interprets the purpose of the spell—to detect movement—to mean that the module will activate and pass a 'true' value whenever there is movement directly in front of it." He inched closer and closer until the red light appeared again. "Within a certain field of view, that is."

"So you could use it to find the nearest mobs?" That sounded quite useful to Asuna.

"In theory," Grimlock said, plucking the power crystal from the top of the device and placing it on the desk. "As well as revealing ones you can't see, so long as they continue moving. Unfortunately, the necessary mats can be rare and expensive. We have to justify every one I request from our stores."

Agil suddenly looked a little uneasy, glancing at Asuna. "Look, I know this is kind of shutting the barn door after the horse is gone, but could I ask you to keep this to yourself? We still don't know how well this'll work in practice, but if word gets out, there'll be a run on the market for activator and power mats."

"Is it really fair to say that after you've shown me?" Asuna asked. "Every farming and clearing group would want one, and why wouldn't they? This device could save lives and get us all out faster."

"If it works the way we think," Grimlock said. "All we know for sure so far is that it can trigger off movement a few meters away. We don't know its range, whether it will consume the power crystal over time as many modules do, or even if it can see through world geometry like the spell."

As exciting as the discovery was, they both had some very good points—and Asuna was inclined to take their word for it, since they were the ones who knew what they were doing here. She decided to shift gears and get back to the purpose of her visit. "Okay. You said that Nezha moved to Arun some time ago?"

"Yeah," Agil said with a nod. "I wish I could tell you more, but we honestly stopped paying any attention to him after that, once it was clear he wasn't picking up the same scam again. We've got bigger fish to fry, especially now with the changing mobs spawns." He glanced at Grimlock. "Oh hey, remind me after I get back from walking Asuna out—Chellok wanted me to talk to you about this mission we've got for your guild."

Asuna was more than capable of taking a hint. She bowed at the waist. "Thank you for the help and hospitality," she said. "I'm very sorry to bother you while you're working."

"Not at all," responded Grimlock, who looked a little apprehensive at the mention of his guild. "I hope you find what you are looking for in Arun."

Asuna doubted that. This lead was starting to look as cold as the region itself. Grimlock had given her a detailed description of Nezha, but even if she walked right into him once she reached Arun, what Agil said stuck with her: for all they knew, Fausta had killed the player who originally commissioned the sword from Nezha, or the smith simply hadn't known her from any other player. His name on the sword wasn't evidence of anything other than the fact that the item was his work.

As she and Agil made their way out of the Depot, she dearly hoped that Kirito was having better luck.
Argo and Thelvin were hours into their trip before they realized they had a problem.

The Lugru Corridor was the most direct route linking Sylph territory with Yggdrasil Basin, and everyone knew it. The trip could certainly be a difficult slog, especially through the much tougher mobs on the Yggdrasil side of the underground settlement—even for a clearing group, although at their levels it was more tedious than dangerous. But even with the necessity of clearing as you went, it was still considerably faster than going around through either Cait Sith or Salamander territory.

At least, it had been. But as they fought their way further and further through the winding subterranean pathways of the Corridor, it became clear that it wasn't just the overland mobs that had changed.

Argo knew the exact level ranges of the mobs in Lugru; they'd conclusively tested them during the beta by taking groups of players with a six-level spread and pinpointing mob levels based on who saw which cursor colors. She knew, for an absolute fact, that the most dangerous thing to be expected on this side of Lugru ought to have been a linked encounter of level 10 Doomgazers with a named leading them. Even the Orcs at this end of the corridor were weak compared to their Arun-side kin.

Nothing they had fought since entering the Corridor had been very far below Argo's level; if she'd been solo she would've been forced to turn back very quickly. As it was, even with Thelvin tanking she was both kicking herself for not hiring a healer before leaving Sylvain, and blessing the fact that she had packed enough potions for a full party. A few of the fights had been uncomfortably close.

"This sucks," Argo said at the conclusion of one such fight. "We've got no ranged DPS, no healing besides our pots, and with just the two of us the mobs are a lot tougher than we expected. We gotta go back and rethink this. Probably go around. If we're having this much trouble on the way there, we're gonna hit a brick wall when we try getting through the tougher mobs on the Yggdrasil side."

Thelvin waved at his Result window to dismiss it, drawing open his game menu and expanding the map; he had previously 'pinned' it visible for convenience. He traced a metal-clad finger from the icon marking their location through to the one labeled «Lugru». "I don't disagree, but we're almost to the midway point anyway—we might as well get there. You've been going through a lot of potions, and I think we'd both be well-advised to rest, repair, and resupply. Might be at least one player there interested in partying up too, and that'd make all the difference."

It wasn't the worst idea, and Argo gave in to the sensibility of Thelvin's suggestion. The last time they'd been through Lugru together, they'd done exactly that: encountered a small group of Sylphs and partied up to clear more quickly and safely than they would've separately. And Thelvin was right about their supplies. She took a moment to think of whether there was an NPC alchemist in Lugru, and felt a little better upon recalling that there was—Sionn's Sundries, two doors down from the stable and just across the street from the only inn.

Her eyes flicked up to her HUD. "All right, let's go. Day's half-gone already, and I'd rather not spend the night if we can avoid it."

Thelvin smiled faintly. "Don't care for Lugru?"

"Don't much care for anywhere underground," Argo said, unsheathing the hooked steel bars of her claws. "It locks me outta sending or receiving PMs, and my ability to communicate is everything to me. At least I'll be able to catch up a little once we get to the safe zone." She eyed Thelvin and poked him gently in the arm with the blunt side of the wrist-mounted weapon. "You're the one who said..."
this way would be quicker."

"It would have been—before the rebalancing." Thelvin shrugged his shield back down onto his arm and started walking. "But it didn't work out that way, and now we have to deal with the situation as it is, not as we wish it were. You did say the overland spawns seem to be changing everywhere in Alfheim, from what you've been hearing. We should not have expected different here."

Argo could not find any fault with that kind of response, entirely practical as it was. The next hour passed in relative silence; the two Cait Sith reluctantly but doggedly trudged through the meandering switchbacks that wended down and northeast, carefully picking their way down the precarious stairway which wound its way down the cliffside overlooking Lugru's subterranean lake.

At one point their progress was halted by an unnervingly-wide gap—well within a typical character's ability to jump at a run, but not while wearing heavy plate armor the way Thelvin was. When they'd come this way before, they'd had another tank who had helped give Thelvin a boost over; Chihae had been lightweight enough to make the leap herself. Now it was just the two of them, and Argo had very little STR with which to provide any such assist to the much heavier Cait Sith tank.

Her eyes travelled across the wall bordering the narrow walkway, looking for signs of the design language the game used to signal climbable surfaces. She hadn't seen anything before, but—"There," she said suddenly, pointing. "Ironwood roots. Almost missed 'em; they're hard to see against the rock in this light."

"And?" Thelvin's eyesight was no better or worse than hers, but he didn't seem to get what she meant. Argo hastened to explain.

"Whenever the level designers wanted to make absolutely certain anyone can climb a natural wall, they placed ironwood roots. There are local variants that can be found anywhere in Alfheim, and they're so strong you need high-end harvesting gear to even make a dent. Trust me, they'll hold your weight."

Thelvin's gaze traced back and forth across the gap, lingering on the dull blackish-brown roots and then at the rocky waters far below. "Am I also trusting you to rez me if they don't? That sounds as risky and speculative as it looks."

Argo backed up for a moment and took a running start, leaping over the four-meter gap and rolling to a stop with plenty of room to spare. She got up and dusted herself off theatrically. "It's climb or jump, and you're too heavy to jump. You got a better idea?"

Having observed her jump, Thelvin nodded. "I believe so." He drew open his menu and poked at the air; after a few moments, pieces of his armor began to disappear individually. Once done he was left with only the basic garment he wore underneath it all, a belted silver waistcoat that matched the tabby-stripe markings in his black hair.

Argo stared. "That's not gonna work. You're gonna be even more weighed down when it's in your inventory; your armor skill only reduces the «Encumbrance» of worn armor."

"I know. But I have an idea. Walk towards me, all the way to the edge."

Having observed her jump, Thelvin nodded. "I believe so." He drew open his menu and poked at the air; after a few moments, pieces of his armor began to disappear individually. Once done he was left with only the basic garment he wore underneath it all, a belted silver waistcoat that matched the tabby-stripe markings in his black hair.

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"I know. But I have an idea. Walk towards me, all the way to the edge."

Something in Argo's mind flinched; she almost felt it physically. "I don't like where this is going."

Thelvin looked at her calmly, expectantly. Argo sighed and took a few steps forward, becoming more cautious as she came within a meter of the edge, tail lashing nervously behind her and eyes deliberately trained forward, not down. As she did, Thelvin approached as close as he could.
Is he going to try throwing his gear at me? Argo really hoped not. She didn't want to play catch with plate armor that weighed almost as much as she did.

A trade window popped up in front of her. After a stunned moment that seemed to drag on far too long, Argo swore creatively, words echoing off the stone as her voice rose. "You are kidding me. For real? That works?"

"The maximum range for all Focus-based social interactions—like a party invite, duel, or trade request—it's what, about five meters?"

"Exactly five meters," Argo confirmed, filing this little exploit away in her mind. "And because players can fly, the game doesn't care whether there's a floor under that space or not—it's just a range limit. Genius. I love it."

Argo did not love it quite so much a few moments later, after Thelvin finished trading a test batch of his heavy equipment to her and she pressed «Accept». She could immediately feel it all tangibly weighing her down—not really in any one place, more a sense of just her whole body being heavier and needing that much more effort just to stay upright.

Then, as the final trade went to her inventory, she hit her encumbrance limit. Not the soft limit beyond which she would start suffering movement and stat penalties—she was well past that point after the first trade—but the hard maximum encumbrance she could suffer and still move or act effectively at all; she was Rooted and afflicted with Delay status, and the sheer weight of her avatar forced her to her knees.

Thelvin, on the other hand, was now bearing weight which was very far below the limits of a strength-heavy character; if Argo had to guess based on his level and gear, she would've pegged him at a STR of at least 70 and an Unencumbered Carry Weight of at least 35 kilos. Having shed the weight of all that equipment, he could've almost carried her without much penalty. Thelvin took the same running jump as Argo had, and landed safely—if considerably less gracefully, coming down in a staggered jog rather than Argo's fluid breakfall.

Argo stared once more as Thelvin opened a trade window and relieved her of her burden, then began nonchalantly re-equipping his armor. At a loss for words, she said, "I guess that works too."

"The root of the problem was equipment encumbrance affecting jump distance, yes?" Thelvin's shield reappeared last, and he readied it once more as if it had been there all along, then glanced down at her. "Problem solved."

Thankfully, this time there were no Imp PK groups waiting to ambush them on the rest of their long descent down to the lake shore, although there were plenty of mobs left to clear—sometimes within sight of each other. There were no other groups at all, which Argo found a little bit odd; the Corridor was the fastest route between Sylph territory and Arun, and she knew at least one player who lived there full-time.

Come to think of it, what's Chromato up to, anyway? Argo wondered as their footsteps echoed across the bridge spanning the dangerous underground lake which surrounded the island town of Lugru. The streets weren't empty, but every cursor she saw belonged to an NPC, and the lack of activity was starting to worry Argo a little. I should've sent him a message before entering the Corridor; he usually checks in at least once a week with a traffic report if nothing else. Might as well ping him while I'm there—it shouldn't be this quiet!

It wasn't difficult to find the Sylph blacksmith once they'd passed through the massive gate which breached the turreted walls of the town—it never was, not since the former clearer had retired to
Lugru and set up shop there. There was an NPC smith, of course, but Chromato knew from experience that Lugru Corridor was the route the Sylph clearers used for access to Arun, and experienced players always went to a player smith if they could help it. He had managed to quest for and purchase shop space in a prime location for catching the clearers on their commute: right on the wide avenue that cut through the center of the town from gate to gate.

"Convenient," Thelvin remarked simply when Argo pointed out the player-crafted sign jutting out from the side of the steeply-angled sides of the building, the light of habitation glowing from within through windows fogged with condensation. "I wish we had a town like this in the Valley of Butterflies."

Argo glanced up at the Cait Sith tank. "You haven't been here in awhile, have you?"

Thelvin shook his head. "Not since we were here together. Why would I? The Valley is the more direct route for us."

"Point. Anyway, here we are. We can get our equipment topped off while I find out why Lugru's turned into a damn ghost town."

"I'd wondered," Thelvin said, stopping in front of the shop's varnished wood door, keen eyes traveling around the street and likely noticing the same sea of white cursors that Argo had. "It's rare to find a town without at least one player who's decided to make it their home, and I expected to cross paths with other groups along the way."

"Yeah," Argo agreed, pushing open the door. "You and me both. Hey, Chromato!"

Her longtime Sylph contact was not, as she expected, hard at work. If anything, it looked as if she'd caught him while entertaining company. The fat Sylph boy was seated at the only table in the shop's roughly triangular front room, a small but well-crafted and polished wooden surface which stretched out from the carved stone walls. A half-annihilated plate of food rested in front of him. A mixed-race trio of players filled the seats around the table with their own meals in various states of consumption, and a low conversation came to a sudden end as four gazes went to the new arrivals.

Chromato's eyes widened, and his youthful voice nearly cracked as it shot up in pitch. "Holy shit, Argo! What are you doing—never mind that, how did you get here?"

Argo could tell Thelvin was about to open his mouth. She stepped forward before he could say anything and spread her arms. "Come on, this is we're talking about. You sound surprised to see us. What's going on?"

"Which way did you come?" That urgently-voiced question came from an Undine man in light armor who was sitting opposite Chromato—or rather, he had been sitting there; he shot to his feet as he spoke, the buckles and other metal parts of his leather armor jingling.

"Why?" Argo asked, put off by the unexpected question.

"Because no one else has come through for almost two days," Chromato said. "Not since a party of Sylph scouts Sunday night."

That made at least some sense to Argo; Sylph clearers and scouting groups were the most consistent and regular travelers through the Corridor on their way to and from Arun, and a new zone had just opened up. She glanced around at the unlikely group. "Are you the only players in town?"

"Far as we know, yes," said a Cait Sith girl with short calico-patterned hair, who from her voice and stature seemed like she might be in her late teens.
The final stranger was a Spriggan man who seemed to be the best-gear ed of the lot; if he wasn't a clearer, Argo was certain he was at least an experienced adventurer. "Lugru pretty much turned into a ghost town overnight. Never seen anything like it—all of a sudden one morning, the mobs in the Corridor started respawning a lot tougher than usual."

The Undine man nodded. "One day they're all the kind of low-level trash any traveler can handle, the next they're deadly."

"Terquen's not exaggerating either," added the Spriggan, his square jaw tight as he spoke the words. "There were three groups here in town when the spawns changed—the four lowbies Terquen and Whiskers came with, the farmers I'd hired on with, and a group of Sylph clearers whom I'm guessing spent the night on their way back to Arun."

"We figured we'd follow the clearers out," Terquen said. "The mobs on the Arun side of Lugru are supposed to be tougher, right? Around level fifteen or so."

"Correct," Argo said immediately. Realization had snuck up and ambushed her while Terquen was speaking; she thought she now knew exactly what had happened here. "Let me guess—you got partway through the other side of the Corridor, and then you got repops."

"And not just any repops," said the Cait Sith girl, who sounded like she wanted to cry. "Nasty things with cursors darker than I've ever seen. Our tank thought we could take the first one, and we came close, but…"

Terquen rested a hand briefly on the girl's shoulders. "That's enough, Whiskers. I think they get the point."

Whiskers shrugged her shoulder to dislodge the hand. "They're dead," she said bitterly, amber eyes on the table. "Everyone else in our party is dead, and we're not. I should've never left Freelia."

Tell me about it, Argo thought. The Undine withdrew the unwanted touch and returned his attention to Argo while gesturing towards the Spriggan. "We ran into Veldt during a fighting retreat; he'd been trying to stealth his way through."

"And doing a pretty good job of it, too," Veldt said confidently. "If it was just me, I probably could've made it; I'm a hell of an Illusionist. But my best concealment spells are self-only or single-target—I can't affect anyone else with Phantasmal Form, and that's my bread and butter for getting past aggro trash."

Argo was inclined to believe him—she knew most of Kirito's tricks for getting around solo; it was something at which well-played and creative-minded Spriggans excelled. "So why didn't you keep going?"

Veldt didn't answer immediately, but glanced at Terquen and Whiskers. Thelvin made a sound of approval. "You couldn't leave them to fend for themselves."

"Well, what else am I supposed to do?" Veldt said a little testily, perhaps misunderstanding Thelvin's meaning. "A teenage girl, and an Undine who can't heal or tank? Trapped in a zone with a bunch of high-level mobs? Nobody would ever see them again."

"I can heal," Terquen protested. "There isn't an Undine alive who doesn't have the Water Magic skill."

"No," Veldt replied, arms crossed in front of his black leather chestguard. "But there's plenty who don't bother to grind it, and I'm talking to one. You're melee DPS; being able to spot-heal in a pinch
doesn't make you a healer. Come on, man, you said so yourself."

"What about your farming group?"

Veldt shrugged at Argo's question. "Don't know; don't care. They were farming the Sylph side of the Corridor, and I only signed on as far as Lugru. They were headed back towards Sylvain and I wasn't; I have no idea what became of them after that."

Argo caught Thelvin looking at her aside. "If they were a typical home-zone farming group," she said, "they're probably high teens, maybe early-mid 20s. Tough to get much higher than that off what pops in the starting areas without venturing into dungeons. Guess it's possible they made it back, but we didn't see anyone on the way here."

"Please help us," Terquen said, bowing in his seat. "We don't know anyone we can message. The two of you made it here alone, and that means you're a lot stronger than us. I don't care which direction you're going, I want out of here. I think I speak for all of us on that one."

"Not quite," Veldt said. He shifted in his chair and looked slightly uncomfortable. "I do care about the direction; I'm headed to Arun, and I want no part of the shitstorm going down in Sylph territory right now. If everyone wants to party up going northeast, then sure, I'm in. Otherwise, if you want to take these two back towards Sylvain, I'll just try stealthing my way through again and wish you the best of luck."

Argo could understand not wanting to get involved in Sylph politics, especially from a Spriggan. She turned to Chromato, annoyed. "You coulda told me, you know—I haven't heard a damn thing from you in a week, and that was before the respawns. For that matter, why not just call on some of your clearer friends?"

"We kept figuring that someone was bound to come through eventually anyway," Chromato said defensively, running stubby fingers through his short forest-green hair. "They just opened up the next zone in the World Tree, after all, and I was hella busy servicing all the clearers on their way back—at least half of the Sylph groups are in Sylvain to debrief. Problem is, now most of them are tied down dealing with the Sallies."

Argo's mobile ears perked straight up. "What about the Sallies?"

Chromato blinked, momentarily taken aback. "You don't kn—of course not; you've probably been in the Corridor since this morning. We're at war again."

Despite the matter-of-fact way the Sylph blacksmith relayed the news, it still rocked Argo back. She had absolutely no trouble understanding the chill that ran through her from head to toe, setting her hair on end and her tail to lashing. No one could send mail to her while she was in the Corridor, but new PMs had started queueing up not long after she entered the safe zone; for the moment they were forgotten. Argo gave a little hop and seated herself on the window sill by the table, putting her feet up on the back of Terquen's chair. "Tell me everything."

"I don't know much," Chromato began slowly, "but here's the short version: the Sallies started farming the eastern part of the Ancient Forest, and sent clearers to protect their farming groups. We sent our clearers to support the Militia and try to kick them out, but it's not going so well."

"The Sals invaded?" Thelvin's tone was calm, but Argo could hear the edge in it.

"I guess that depends on what you mean by that," Chromato clarified. "From what I hear, they basically just decided to start farming there and told any Sylph farmers to stay away. They're not
randomly ganking, but they're not pulling punches either if you stray too close to their farmers."

Argo frowned. "Well, it's a contested zone—anyone can farm there. Still a dick move," And potentially explosive. She fought against the urge to check how many of the remaining unread messages concerned this outbreak of hostilities; there would be time enough for that before long.

"Yeah, and it gets better," Chromato said. "Now that fighting's started up again, rumor has it the damned monkeys are going to try blockading Lugru."

Argo tried to keep her face free of the apprehension and panic she felt. "Which would trap everyone still in Lugru when they do." There is a solution to this. Think. Think. Think. Now she did avert her eyes long enough to start opening and scanning through unread messages. Nothing yet about a blockade, but a whole mess of reports corroborating the basic outlines of the conflict and tallying known casualties. She memorized and dismissed them as quickly as she could.

"Get us out of here, please," Whiskers said in a plaintive, whiny tone of voice which cut through Argo's concentration; it was a sound she found very unpleasant and not at all conducive to thinking.

"We have no way of knowing when another clearing group might come through," Terquen added, craning his neck to look over his shoulder at her and donning a bemused expression as he found himself at eye level with her boots. "And we haven't seen any more farmers or pickup groups."

"The mobs are something of a deterrent to casual tourism," Veldt quipped.

The situation was one without a lot of good options. It was one thing to party up with several competent, level-appropriate players—Veldt looked and sounded like he could handle himself, or at least thought he could. But Terquen was an unknown quantity whose healing couldn't be counted on, and so far she felt comfortable dismissing Whiskers as relatively useless. Bringing them along likely meant signing up to be a babysitter, and if nothing else another party of Sylphs was bound to clear the way through eventually. They might all be better off waiting it out; that would give Argo time to catch up on what was happening with the Sylphs and Salamanders.

Unless the Salamanders really did blockade Lugru. That could be… inconvenient. As much for Argo and Thelvin as for the poor newbies stuck here; there was no telling how long they'd be stuck. At least while she was in the town she could send and receive messages, but she couldn't stand the idea of being trapped underground with her freedom at someone else's mercy. Especially not now, with Corvatz leading the Salamanders.

Thelvin spoke into the silence of Argo's thoughts, addressing the others. "Please pardon my asking, but given the situation, what are your levels and roles?"

Most players would consider the first part of Thelvin's question extremely rude—a player's level and stat allocation were closely-guarded information rarely shared even with longtime friends. Circumstances being what they were seemed to relax some of the expected resistance.

"Low 20s, melee DPS with some heals and other basic Water spells," said Terquen after a moment's hesitation. "It's not equipped right now, but I use a scimitar."

"What's your Water Magic skill?"

This time there was no delay before answering Thelvin's question. "Just over 300."

"Not enough to rez," Argo said. "But you'll have party and AOE heals, Delay debuff, and Rejuvenation to speed up our HP and MP recovery." It was the last spell that would come in most handy; having someone with Rejuvenation minimized the number of potions they would have to buy.
and carry, and would eliminate a lot of the downtime between pulls.

The fact that he wasn't a proper mage worried her, though—tackling dangerous content with a healer who wasn't specced for healing was risky at best. Unfortunately, given the choice between no healer and a shitty healer, she'd take the shitty heals. She glanced at the other Cait Sith girl, not expecting even that much.

"Nineteen," said Whiskers. "And um, I don't know exactly what you mean by role... but I can shoot a bow. DPS means attacking, right?"

"More or less," Thelvin said, "If you use a bow, then what you do in a party is stand back and deal damage to mobs from a distance, right? That role is what we call Ranged DPS."

"Oh," Whiskers said, looking and sounding faintly bored with the gamer jargon. "Why didn't you just say 'archer'?"

"Because not all ranged DPS comes from archery," Argo said. "Mages can DPS, too."

"Well, I don't use magic," the younger girl replied. "It makes me sound stupid."

You don't need magic for that, Argo thought, rolling her eyes. She knew the girl's type; the Cait Sith faction had a disproportionately large population of casuals, socials, and larpers who rarely ventured outside of the lowbie home zones. Mobs in Cait Sith territory capped out at 15; chances were good that the girl never risked level-equivalent content, and had started hitting the steep diminishing returns on EXP for mobs more than 5 levels below her.

The real wonder was that she'd leveled up even this far; it meant she couldn't be completely useless. But at least they now knew where she fit into the party. That left one.

"My level's probably comparable to yours, judging by your gear," Veldt said directly to Argo—a notably nonspecific answer; the Spriggan seemed to be holding his cards close to his chest, and his caginess reminded her a bit of Kirito.

It made her curious. "My gear?"

"Tier 3, like mine. I'm mainly support—utility and crowd control magic. Illusion, obviously, plus Dark and Wind. All mid-level or higher."

"That's very good," Thelvin said, giving voice to Argo's surge of cautious optimism. "Useful mix of buffs and debuffs, with ranged magic DPS in a pinch."

"Utility and deeps here," Argo said, which gave away virtually nothing of substance. She jerked a thumb towards the Cait Sith tank. "Thelvin's exactly what he looks like. She looked over at Chromato.

"You know me, Argo," Chromato said, chair creaking in protest as he leaned back. "I'm done with clearing, and I'm not going anywhere. This is my home, and foot traffic'll pick back up eventually once things calm down. I've just been keeping these three company."

Thelvin made a thoughtful noise deep in his throat as he looked over the unknown players. "Party of five, two possibly underleveled, one well over. Two melee DPS, one ranged, some light heals and utility magic, crowd control, and a tank." He paused, and now his gaze took in Argo in addition to the others. "Sub-optimal, but potentially doable. What are we facing?"

Veldt seemed to understand Thelvin's ambiguously-worded question. "Aside from the usual types of
underground trash—spiders, crawlers, so on—there's the Lugru Orc Clan. They always sucked to deal with, but now they've taken a level in their Badass skill."

"They maxed out at 15 on the Arun side before," Argo said. "Level 11 on the Sylph side. But on our way here from Sylvain, we were clearing mobs in the low 20s." It was giving away perfectly salable information, but she figured these weren't details to be holding back, given the circumstances—and besides, she was getting a lot more information than she was giving out. Fair trade.

"Well, the Arun side is a lot meaner than the way in now," Veldt said. "I've scouted both while we were waiting. I'd bet on the Orcs being at least 25, and some higher. A few named with cursors dark enough that I didn't feel like taking chances, usually with a handful of trash adds backing them up. Those you can avoid. The big danger is from patrolling roamers—Orc cav mounted on Wargs. They do not seem to have a tether, and they will ride you down if you try to run." Argo was sharp enough to figure out why Terquen and Whiskers looked guiltily down at their feet just then—and why Veldt was able to offer this advice in the first place. She would've wagered quite a sum that their "fighting retreat" had involved a bit more retreating than fighting.

Thelvin nodded; if he picked up on their reaction, he gave no outward sign. "Sounds similar to the «Caves of Color» zone, just before the 10th gateway. That's doable by a level-equivalent group." His eyes made another quick circuit of the room. "Which we are not entirely, but we have a few things in our favor, not least being a clearer tanking. I'm well-equipped and I outlevel this zone by quite a bit—just not by enough to trivialize it."

"I appreciate it," Veldt said. "Not having a tank in the party sucks."

"Are you still partied now?" At the chorus of headshakes, Thelvin drew open his menu and sent each player an invite with the swift ease of long practice. One by one, three new HP and MP bars appeared in the party list in the upper left of Argo's HUD—just below her own gauge, but smaller in size and simplified the way Thelvin's was.

"It's early afternoon," Thelvin said once everyone was grouped up. "Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't hesitate to push all the way to Arun with that much of the day left; we'd make it easily. But circumstances are not normal, and we have to clear our way through difficult and unknown mobs with an under-strength party and no rez spells. That means taking no chances. That means taking things slowly and carefully, stopping to fully recover HP before pulling again."

"You're suggesting we spend the night here," said Veldt, clearly unhappy at the prospect.

"It might be the safest choice," Thelvin said. "Start first thing in the morning, fully rested and stocked. Get our mistakes made and learning done while we're fresh instead of running on fumes, and have the whole day to carefully make our way to Arun."

Argo could not even begin to express just how much she did not want to spend the night in Lugru, nor list the numerous reasons why. "There's the town of Pacifen in South Yggdrasil Basin," she pointed out. "Thirty klicks east of the Corridor's exit. Got an inn, smith, general store—just the basics, but it's a safe zone and a place to sleep for the night."

"That still potentially leaves us fighting our way out of the Corridor at the end of the day when we're getting tired," Thelvin gave Argo a pointed look. "I know you're anxious to get topside, but I'm not persuaded it's a necessary risk."

"Don't talk like I'm the only one who's in a hurry to get to Arun," Argo said in mild agitation. "These kids want out too, and you've got two parties waiting for you there."
Thelvin appeared doubtful. "My clearing group will understand the circumstances, and Klein and his friends are already inside the World Tree—they're not waiting for us, we're just meeting up with them."

"Is this a good time to remind you about the damned Salamander blockade that could be cutting us off at any time?"

Thelvin weathered Argo's reminder and glanced at Chromato. "With respect for your friends, some of whom fought at my side in the raid a few days past… that conflict is between you and the Salamanders. You said they weren't randomly ganking—they're almost certainly under orders for a specific purpose. Their clearers are unlikely to attack a pickup group with no Sylphs in it, so long as we pose no threat to their farmers."

Almost certainly. Unlikely. These were weasel words that Argo disliked hearing in an answer, however much she might use them herself. This stinks of wishful thinking, she thought loudly enough that she was certain it showed in her expression. She did not share Thelvin's optimism when it came to the subject of Salamanders exercising restraint, and the moment this conversation was over she was going to have some very pointed messages to send to Eugene and her other contacts.

"In my experience," Veldt said after a few beats when no one spoke further, "it's usually the tank that sets the pace and leads the party. If Thelvin wants to wait, that's his call—it's his ass on the front line. But I'm no more anxious to stay here than anyone else."

"Look," Argo said. "The longer we stay here, the greater chance of the Sal-Sylph conflict escalating and trapping us for who-knows-how-long. I'll do what I can to try and cool it down while we're here, but I can only do so much with Corvatz calling the shots." She tilted her chin up to regard Thelvin. "Maybe pushing forward is a risk, but so is staying here and hoping we don't get cut off by the wrong kind of Sallies. Hope is not a plan."

"She's got a point," Veldt added. "I stay as far from Gattan as I can for a reason."

Thelvin nodded slowly. "All right, thank you for your thoughts, everyone. Argo and I need to restock and repair, and I suggest everyone else do the same if you haven't. We'll regroup at the gates in half an hour to give it a shot, but if I decide it's too risky, I'm turning back and putting out a call for a Cait Sith clearing group. Fair?"

"Fair," Argo said. She knew it was the best she was going to get from Thelvin, and his caution wasn't misplaced—not with the half-assed group they had to work with. She leaned back against the window and drew open her menu, spawning a new PM window and typing while she listened to Thelvin.

"Good. Now let's talk roles. Obviously I'm tanking. We don't have an off-tank, so no switching—I'm going to be the center of mob attention, and I doubt most of you could take aggro from me if you tried. Argo will be melee DPS. Whiskers, you and Veldt hang back with Terquen. Wait five seconds before attacking so I can build hate, then take any open shot you can get unless I call for DPS out."

"What do you mean, hang back with me?" the Undine protested. "I'm melee DPS."

"With all respect for your skills, not today you're not," Thelvin said. "You are our only source of heals, and we need you focusing on keeping everyone in the green. Keep your weapon at your side and both hands free—"

"I can cast with one free hand," Terquen argued.
The hell you can, Argo thought, hitting the «Send» button on a brief message to Sakuya and starting another PM immediately.

"Not effectively," Thelvin pointed out, as if plucking the objection from her mind. "Even the two-handed spells that can still be cast one-handed will be at partial strength if you do. I want your attention on your assigned role, Terquen. Stay with the the ranged attackers, and only draw your weapon to defend them if anything gets past me."

No one seemed to have anything else to say, although Argo thought the rapid-fire exchange of looks that passed through the group then qualified as a pretty spectacular episode of Significant Glance Theater. "I'll give more specific instructions before our first fight," Thelvin said. "Any questions?"

When it was clear there were none, his eyes fell on the Sylph blacksmith. "All right then. Let's get started with repairs."

Kirito was both extremely embarrassed by the fact that he had to ask an NPC for directions around his own home city, and equally thankful that no one was around to see him do so.

Fortunately, NPCs didn't judge. The white-cursored Spriggan citizen paused when addressed as the game detected the focus of Kirito's attention, turning to him with eyes the color of cornsilk. The irises were so pale that in the torchlit evening Kirito wasn't certain if they were supposed to be gray or yellow. "Need something?"

"Could you tell me where to find the city jail?" Kirito asked. He'd been there once before while simply exploring the city, and he vaguely remembered it being somewhere deep underneath the central ziggurat—but until now he'd never had any reason to go there specifically.

NPCs tended to be scripted for various specific, limited roles, but there were certain kinds of interactions that they all seemed to have the ability to process—among those being a player asking for directions. The Spriggan NPC took a moment to consider the question, then pointed a gnarled hand towards the opposite side of the city. "Go towards the hill where the baths are, but instead of going down the steps, hang a right and follow the top of the hill around until it steepens to a cliff face. The entrance to the jail is in a one-story building there, but the jail itself goes deeper."

Kirito took a moment to appreciate the skill needed to design the game's language processing code; it had been the subject of more than a few articles he'd read during the beta. In order for the NPC to give an answer like the one it had, it would've been necessary not only to plot the path from their current position—that was the easy part—but render the directions in natural-sounding Japanese.

It occurred to Kirito that asking for directions conversationally the way he had seemed to engage more of the NLP system's resources than ordinary interaction—like most players, he usually kept NPC interactions simple to avoid confusing their narrowly-focused scripts. Curious, he decided to indulge a whim and test the limits. "Thank you for the information. It's important that I find a Spriggan named Prophet there, and I might need Yoshihara's help in dealing with him. I don't suppose you've seen her around?"

The Spriggan paused for a moment—long enough to make Kirito wonder if his question had managed to overwhelm it somehow, or trigger a race condition and glitch the NPC as it was about to switch back to its scripted routines. Then its features seemed to unfreeze. "Our leader? Last I heard, Yoshihara was seen in the north side of the market not too long ago. A small group was heading out, and she was talking to them right before they left."

Kirito hadn't actually expected any kind of a useful response—if anything, he'd expected the usual
blank look and boilerplate answer that an NPC gave when you tried to talk to it about subjects it wasn't scripted to know. His surprise was such that he almost fumbled his response. "You said not too long ago… do you know where she went after that?"

This time there was no pause before the NPC replied. "I couldn't say. We done here? I've got customers to attend to."

There were no other players nearby, nor were they at one of the dozens of vendor stalls in this part of the marketplace; Kirito was certain the NPC had just reverted to his stock responses. "Thank you for your time," he said with a quick bow.

The information about Yoshihara was interesting, and certainly more than he'd expected to get out of an NPC—but at the moment it was a distraction from dealing with Prophet, who was currently sitting helplessly in a jail cell. He'd hoped he might be able to get Yoshihara to do something, anything, to keep him there longer—and he had a few ideas if it came to that—but her help wasn't strictly necessary quite yet.

Still, he didn't want to go all the way to her residence to find her if he didn't have to, so it was worth checking. Kirito spared a glance at his HUD as he took to the air and veered towards the north end of the market; it was almost nine in the evening. The tip he'd received from Philia—whoever that was—had suggested that Prophet would be in the jail for at least another few hours. At least, that was a reasonable inference; the message had been sent around midnight. But it occurred to Kirito that it was entirely possible Philia hadn't been the one to jail him, or that Prophet had already been in the jail for some time when they found out.

Or, for that matter, that his tipster had been telling the truth in the first place.

It was far from the first time he'd had such suspicions, but this time the wary thoughts came against the backdrop of Penwether's design themes: an ancient, dead city of deep-forest gloom, the crumbling remnant of a long-lost civilization. The relative silence of its citizens and the transient, makeshift nature of newer structures seemed intended to suggest that its denizens were not so much living here as staying—permanently encamped while they plundered the seemingly unending catacombs and ruins beneath and surrounding it.

Suddenly hyper-alert for no reason he could discern, Kirito landed and stopped in front of an NPC armorer's stall and pretended to examine a shield hanging from the rack in front of him, lifting it slightly and tilting it from side to side. It had been a clever idea, but the exercise ended up being fruitless: between the dim evening light and the surface imperfections breaking up the reflections, he couldn't tell if anyone was following him. He ignored the NPC's repeated inquiries and stepped away from the display, trying to look around without being obvious about it.

He certainly wasn't alone now; aside from what NPCs still remained in the open at this hour, here and there he spotted the green cursors of other Spriggan players. One cluster of five appeared to be a group preparing to head out, which wasn't as surprising as it might've been in another city—the fact that every Spriggan had at least a basic cheap Light spell meant that a lack of daylight was no real hindrance if a party preferred to hunt at night. There weren't any other parties that large; most of the other players he saw were individuals and pairs, and there weren't all that many of those.

Kirito was preparing to take to the air when recognition snapped his gaze back to the large party gathered around an NPC alchemist. He didn't know the rest of them, backs turned as they were, but he would've recognized Coper's youthful voice and unruly head of hair even if he hadn't caught a glimpse of the other boy's face in side profile.

"What's the holdup, Krensh? We're losing valuable time here."
Krensh's voice was even as he poked at a menu, but when he glanced over at Coper, he looked about as anxious as his party member sounded. "What does it look like?"

"I can't see your menu, jackass, how should I know?"

Now that he'd spoken and been named, Kirito recognized the stocky Spriggan tank's distinctive Volcanic Steel crafted armor—and his equally distinctive abrasiveness. "Trying to find the pots I just bought. The damned bot said the transaction completed, but I don't see them anywhere in my inventory." Kirito could sympathize, hard as it was to concede any common ground with Krensh; finding the right item in your inventory menu if you carried a lot of mats and small consumables could be a real pain. It was the main reason to use gear that added bags or pockets, since anything stashed in them—while vulnerable to theft or loss and adding encumbrance—was accessible at a moment's notice.

What the hell are those two doing together, though? It was so baffling to Kirito that it threatened to distract him from his quest. Coper hated Krensh, and Krensh hated… well, pretty much everyone except his Leprechaun girlfriend, and it was anyone's guess what she saw in him. For that matter, Kirito didn't see her anywhere around; he knew some of the players Coper liked to run with, and none of them were here either.

Still fighting off the sense of unease that had overtaken him, Kirito toggled on his Hiding skill in order to conceal his cursor, and took a few steps aside so that the canvas shell of the armorer's stall hid him visually as well. As far as he knew, Coper didn't come to Penwether often, so even if Krensh hadn't been there, seeing Coper twice in the span of a few days struck him as curious enough on its own to stop for a moment and listen.

Another boy in Coper's group, a gangly Imp youth with violet-black hair halfway down the back of his robes, sighed and stepped into Krensh's personal space. "Here. Set the damn menu viz."

Krensh's annoyed reaction to the offer of help was in poor grace. "And what? You can't interact with it, Burns."

Kirito couldn't see the mage's face, but from the cant of his head suspected that eyes were being rolled. "Will you just do it?"

After a few taps at the air, Krensh's inventory menu blinked into public visibility. He turned the window slightly so that Burns could see better, and scrolled through with one finger. "See? No «Truesight Potion» anywhere. I'm telling you, it's a glitch."

Krensh immediately realized the problem without even needing to see, and apparently so did Burns. "And I'm telling you that you're being a noob." The Imp mage reached out quickly and grabbed Krensh's wrist, then used it to give the menu a spin, scrolling it down. "There: it's under «Potion: Truesight». Potions are categorized items, so their display names are always prefixed with the item type. You were in the beta; how do you not know this?"

Krensh rubbed his unarmored wrist sullenly. "I oughta port your ass to jail for that. And you're forgetting whose safe zone this is."

"You're welcome," Burns said amiably.

"Accept that prompt or bare any steel and I will gank you in your sleep, Krensh," said Coper, holding out his palms to the two conflicting party members before they could escalate. "And Burns, rein in the attitude. This is gonna be hard enough after Mizer bailed on us, but even without his DPS rounding out the party, for the five of us it's still doable. We lose any more, we lose this opportunity.
Now, everyone got their pots?" Four nods followed immediately. "Then let's rip sky."

Kirito hadn't met Burns, but he knew of the Imp ex-clearer by reputation—not all of it good. There were one too many familiar names in the whole conversation for his liking, and he had the nagging feeling that he didn't want any part of whatever quest or job this unlikely pickup group was doing. When Coper rallied his pickup group to leave, he made sure to maintain his Hiding skill and ducked under the awning of the vendor stall.

Five sets of wings—four Spriggan, one Imp—filled the air with receding sound as they wasted no time taking flight. Kirito peeked out from the open interior of the tent and craned his neck up at the sky, activating Searching long enough to pop the five dwindling cursors and ensure they were all leaving. The few other players in the open seemed to have had their attention drawn by the sound, a distraction which Kirito used to resume following the directions the NPC had given him without further incident.

The encounter had been unusual, but Kirito tried to put it out of his mind as he prepared for what he might find in the jail. True to the NPC's words, it was a squat single-story building of cracked orange stone, a relic of whatever civilization supposedly predated the Spriggan population in the city. Steel double doors which were obviously not part of the original design barred the entrance, but despite their imposing appearance they parted at a push—albeit not without an incriminating squeal of protest.

The entryway was high-ceilinged, constructed as a broad half-octagon with the front door in the center of the arc, lined with benches on the angled sides and parting to two hallways on the flat side. No one was in evidence—not a living soul, not even an NPC; other than the stone benches there were no furnishings of any kind, and the place looked like it hadn't been used in decades. Did the NPC give me bad information? Kirito wondered, peering down the darkened hallways.

Frowning, he raised a hand and aimed in the general direction of the ceiling, some distance down one of the halls. "Matto famudrokke trekul shippura dweren." At the conclusion of the incantation, golden motes of light coalesced into a miniature star which shot away from his outstretched hand; eventually it attached itself to a Focused point on the ceiling and blossomed into a brilliant light source—as if a very large LED had emerged from the stone.

The shadows cast during its brief flight fanned out in alternating bands of light and dark as it passed the vertical iron bars on either side of the hallway, confirming his suspicions; when it reached its destination and brightened, he could clearly see the cells blocks that the corridor held in lieu of walls. He was in the right place... there just didn't seem to be anyone home. No motion stirred in the deep shadows, and no lonely voices called out in response to the light.

The two hallways turned out to be the stubby legs of a broad U-shape, the half-loop lined with empty cells perhaps four meters square. Some of the cell doors were sealed, most were not; the ones which were not seemed just as empty as the ones where the creaky metal doors hung wide open. At the apex of the U, opposite the entrance to the building, a switchback staircase with carved stone steps led downwards, a path which was lit only by a few torches hanging from the walls at irregular intervals. The dusty sign next to the stairs read «Overflow», and Kirito briefly considered heading down there, but decided to first check the other leg of the U as it wrapped back to the entryway.

Kirito raised his hand again, preparing to recast his spell and illuminate his way. Before he could speak the incantation, however, a deep voice filled the silence, startling him.

"Any more predictable, Kirito, and you'd be a video game protagonist. Like clockwork, both you and Philia. It's really amazing you've survived this long."
Kirito fought to control the triumphant rage that flared in him at the sound of that voice. When he turned towards its source, he saw a vaguely human shape lying in the far corner of one of the closed cells, and immediately cast his Light spell against the back wall. Prophet's eyes narrowed, and without straightening from his reclining position on the stone bed, reached up to pull the hem of his hood down so that it provided shade from the sudden increase in illumination. "Rude. Could at least warn when you're going to turn on the lights."

Kirito put his hands on the bars of the cell and leaned closer. "After what you've done, you've got real nerve complaining about courtesy. 'Griefer' is the nicest thing I can think of to call you, but that feels like an insult to griefers everywhere."

Prophet made an indifferent sound and drew his hood lower. "Argumentum ad hominem. Completely unimaginative. Boring me already."

Prophet had no cursor to target; Kirito couldn't even send him a duel invite to get his name. Annoyed, he carefully aimed a second Light spell directly at Prophet's chest. The PKer sighed and sat up, regarding the light source attached to him with one eye squinted shut. "And you call me a griefer. Fine, have it your way. Yatto famudrokke wejilh tepnaga yasun."

As Kirito braced for the unexpected, a wave of Dark energy washed out from Prophet, immediately extinguishing the active spells within its area of effect and plunging the hallway once again into something very near to darkness. The other Spriggan's laugh drifted out from the darkness. "Yes, non-combat spells work just fine in here, good for you." Before Kirito could recast the light source, Prophet's words lashed back out at him. "I don't do social visits, boy. Something on your mind, or is this just what passes for house entertainment in this shithole?"

Kirito folded his arms. "I'm not interested in being social with you. I mainly just wanted to confirm that you really were here, and take the measure of you when I'm not looking down your blade. If that qualifies as entertainment, enjoy it while it lasts."

Prophet pointedly looked Kirito up and down. A sneer darkened the shadow of his face. "Come back in a maid outfit. That'd be entertaining."

The initial spike of surprise and alarm had begun to fade, and in its absence Kirito found the presence of mind to do more than just react to Prophet's taunts, now that it was clear the man wasn't a threat and couldn't go anywhere. He was mouthing off precisely because he couldn't do anything else. "Actually, I was thinking about how quickly I could get together enough players to ensure that you never set foot outside the safe zone without someone doing the world a favor."

Prophet's laughter rang out again, echoing down the stone hallways. "Hollow threats from a hollow child who's substituted self-righteousness for a lack of self-worth. If you had a lynch mob on call, you'd be rounding up your fellow vigilantes right now—not shooting the shit here with me and thinking about it." He leaned forward at the waist from his sitting position, gaze unflinching. "Try again."

Fists tightened on the bars once more. "You're awfully calm for someone who's sitting in jail, Prophet. You have to come out sometime, and there are at least two bottlenecks on the way."

Prophet snorted. "Listen to yourself. If you want to know why the Treaty is a dead letter, take a hard look in the mirror, boy. You've got no problem with PKing when it tickles you, jishou-yuusha—you cherry-pick the circumstances where you think killing is justified, and pretend that being choosy about your murder makes you noble."

"Jishou-yuusha? Odd choice of insults. From where I'm sitting, I'd rather be a self-proclaimed hero
Prophet wagged a finger back and forth in a condescending scold. "You don't get it, do you? That's all a hero is: a murderer with delusions that their nobility of purpose makes them better than those they've chosen to kill." Clothing and buckles murmured as Prophet came to his feet. "Plot twist, hero: no one's impressed by your self-congratulatory song and dance. And I don't care if you stand there running your mouth up to the moment that cell door opens—you still can't do a damn thing to me. You and I both know I can be out of this building and long gone before my «Prisoner» protection expires. And doesn't that just suck for you."

The smug, brutal mockery began to erode Kirito's reserve of calm. Prophet was aggravatingly correct; Kirito had reviewed the prisoner mechanics in the manual on his trip down. They weren't the same as they had been in beta, and the anti-griefing safeguards were apparently a lot more restrictive now—inconveniently so. "You seem pretty sure of that, Prophet. You willing to bet your life on being right?"

A hint of reflected magelight from around the corner briefly glistened on Prophet's yellow eyes as he stared back at Kirito. "As if we all haven't already." He gestured broadly at the ceiling, the floor, the air surrounding them. "This is all there is, you naive fool. There's no going back—our lives in the old world were gone the moment we entered this one."

"Maybe for you," Kirito spat out angrily. "Maybe your old life was so worthless that this is the only way you can find purpose. You're still just—"

"Spare me your armchair psychoanalysis," Prophet said wearily, coming to his feet and drawing close enough to the bars that Kirito could've almost reached out and touched him. "I know exactly what I am, and I'm good with it—and good at it. Think your precocious, hormone-addled brain has this all figured out?"

"I think I've got you figured just fine," Kirito said, ignoring the insults for the obvious bait they were and trying to project serene contempt. "Your kind is a dozen to the yen in any online multiplayer game. The death penalty in Alfheim raises the stakes to murder, but the hard truth is that at your rotten core you're still just another pathetic flavor of griefer—someone who gets their fun from ruining it for others."

Prophet's white grin split the darkness. "Spoken like the true carebear you white-knighting types usually are. It must suck for you, being in a world with no GMs to call or customer service to email when someone doesn't join your hug circle and play the game your way."

Kirito again refused to rise to the bait. This, at least, was an argument he'd had before, and it wasn't one he was interested in rehashing with the sociopath on the other side of the bars.

When no answer came after a few beats, Prophet grunted and brought his face within breathing distance of Kirito's, separated by an alternating veil of vertical steel slats. "Best get used to it, jishou-yuusha... pinpointing my Myers-Briggs or guessing my blood type won't change the reality of this world. The only part of 'us' left is the consciousness that lives here in Alfheim... and when Alfheim's time is up, so is ours. Best you make the most of it if you plan on ending it."

The chill of unwelcome knowledge shot through Kirito with each sentence Prophet spoke, the weight of the realization almost staggering him. "You have no intention of ever leaving the game—or letting anyone else clear it."

Prophet slowly clapped his hands, backing up a few paces. "The boy's slow, but he's starting to catch on. You want to talk hard truths? We're already dead. There is no logging out. No second wave, no
warm and fuzzy happy ending that gives everyone back their old lives. This is all there is—and the sooner you get that through your head, the sooner you'll understand that Death has offered us immortality."

Now Kirito did take a half-step back, though he wasn't quite sure why he did. "Now I know you're crazy. And if you think that little speech is going to intimidate me, Prophet, you can add stupid to crazy. What do you think the clearing groups will do when they find out you're trying to stop the game from being cleared?"

Prophet's infuriating grin widened. "I imagine they'll go out of their way to hunt me down."

Kirito stared incredulously. "You sound like you want that to happen. If it's an end you're looking for, I'd be happy to help your wish come true—just stick around here for a bit."

Kirito could faintly see Prophet's shoulders rise in a shrug. "Bloodthirsty little wannabe-hero, aren't you? I think I'll pass for now. It's a big world, and I know its secret places. Every clearer hunting for me is one less trying to clear the game, and one more for me and mine to farm for Favor. Win-win from where I'm sitting."

"You're contradicting yourself," Kirito pointed out. "You say there's no point in trying to clear the game, but then talk like it's to your benefit if we don't. So which is it?"

"Just because you don't understand my words doesn't make them a contradiction," Prophet remarked. "If you clear the game, the game shuts down—and if that happens, that's curtain call for all of us. An end to ageless virtual bodies that will never get sick or die, a life lived in a world where the gods walk and a man can be anything he chooses to be." He seized the bars just below Kirito's hands, and pulled himself close so abruptly that Kirito yanked his head away. "It doesn't have to end that way. It doesn't ever have to end, if you pledge yourself to the Mistress and impress her with your works."

"And now we're back to larping," Kirito said, openly disgusted. "Since you like hard truths, here's another one for you: roleplaying as a serial killer for a fictional deity doesn't make you their prophet."

"No," said Prophet with a secret smile as he bowed his head. "This does."

Kirito didn't recognize the words that Prophet spoke next; they were not part of any incantation he had ever heard, and they certainly weren't Japanese or English or any of the other languages with which Kirito had some familiarity. But while the words held no meaning for him, they had a clear effect. He could hear a faint guttering sound accompanying the deaths of the few torches down the hall, and what light remained gradually took on a bloody hue. There was an oppressive sense of presence in the air, a suffocating weight that seemed to press in on Kirito like the cloying humidity of summer gone ice-cold.

It made no sense. He was in a safe zone, and there was no spell in the game that could do anything like this. Kirito's sword was clear of its scabbard before he even thought about it. But when moments passed and nothing further happened, the tip of his blade dipped a little as he glared at Prophet's smirking face across the bared steel. "That's it? You found an ability that lets you put on a lightshow and intimidate people with weird simulated feelings, and suddenly you think you're communing with a god?"

"Goddess, actually," came a silky whisper in Kirito's ear. "And you have your cause and effect reversed."

The second sentence was almost lost to the wind as Kirito whirled and leapt backwards down the hallway, sword held defensively before him. He was certain—completely certain, beyond any shred
of doubt—that he had been alone with Prophet. The dead silence in the jail was so absolute that he was sure he would've heard anyone approaching. Now the two had become three, and the third was regarding him from a pair of mismatched eyes, one glowing yellow and the other hazy with blindness.

It was a woman's form, but even in the dim light Kirito could tell that there was something wrong with her. One half of her face was stunningly beautiful, save for a blue skin tone that darkened in the reddish hue of the light. The other half appeared superficially human, but the skin went intermittently translucent to reveal dead flesh and bones below, as if the normalcy was merely a seeming.

Above the woman's white NPC cursor was a single word, three simple letters in the Latin alphabet: «Hel».

"Such a dramatic response," Hel said with a curious tilt of the head, once it was clear that Kirito had no immediate intention of lowering his sword. "One might speculate that I startled the boy." She turned to regard Prophet in his cell. "You expended a great deal of «Favor» to bring me here. Those souls cried my name when you beckoned. I trust that my time—and your Favor—will be well-spent."

When he could spare a moment to glance out of the corner of his eye, Kirito was shocked to note that Prophet was kneeling. The PKer did not raise his head while he spoke. "Mistress, the boy thinks me a common killer. He hunts me, and all others in your service. It seems a waste of his talents."

"Indeed?" Hel turned her good eye towards Kirito, who did not flinch from the gaze. "Yes… so I see. Boy he may be, but a boy with a man's will and a man's skill. Were he human, he would surely see Valhalla one day. I trust you are not fool enough to think that I will directly interfere in this conflict?"

"Not at all, Mistress. I'm sure you would celebrate my death at his hands as readily as the other way around."

Hel's yellow eye gleamed with its own inner light as it beheld the kneeling Spriggan. "It could be so. If he is so skilled at sending others to the Halls of Valor, perhaps he might even take your place and send them to me instead."

Kirito had no idea what kind of quest he'd managed to stumble onto, but he'd had about enough of being a bystander in this insane exchange. He locked his gaze with Hel's, trying not to let her inhuman appearance or the unreality of the moment throw him off. She had a white cursor, which meant that she was—at least, at the moment—no danger to him. He allowed his sword to lower, but did not sheathe it. "You're an NPC—I recognize your name from Norse game lore. What's going on here? Why are you playing favorites with a player? A player-killer?"

If the Hel NPC was confused in any way by Kirito's questions, she showed no sign of it. "If you know my name, child, then you must also know who and what I am. I am the final embrace known by those who come to the end of their lives. I am the beacon that guides those who venture across the Gjöll. Mine is the farewell kiss before the funeral pyre at the end of a long life, and the whispers of solace to those who keen for what they left behind."

Hel's smile then was sweet and affectionate, an appearance horribly betrayed by the decaying rictus that momentarily faded in on one side of her beautiful face as she gazed towards Prophet. "As to your final question, Vassago is my prophet. He has discovered that I am quite generous to those who pledge to me and do good works in my name, and he has taken it upon himself to spread that word."

Vassago? To Kirito's ear, it had the sound of a foreign proper name. "A prophet needs a prophecy,"

"he said warily. "What's yours?"

Hel reached out towards Kirito with an upturned palm; she seemed to be about to touch his face. Kirito jerked his head away and took a few steps back. "Oh good child, be at ease. I do not harm the living."

"No," Kirito said, unrelenting. "Apparently you just encourage players to do that for you. That's a distinction without difference to me. Wrap it up in whatever dialogue tree or plot language you like, that's what's going on here: you're giving out some kind of deity quest where the goal is to kill other players."

"Your understanding of the situation is rudimentary at best," Hel replied, languidly strolling over to one of the cell doors and caressing slender fingers down the length of the metal bars. "Your need to frame it in your own terms limits your ability to see truly. Mine is a story that has awaited its fullness for centuries, part of a prophecy foreseen by the Seidh and set in motion from the moment the trickster was bound and the Valkyries slumbered. In time you will learn more of it. But not yet."

"In Japanese, please," Kirito said when Hel seemed to pause for a breath. "You're talking a lot but not actually saying anything. What kind of reward could be worth the price you're asking?"

"I offer something that no other of my kind will. A treasure without weight or substance, yet invaluable. A reward commensurate with the deeds which earn it."

"And that is?" Kirito had absolutely no intention of taking Hel up on her offer or accepting any quest from her, but as long as she was scripted to keep talking, he was going to get as much information as he could.

Hel was still facing the cell, hand pressed against the bar; she canted her head to look back over her shoulder at Kirito with her blind eye. "Eternal life."

Kirito couldn't help it. He laughed out loud, directly at Hel, and then grinned as he looked at Prophet. "You're being played."

Prophet's mocking smile, barely visible below the shadow of his hood, was awful in its lack of humanity. "You think so."

"I know so," Kirito said, gaze flickering briefly to Hel and then back. "The Nerve Gear isn't a fountain of youth, so we're talking about game mechanics here. And Kayaba would never have designed a quest or reward that let you cheat death by breaking established game mechanics. At best it's something like Second Chance—a one-time trigger to reset your HP to 1 instead of becoming a Remain Light."

Hel seemed to entirely gloss over most of what Kirito said. "My dear, you cannot cheat Death out of what she is offering freely. Pledge to me, and my boons shall be yours."

"Never," Kirito said, fingers tightening on the grip of his sword. He had no idea what was going to happen when he tripped whatever dialogue condition that caused Hel to decide he had refused to accept her quest. This situation was so new, so different; for all he knew she might well go KOS and aggro him. He didn't think that was likely or even possible... but recent events had shaken his assumptions in that regard.

Hel's smile faded slightly then, and became almost sad as she gave Kirito a proper once-over. "Is that so? A pity. You could continue your hunt for my prophet, you know. I do not tell my devotees which souls to take. Vassago spoke truly: I would celebrate his death at your hands as surely as the
It was the second time Hel had called Prophet by that name. Kirito filed it away for future review; it was possible that she'd just inadvertently given him Prophet's true character name. He decided to push the boundaries. "What part of 'never' was hard for the game's language engine to process, Hel? I'm not your minion, and I never will be. Don't you have Valkyries for this or something? Or are they all too embarrassed to be seen in public with you?"

Seconds ticked away. Without the guttering of the stairwell torches to provide a glimmer of flickering light, it was hard to tell how many. Hel's frozen posture might well have been an indicator of lag or a game freeze, and Kirito fidgeted slightly—more to test whether or not he could still move than from nervousness.

At long last, her smile tilted ever so slightly to the side, favoring the rictus. "Well, aren't you interesting."

A hint of movement in his far peripheral vision drew Kirito's attention to the side; Prophet had raised his head and was grinning toothily. "Not that it would've stopped me from killing you. Actually, you would've been worth a lot more Favor if you'd accepted—the more dangerous souls usually are." He began to rise to his feet. "Suits me fine. Now you know how screwed you are."

When Kirito's eyes went forward again, Hel was gone, her silent departure not even displacing the air. Within moments the color balance in the dim light shed its crimson aura, and the smothering sense of pressure and presence to which he'd very nearly adjusted suddenly lifted itself.

Still wary, Kirito returned his sword to its sheath and faced Prophet defiantly. "If that's all you've got in your corner, Vassago… I'm not worried. No matter what kind of abilities you've unlocked, no matter what lore nonsense you've mistaken for a gameplay advantage, you can't escape the fact that Hel and her entire questline still have to obey the game's rules. I've been on quests where there was a temporary 'cinematic' bending of what seemed possible, but they all still had to conform to the game's need to maintain a fair balance."

He tipped his head in the direction of where Hel had stood. "I'm sorry, were you expecting me to be awed by this show you just put on? Everything she said and did just now was still completely within the limits of a quest NPC. Well-written dialogue and temporary sensory effects aside, this is is still nothing more than another kind of quest."

Kirito's eyes snapped back to Prophet, whose expression was unreadable in the shadow of his hood. He leaned forward just a little to emphasize his words. "And that makes you nothing more than a murderer sitting in a jail cell, waiting for judgment."

Without further word or delay, Kirito swept down the hallway and left the jail at a fast walk, Prophet's laughter nipping at his heels. The moment he was outside, he took to the air and took a ballistic route towards the central ziggurat, not caring at the moment for subtlety. There was no telling how much longer Prophet would be stuck in that jail cell; for all Kirito knew he could be released at any moment, and he'd spent far too long there trading words. He had to assume the worst and act fast.

Kirito ignored the stares of the few Spriggan players he passed in the street and the hewn stone hallways, eyes before him and intent focused on his objective. He expected to have to spend some time pounding on Yoshihara's door before she'd answer it—he was certain she eventually would, if only to make him go away. At this point he didn't care what kind of scene he made; he doubted this chance would ever come again.
He did not at all expect to come face to face with her when he rounded the corner leading to her residence.

Judging by her reaction, Kirito was evidently not high on Yoshihara's list of people she expected to find on her doorstep, either. "Oh, hell no," she said.

"Yoshihara—"

"I don't care," Yoshihara said bluntly, her ash-gray ponytail whipping back and forth. "My field of fucks is a dustbowl right now."

"It's about Prophet," Kirito said in a rush. "He is sitting in your jail right now."

Yoshihara folded her arms with a scowl. "Tell me something I don't know."

Kirito's jaw dropped. "You knew? What the—never mind. Look, I just need you to hear me out for thirty seconds, okay?"

"Nope," Yoshihara said with a flick of her hand, stepping towards him. "A whole world of nope."

"Just thirty seconds!" Kirito said, flabbergasted. He stepped aside so that he wasn't blocking her, a gesture of good faith that he hoped wasn't wasted. "You want to see Prophet dealt with as much as I do, and all I'm asking for is thirty seconds out of your packed schedule so that I can explain what's going on and what you can do to help. I'll pay you to do that for me. I'll even pay you just to hear me out, if you want it to be worth your time."

"Are you deaf?" Yoshihara demanded, hand resting on her doorknob long enough for it to unlock. "I said I don't have time for this. There's nothing else I can do for you, now please, please, just get the hell out of here and leave me alone."

Kirito blinked in surprise at her choice of phrasing. "What?"

"I said—" Yoshihara's rising voice cut off there, eyes drawn to the side. At the same time, Kirito heard a chiming sound in his ear and caught a glimpse of a system notification icon in his peripheral vision. His wordless exclamation of disbelief came only a moment after Yoshihara's shocked gasp from in front of him.

『07/05/23 09:17 JST — «Yoshihara» has been defeated in combat, and «Coper» is now your «Faction Leader» until the next scheduled vote. Please congratulate him!』

Kirito was barely aware of anything else—he just couldn't stop staring at the nonsensical words in the system notification window. When he finally looked back up at Yoshihara, she was still there in front of him, very much alive and well; when he focused on her cursor, the status ribbon that appeared still had a gold star beside it. She had one hand in the air positioned as if to scroll through a list in her game menu; the other covered her mouth as she looked on in obvious horror.

"What?" Kirito repeated, more confused than ever. He read the message again to make sure it wasn't some very clever spoof, although he couldn't think of how anyone might've accomplished such a thing.

By the time he looked back at Yoshihara again, some of the shock had faded from her face. Her hand was still held out as if stopped in mid-motion of operating her game menu, trembling as she met Kirito's eyes for the first time.

"Yoshihara," Kirito said, "what's going on here?"
Yoshihara's eyes went up to the top of her vision, and she blinked once; as soon as she did, her features instantly began to melt slightly, to become fluid and malleable in a very uncanny but familiar way. The details on her armor changed; straps sank into the metal in some places, appearing where they hadn't been in others. She seemed to gradually lose a few centimeters of height while this was happening, although Kirito couldn't be certain whether he was imagining it. Her hair and face were the last to settle into a stable appearance, and when they did, Kirito halted the steady, cautious steps backward he'd been taking.

"Well," said a Spriggan with wavy black hair which brushed against the high blue-hemmed collar of her vest, her voice pained as she looked between Kirito and something in her HUD. "This isn't at all awkward or anything."

All at once the pieces began to fall into place for Kirito, the sheer volume of realizations stunning him far more thoroughly than any status effect. When the woman in front of him dropped her disguise, the visual effect had been identical to when one of Prophet's people had "cloned" Asuna's appearance with a spell. It was impossible to mistake it for anything else, especially now that he'd seen it happen more than once. Even Yoshihara's already-faint Osaka regional accent seemed to have softened to the point where he might not have noticed it if he hadn't been expecting to hear it, as if the person in front of him had been exaggerating it in order to sound more like her. "You're not really Yoshihara," he said, aware that the comment was stupidly obvious. "So who are you?"

"Give me a minute," the other Spriggan said, eyes on her interface.

"We don't—"

"A minute!" she said, voice rising sharply until she seemed to realize what she sounded like, looking startled at her own volume. "Just a minute, please," she said more quietly, voice still sounding tightly controlled. "I need to know for sure."

"Know what?" Kirito asked.

She simply shook her head without looking up, so Kirito resigned himself to the waiting game, giving his HUD a quick glance now and then to check the time. The young woman in front of him must've been doing the same; a little over a minute after the notification—almost to the second—she squeezed her eyes shut and bowed her head, a tear trickling down her ash-skinned cheek. "Sahara," she whispered. "Misono. Tokihiko."

They sounded like names; Kirito didn't recognize any of them, but they obviously meant something to her. After enough of a pause that he was getting ready to prod her again for a reply, the woman took a deep breath and seemed to pull herself together, meeting Kirito's gaze with much more strength in her own. "I guess there's no point in dragging out this charade any longer," she said. "You can call me Philia. Yoshihara... is one of my friends from outside."

Philia stopped there, eyes dropping again slightly to her game menu. She gave a weak slash at the air with one hand to close a window, and her voice broke again, this time with what Kirito clearly recognized as grief. "Was."

Chapter End Notes

Things are heating up again a bit, aren't they? We are getting into another part of the story that I have really been looking forward to writing—in fact, some of the segments
from upcoming chapters are already written and just need to be integrated in once the
story gets to that point, chronologically speaking. That last sequence with Kirito and
Philia, for example, has gone through many revisions over time but the core of it has
been sitting in its own scrap file, written, for more than a year.

I'm trying not to go more than two months without an update, and even that is longer
than I'd like. But ultimately, as longtime readers know... the chapter's ready when it's
ready, and it will be—sooner or later. Knowing that new readers are picking up,
enjoying and commenting on the fic all the time helps push me towards "sooner".

By the by, the TV Tropes page for this fic has been languishing for a while, and I
always feel weird adding tropes to my own work—I'm more interested in what other
people see in the story and its characters. Any tropers feeling motivated to contribute
there are encouraged to do so.

Thank you again to new and constant readers alike. As always let me know what you
think!
"The «Trade» window is the standard interface used in Alfheim Online for conducting trades between players. To open it, a player first selects another player using Focus, then chooses the «Trade» context action, at which point each player is presented with their own «Trade» window. Both players can then freely add or remove items on their own side of the trade until satisfied with the exchange, which will remain open until both players confirm that they accept the current state of the trade. Virtually any inventory item can be traded as long as it is not «Bound» to the player, as well as many weightless or non-inventory items such as keys, reputation marks, currency, some quest tokens, or even a player's explored map data..."
—Alfheim Online manual, «Trading and Transactions»

8 May 2023
Day 184 - Evening

Yoshihara was most definitely dead, but clearly Philia was keyed for what had been her room, and she had unlocked the door just prior to their erstwhile faction leader's death. It gave her and Kirito an acceptably quiet and—more importantly—private place to have a private discussion. A conversation that he was certain would be as uncomfortable as it was interesting.

"I suppose I owe you a few explanations," Philia said, sinking back into one of the former leader's couches across a low table from Kirito with an understandably glum expression on her face. "I'm sorry for being so rude to you before. I guess you probably figured out by now that I was putting on an act."

"I figured," Kirito said, unequipping his sword so that he could comfortably sit back. "Apparently the Yoshihara act involves hamming up her regional accent, using a lot of profanity, and telling everyone off."

Philia's smile had little real humor in it, and it was there only momentarily before vanishing. "Yeah, she was... well, kinda rough around the edges, and it was hard to act like her without being a complete bitch about it. So again, sorry about that."

Kirito waved it off, acting a bit less forgiving than he really felt at the moment. "I can't imagine it was much fun pretending either, and getting to deal with all the hate. She didn't exactly make it easy to like her."

Philia nodded, lips thinly pressed together and unsmiling once again. "Hell, there've been days when I didn't really like her, and she was my best friend."

"So why the impersonation?"

Philia's eyes rose to Kirito's only briefly before wandering around the room again. "Do you know how boring it is, being a faction leader? She hated it. Hated it like a big hatey thing hating. The only reason she got elected in the first place is because everyone who came over from our old guild voted for her—not because she wanted it, but as a joke. And the only reason she didn't quit after that was because the assholes who wanted to replace her were all worse." The look on her face went from merely sad to darkly angry all of a sudden. "Like Coper, obviously. God, I still can't believe he killed her. He must have taken out everyone else in the party and camped her Remain Light. And"
the leadership should've passed even if Winslow rezzed her; he didn't have to go that far."

"I don't understand how he killed her," Kirito said. "Were you two swapping places or something so she could go out?"

"It's more complicated than that," Philia said, relenting a bit, "but you're close enough. There's a high-level Spriggan-only spell, «Phantasmal Mimicry», right? Lets you touch someone and imitate their appearance and voice for a while, all the way down to their status ribbon."

"I've seen it in action before," Kirito said warily. "One of Prophet's people tried to use it to kill Asuna."

It was impossible to miss the physical flinch that shot through Philia's expression at the mention of Prophet's name. "Yeah," she said, more quietly at first. "Not surprised. It's useful—especially for what we had to pull off. As soon as we heard about the spell, we..." She paused there, mouth half-open. "There were some details we had to sort out to make it work, but Sahara had those of us who were left grind Illusion with her until we got access to it."

"Sahara?" Kirito asked. It was the second time Philia had mentioned that name, and his brain caught up to his mouth only a moment before Philia's reply.

The pain and grief in her voice when she did, although faded somewhat from the initial shock of her friends' deaths, was still noticeably present. "Yoshinae Sahara. That was her real name, I mean. The whole 'Yoshihara' thing was a nickname she got from being really into the underground racing scene—some guy she admired, I think."

"Yoshihara was a street racer?" Kirito said, not wanting to get sidetracked but at a loss for what else to say to a non sequitur like that.

Philia snorted suddenly; the humor sounded more than a little forced. "She wished. No, she was a groupie, but she loved cars and had fun with it, so what's. She and Misono—Mouse, I mean—always hung out with some gamer guys from that scene. MMOs were one of the only things we really had in common, other than she and I both being from the same ward. But there must be at least some overlap between gamers and racers, because she didn't have any trouble meeting guys or recruiting them for our guild." She hesitated. "Some of them of the not-so-savory variety."

Kirito nodded, listening attentively now. He was dying to find out just what the heck was going on here, especially now that he knew the person who'd been impersonating Yoshihara at least part of the time was the same person who'd tipped him off about Prophet. He wasn't happy that their faction leader had been killed, but he didn't exactly care all that much either—at least not to the extent of feeling inclined to reminisce about her with someone who was clearly going to be grieving for a while.

But there was something in Philia's last comment that called for patience instead of an attempt to redirect the conversation. "Go on."

"You have to understand," Philia said haltingly, as if she wasn't quite sure where to go from there, or how. "Our guild in Stellar Frontiers Online wasn't huge, but it wasn't like it was just a couple close friends either. So when she invites some new guy she met at a race, we're all like hey, cool, let's party up and gank Fed patrols sometime. You know, welcome the newbie, Sahara likes him so obviously he's boss, right?"

A connection clicked for Kirito. "Prophet."
Philia nodded, but answered with a different name. "Vassago," she said, the word burdened with emotional baggage that leaked through in her voice.

Kirito felt a surge of righteous excitement. "H… someone else called him that name. Is that his character name?"

Philia shook her head. "No, that's his real name—Vassago Casals."

"That's not a Japanese name," Kirito said unnecessarily.

The girl before him gave him a blank look, the kind that openly speculated about his intelligence. "You don't say."

Kirito tried to salvage the moment by pivoting to what he really wanted to know. "Do you know his character name?"

Philia hesitated just long enough to make Kirito certain that she did, regardless of what she said next. "Puu."

The sound stirred no recognition for him, however. "I can't tell if that's supposed to be a name or a comment."

Philia put a hand against her face and sighed. "His character name. Spelled Pii-Oh-Ecchi. Middle letter is small, the others big."

"Er," Kirito said.

"The English letter H," she clarified emphatically after a few beats of obvious confusion at his reaction. She tried to enunciate it as clearly as possible; it didn't come out sounding much different. "Oh for—get your head out of the gutter, kid."

"It's not," Kirito protested. "I mean, I'm not. It's… argh. Never mind. So his character name is «PoH»?"

"That's what I said," Philia said with what sounded like growing annoyance, tapping one of her fingers against her cheekbone as she leaned to the side and rested her chin in her palm. "On our old server he went by «Prophet of Hell». His toon here is definitely PoH. For all the good knowing that does you."

"It does more than you might think," Kirito said excitedly. "If I… wait a minute." A thought occurred to him then, and it was an unpleasant one that dampened some of the rush. "That means that Yoshihara knew who Prophet was all along—and so did you. Her eyes narrowed. "She could've acted against him anytime she wanted. So why was she protecting him after finding out what he did?"

"She wasn't," Philia said, looking down and away in clear shame. "She was protecting me."

"Click, click," went the rest of the pieces for Kirito. "You're the 'friend', aren't you? The one she was talking about who had some… personal connection to Prophet. Assuming that was her at the time, and not you speaking for her."

Philia couldn't meet Kirito's eyes now, and she was quiet for long enough that Kirito had almost decided that she wasn't going to answer by the time she finally did. "Yeah, that's me she was talking about. Go ahead and judge all you want."
"I'm not judging, I just don't understand what anyone would see in him, is all. He's... I mean... I don't have to tell you what kind of person he is, or what he's done, right?"

"I was barely eighteen when I met him, okay?" Philia said, ash-colored cheeks darkening and voice becoming strident and defensive. "Look, you're probably too young to get it. Sahara drags me by my hair to a *riaru* meetup for our SFO guild, and here's this tall, brooding older guy who looks foreign and has a dangerous vibe going on—and he *likes* me! Not Sahara or Misono, the 'cool girls' who smoke and drink and hang out with drifters, *me*—dorky little Kotone, single-for-life, the permanent third wheel. It was *me* he wanted. I pretty much worshipped him."

Despite her condescending remark, Kirito doubted that Philia was all *that* much older than him—she certainly didn't sound like she was long out of high school. But he could relate a bit, at least, to the low self-image she'd had of herself—and going by his own admittedly-limited exposure to girls at school, it wasn't at all surprising to him that she'd fallen for the first *senpai* who'd taken notice of her.

"I'll spare you the intimate details," Philia went on, much to Kirito's relief. "I ended up living with him for over a year before we got wind of Alfheim Online, and it was mostly his push that got a bunch of us to quit SFO and jump on the VR bandwagon. And then... well..." She waved at the ceiling. "Shit happened." She ran her fingers through the coal-black waves of hair that fell to either side of her face, eyes downcast. "I'm sorry for holding out on you before. I wasn't trying to protect Prophet. I was just... in shock."

The whole situation was starting to make a bit more sense to Kirito now, albeit with more than a few unanswered questions. Most of those, however, were secondary to the fact that Prophet still needed to be dealt with—and most importantly, Kirito now had his name. A name that the person in front of him, for all that she'd led him astray before, had freely given him.

He still wasn't entirely certain he could trust her. But she was the reason he'd even gained as much as he had, and she was clearly no ally of Prophet's—of *PoH*.

"You sent me that tip," Kirito began, carefully selecting his words. "You told me he was in jail for the day, and I'm guessing he was there—and you knew about it—because he tripped the anti-harassment code on you." Philia's only response was a nod so slight he might have imagined it. "Even if you had any reason to protect him before, you sure don't now."

"No," Philia said bitterly. "Again, not that knowing his name does you much good. What are you going to do, run for leader next month and Exile him?"

"No," Kirito said, almost physically recoiling from the thought. "But I might be able to get Coper to now that *he's* the leader. And if we can get all the other faction leaders to set him KOS, he'll have to go to neutral towns to restock—"

"Fuck Coper," Philia said heatedly, rising with an abruptness that startled Kirito to his feet as well. "I'm going to find that little snot and pay him back for murdering my friends. Don't even think about interfering."

"Wait," Kirito said, holding out a palm in a plea for patience. "Think this through. Regardless of how you feel about him, Coper *is* the faction leader now—at least, for the next thirty days he is. You won't be able to attack him anyway unless he leaves the city, and trying will give him every justification for hitting you with Banishment or Exile. There's *nothing* you can do to him right now unless he allows it to happen, and trying will only put you in danger."

"What does it matter?" Philia demanded, beginning to check over her equipment. "My life is in danger now anyway."
Kirito frowned, trying to get a step ahead of the conversation. "Why would that be?"

Philia stopped her preparations for just long enough to eye Kirito with contempt. "Just how dense are you, Kirito? Has it occurred to you that when Coper killed Yoshihara, she was wearing my avatar? I don't think he was even after her in the first place."

"Why not?"

"Because I know Prophet. I will guarantee you that no matter how casual he acts about it, he is righteously pissed at me for sending him to jail and costing him a whole day of his time, and my bet is that Coper's working for him. The kid used to be a PKer, and he wants to be leader. This is payback for Prophet, and Coper probably thought it was a bonus if our deaths demoralized the person he wanted to replace."

Kirito recalled the conversation he'd overheard earlier, and shook his head. "I don't think so. I think there's something more to this than a ticked-off psycho ex-boyfriend… more even than just Coper's ambitions."

"Like what? We're not talking about Machiavelli here; he's a snot-nosed brat who's in way over his head. And Prophet is a psycho who gets off on hurting people and doesn't forget a slight. I don't doubt for a minute that he'd kill me if he was pissed enough."

Kirito wisely decided not to reveal that he was even younger than Coper—she could probably tell anyway. Again he forced himself to slow down and proceed carefully. "Just what do you think went down out there between Coper and Yoshihara?"

Anger and grief again shrouded Philia's features. "I think he got lucky. Like I said, I think this was supposed to be a hit on me—Coper just got a lot more than he expected."

Kirito shook his head. "I think it was more than that. I think this was a planned political assassination."

Philia froze. A few beats of silence followed, during which her eyes held his intently, searching. Her next words were sharp enough to cause HP loss. "What makes you say that?"

"Because when I was in the market earlier, I spotted the group Coper went out with, and overheard them talking right beforehand. It wasn't his usual group—some of the most well-known leadership candidates were with him, and they were buying Truesight potions."

Stunned, wordless silence followed for a time. "But… how would he even know to look? We had this down to a routine, Kirito. Whenever she went out with us, Mouse and I took turns imitating her appearance. The person standing in for her would make a point of staying behind and being seen in the city after we left, then go back to the room before the spell wore off. No one should've had any reason to think she was leaving with us."

Kirito did not share that opinion. "All it would've taken was the wrong person having the right buff at just the right time. One person who happened to have a Truesight buff running, and caught a glimpse of Yoshihara in your party on the way out. Take that knowledge, put it together with the weirdly out-of-character way Yoshihara acted sometimes, and it wouldn't be hard for someone to figure out what was going on once they had the key piece."

Philia's silence was total this time, and eventually Kirito felt compelled to go a step further, softening his tone a bit. "I'm really sorry for your loss, Philia. It's horrible to lose a friend no matter who it is, or who they were to anyone else. But honestly? It's sheer luck it didn't happen sooner. Your whole
group has been playing with fire just so that Yoshihara didn't have to be bored by the situation she created for herself."

That addendum did not seem to help very much. If anything, it tipped Philia over some kind of threshold, agony and turmoil obvious on her face. She sank back down and put her elbows on her knees, chin not so much resting in her palms as entrapped by them.

"Philia," Kirito said, reaching out to place a reassuring hand on her head.

She absently swatted his hand away just before it touched her. "Don't."

"I—"

"Don't try to console me," she said unhappily, cutting him off. "You're right—we basically may as well have helped her commit suicide. Winslow tried to tell us too, but Yoshihara was so bored sitting in her room all the time that she was unbearable whenever we got back. And Mouse is all like no, just keep the damn thing on as long as you're out there and it'll be—" She stopped there, as if reconsidering her words, and then her shoulders sagged again. "Forget it. I just don't know what to do. Almost every friend I came into this game with is dead now. The only one who isn't probably wants me dead too. And I can't even hit the guy who killed them."

For someone who wore all black and went out at night, Yoshihara sure had liked a lot of light in her room; Kirito had to tune out the crackling of the nearby torch sconces as he leaned back against a wall of hewn orange stone. "Maybe there's a better way," he said.

Philia raised her chin from her hands and cocked her head.

"We don't really know what happened out there. We don't know the whole story, who arranged it… or who was helping them. Even if your plan is to get some kind of revenge on Coper, it won't do you any good to go off half-charged with no real understanding of what you're getting into. We need to know more."

He seemed to have her attention now; she sat fully upright and regarded him. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm going to talk to Coper," Kirito said. "Think about it: right now, he's probably just pissed off a lot of Spriggans. Everyone's going to wonder what he's planning to do—what he might change. He's already got the leadership for the next month, but he can't afford to make any more enemies right now—so it wouldn't be to his benefit to do any harm to either of us. There won't be a better time to get some answers. The trick'll be finding him."

"Oh," Philia said, the neutrality of her tone belied by the sarcastic bite in the words. "That's cool. Let's just go have a chat with the dude who murdered my friends. Epic win."

"I'm not saying you have to make nice with him," Kirito pointed out. "Though I don't think it'll help if you go in there and blow your top, either. If you don't feel safe going, I'll do it myself."

"No," Philia said firmly. "If you go to talk to him, I'm going with you. Now?"

"In the morning, actually." Kirito's eyes went up to the clock in his HUD. "Originally I wanted to try getting Yoshihara to help ID Prophet's real name and Exile him. I'm pretty sure being in jail for harassment would override the auto-teleport from Exile, leaving him unprotected in the city after his «Prisoner» status expired—and unable to safely come back even if I couldn't take him out. But I have his name now, and if I want him Exiled, it's Coper I'm going to have to talk to."
"And you think he's more likely to listen to you tomorrow than now?"

"I do, actually," Kirito said with confidence. "Chances are he's going to be trying very hard to stay out of sight tonight, hoping that emotions will blow over a bit when everyone sleeps on it. I'm pretty sure he'll have turned off his PMs, too, and I don't have him friended."

It truly galled Kirito, having to let Prophet walk out of that jail—but there really wasn't anything else for it now. If Yoshihara had been able to Exile him in time, Kirito might've been able to block off the jail door just long enough for the protection of the «Prisoner» status to expire. But although he'd try sending a message just to be sure, he doubted he'd have any luck getting any traction from Coper tonight.

Philia seemed to accept his answers; perhaps some of the same things were going through her head. She grimaced and again ran her fingers through her wavy black hair, glancing up at where her own HUD would be. "All right. We'll play this your way. For now, though, I think you'd better leave. It's getting late, and I... I need some time alone."

Considering the loss she'd just suffered, Kirito was surprised she hadn't asked him to leave sooner. He gave her a polite bow. "Again, I'm really sorry about what happened. Yoshihara was no friend of mine, but she didn't deserve to go out like that. We'll do our best to get some answers tomorrow—for both of us."

The smile Philia gave him then, although faint and weary, was one of the first genuinely friendly expressions he'd seen from her. He held onto the image as she shut the door behind him, and as soon as he'd left the ziggurat he sat down on an overgrown pillar that had fallen and half-sunken itself into the ground. The surface was damp from the thick fog that currently blanketed the city, and once he was sure of a stable seat he drew open his menu and started a new PM.

As he'd expected, trying to send anything to Coper produced an error rejecting his PM. Wasting no time, he next tried sending something to the player named PoH. It was a simple hello, ambiguous and easy to pass off as a misunderstanding if Philia had been feeding him a fishy story or pointing him at someone innocent, but it produced a different error: «Blocked by Environment».

It was an error message he had seen many times before. Nearly every player in Alfheim had seen it at one point or another, because it was the error the system threw when you tried to send anything to someone who was in a dungeon or underground. It was also, he knew, the same error you got if you tried to PM someone who was in jail—but that just meant that the test had ambiguous results which could be interpreted either way.

There was nothing more to be done about Prophet that evening, and Kirito knew he'd better be getting to bed. But before he did, he had one last important task to perform. He opened another new PM window, and began typing a very lengthy message to Asuna.

It was a shame that she was probably asleep by now. He couldn't wait to read her reaction.

"Natsuo is dead," Chihae said bitterly, rage warring with grief for control of her features.

Sakuya felt as if Hrungnir the Impervious had just punched her in the gut with his stone-shrouded fist, making her very glad she was sitting down. Months of memories flooded her in painful succession, countless times when Natsuo's healing had saved Sakuya's life, or when his ability to switch to DPS on a moment's notice had helped burn down a mob before its next attack cycle. Chihae and her husband worked together exceptionally well, and their banter and companionship
had defined Sakuya's group as much as Sakuya herself had. They were more than party members... they were friends.

And now one of them was gone, with the other standing before her in an emotionally broken state, the night-time glow of Sylvain limning her form in soft green light that filtered up through the windows of Sakuya's office. Still reeling, she exerted just enough control to bring out a single word. "How?"

Broken though she might be, Chihae still managed to deliver her report without her voice breaking as well. Sakuya didn't doubt that her current relative calm had been preceded by a great deal of screaming on the way back to Sylvain. "Sigurd's orders were to relieve Zel's patrol group, then engage a group of Sals they'd been harrying and keep them busy. Once we got there, it seemed obvious to me that the Sals were trying to scare us off, not kill us, so Natsuo and I tried to parley with them and find out what was going on."

"But they attacked." Sakuya's words were not quite a question.

Chihae, however, managed to surprise her. "No," she said. "That's just it, they didn't—at least, not right away. And it wasn't their farmers, they were clearers; I recognized some of them. Heathcliff's been reasonable when we've run into his group before."

"So he has," Sakuya said. "And he wasn't now?"

Chihae hesitated, conflict on her face. It was clear the words she spoke next were quite a struggle to concede. "I think he was trying to be. But apparently they've got orders to kill anyone who threatens their farmers. As soon as I heard that, I told Natsuo to go pass the word to the other groups." She grimaced. "That was about when Sigurd's group must have engaged a different group of Sals, not far from us. Everything went to hell then—Heathcliff's group went KOS on me; Gataki tried to give me covering fire, and the nuke they hit us with pretty much one-shotted him. Then Natsuo ran in and tried to rez him, but..."

The last few words became progressively harder for Chihae to get out cleanly, and when she trailed off there, Sakuya nodded in understanding. "They killed a healer who was trying to rez. So they really have abandoned the Treaty."

"Heathcliff said his orders were to turn away anyone trying to farm near them, and to kill anyone who threatened their farmers. He said to tell you that no Sylph is to cross the Willowbend—those were his exact words."

Sakuya closed her eyes and bowed her head. "The hits just keep coming."

"A bee sting to a crying face," said Chimiro.

Sakuya had almost forgotten that the unobtrusive man was still there; he had been utterly silent ever since Chihae had entered her office, hands clasped behind his back and head bowed slightly. "Pardon?"

"An old saying," Chimiro explained. "In French, it's phrased as misfortune never comes alone. In English, it's when it rains it pours. They all express the essential concept of—"

"I get it," Sakuya said, then immediately regretted interrupting Chimiro. "Forgive me, I'm still..."

When Sakuya did not conclude her sentence, Chimiro nodded and spoke. "Yes, so I imagine. The last few days have been quite trying, and now this. Chihae and Natsuo were part of your group for a long time."
Now the full weight of the loss truly did hit Sakuya. One of her knees tried to betray her, and she put her palms on the edge of her desk so that she wouldn't stumble. "A long time," she said softly. "Since the second month of the game." Glancing up at Chihae, she felt obliged to add, "my loss is nothing compared to hers."

"Yes." The single word Chihae uttered carried the low growl of a dog straining at its leash. "So with all due respect, Sakuya... what are we going to do about it?"

Sakuya's eyes went back to Chimiro. "Do you have any messages from Sigurd?"

"No, my lady."

That was vexing. Sakuya wondered why the hell not. A thought occurred to her; she quickly opened her «Administration» menu and went to the roster, sorting by level descending. Sigurd's name shot to near the top of the list, still quite alive.

She couldn't quite decide whether or not to be disappointed, and quickly shoved the thought out of her mind, dismissing the menu just as abruptly with a flick of her hand. "Well, you were about to bring me up to speed on the latest in from the group leaders I don't have friended. This seems very relevant now, so, please..." She gestured with her palm. "Do continue."

"As you say," Chimiro answered, drawing open his own menu and going through the motions of manipulating it until his map window became visible. "We have new confirmed reports of Salamander encounters in the areas I've marked in red. They do not appear to be advancing beyond what they consider 'their' side of the Willowbend, but from the messages I have, any incursions are met with responses of escalating lethality."

"That's right enough," Chihae said, some of the anger seeping through again. "When we showed up, some kids in a farming group had managed to aggro the monkeys, then tried to go around the blockade—ran smack right into another group, probably the same one Zel's group had scouted. They probably didn't realize they were dealing with clearers; the idiots tried to fight back. From what Recon said, they barely made it back to the trees alive."

It was the first time Sakuya could ever recall hearing Chihae refer to Salamanders as Saru. She could not quite put a finger on why it bothered her. It was not, however, the only detail that made her frown. "Recon couldn't manage Voluntary Flight to save his life," Sakuya recalled. It wasn't terribly uncommon for a farmer, she knew—which she supposed was why they were farmers, not militia or clearers. "In this case that's quite literal. If he made it out of that mess, the Sals couldn't have been DPSing to kill."

Sakuya had never before heard such raw fury from her friend and former party member as she did then, fury only barely smothered by cold deadpan. "They managed it pretty well."

"I meant with Recon's group," Sakuya hastened to clarify. "Escalating lethality, remember?"

Chihae seemed to relent slightly. "That's so."

"It sounds to me," Sakuya said went on, continuing while she had the momentum, "like Zel's group aggroed the Sals and drew an initial warning response. Then the kids ran into them and got another, more serious warning. Whatever happened next must have been the last straw for them."

"From what I've been reading," Chimiro put in, "they themselves have not crossed the Willowbend, correct? They are not attacking anyone who does not first engage them, correct?"

Sakuya felt her fingers wanting to wring the material of her yukata as she looked squarely at
Chimiro. "You're suggesting we just roll over and play nice?"

"Not necessarily," Chimiro said. "The issue is more complex than it appears. The Ancient Forest is a very large region, and you could potentially avert a great deal of unnecessary casualties on both sides if you ceded that small portion of it to the Salamanders and de-escalated the situation. We are still collecting farming data post-change, but we most certainly have other areas where we can farm the same creatures. With that said…"

Chihae cut into Chimiro's pause as if using a sword, every syllable sharp-edged. "Are we seriously going to let this stand?" she demanded of Sakuya. "They are farming our territory. They are killing our people."

"With that said," Chimiro continued with a gesture towards Chihae, "that is likely to be the reaction of many, many Sylphs. Your position is precarious by virtue of the way you obtained it, but your people are waiting to see what kind of a leader you will be; they really have little other choice. The way you deal with these hostilities will strongly figure in their thoughts when the next election comes around."

Sakuya allowed herself to sink slowly into her chair, closing her eyes and rubbing at her temples. "You're telling me that I can either stop a war, or keep leadership of the Sylphs—but not both. That is a simple choice for me—no one sane wants a repeat of the first month."

"You misunderstand," Chimiro said, a sad expression creasing his jowls. "I am not saying you can stop a war. I am telling you that you can delay one."

Sakuya made a wordless sound of confusion before looking up and replying. "No, apparently I don't understand."

"Who do you think is likely to take your place a month from now if you are not re-elected?"

It did not require a great leap of imagination to grasp what Chimiro was getting at. Skarrip had been Faction Leader so successfully and for so long that there was no real bench of candidates for the Sylph leadership—and the few there were tended to be well-known personalities in the Militia or clearing groups. Personalities who, for the most part, would shed no tears if Gattan disappeared off the face of Alfheim overnight.

One in particular.

"Sigurd," said Sakuya with a tight expression after a few beats passed.

"Precisely," Chimiro said. "You have no love for the Salamanders, Sakuya, but you at least still recognize them as people, no matter their form or color in this world. After the events of today, do you doubt that Sigurd's first act upon being elected would be to declare unrestricted war on our neighbors to the east?"

"Then what do you suggest?" Sakuya said—a question that was not entirely rhetorical; Chimiro's advice could be useful.

"I wish I had an answer for you," the older man answered after an uncomfortable pause, erasing her brief surge of hope. "But it seems to me that if conflict is an inevitability either way, the least bad option would be the one which allows you to influence the conflict in ways that might minimize the harm."

It took a few moments for Sakuya to work out what Chimiro was trying to say. She glanced over at Chihae, who was watching the exchange like a hawk alert for prey. "Chihae, could you please give
me a few minutes? Chimiro and I need to discuss this issue further before I decide what to do."

"You're going to back down, aren't you?"

There was an implicit challenge in Chihae's tone that Sakuya chose to ignore for now. Her expression softened after a few moments. "Chihae, Natsuo was my friend, and I do appreciate you coming to tell me face-to-face rather than making me find out through PM. I wish that I had the luxury of grieving properly with you, or of indulging the urge for vengeance that we both have. The Salamanders will answer for what they've done… but the way we go about it must be a way that I feel is in our best interests as Sylphs." She paused briefly there. "Fair?"

Chihae gave little sign of whether or not she agreed, eyes going to Chimiro before returning to her leader. "We'll see." She bowed, correctly if a bit quickly, and turned to leave. Before her hand could touch the door, it slid open quickly to admit Sigurd, who stopped himself before colliding with her and stepped aside with a shallow bow, gesturing to the open door with an upturned palm. "Chihae."

"Sigurd." There was very little warmth in her acknowledgement, as if he'd all but ceased to exist after getting out of her way.

Sigurd's eyes followed her out with an odd look until the door shut, at which point he turned to regard Sakuya and Chimiro. The expression on his face then became so smug that it nauseated her. "I have returned with news you will want to hear."

"It's about time," Sakuya said, annoyed. As much as she needed to discuss a plan of action in private with Chimiro, now that Sigurd was here she would be foolish not to first take his report into account. "Whatever it is, it would've been nice to know it hours ago. Has everyone in this faction forgotten how to PM?"

"You will forgive me for having been somewhat busy killing Salamanders and keeping my group alive," Sigurd replied. "Two things you seem to have trouble doing."

What Sakuya felt then must have been only a fraction of Chihae's rage, but it was enough to bring her back to her feet with a snarl. The look on her face must have been something to see; Sigurd actually blanched and took an involuntary step back. "Understand this," she said, forcing her tone ice-cold instead of the white heat that blazed through her body and urged her to do foolish things. "If you ever again use the death of someone I cared about as fodder for humor or trolling, do not doubt that I will end you without hesitation or care for what follows. That is your one and only warning— you will start choosing your words more carefully. And you will never again willfully keep me out of the loop on matters of state. Now report."

"I was getting to that," Sigurd said with—was that actually fear she heard in his voice before he mastered it? Her threat had not been idle or frivolous, and something of that must have penetrated. "It will please you to know that we have struck hard and successfully against the invaders today. I personally led the assaults on several of their groups, and dealt a total defeat to two of them with no loss to my own."

"Total defeat?" Sakuya echoed. "You killed them?"

"No," Sigurd said, already testing the limits again. "I sat down to have tea with them and asked them very nicely to go home. Of course we killed them. They would have done the same to us."

This only sent her thoughts further into conflict. As badly as she wanted to see the Salamanders pay for what they'd done, a part of her still recognized that the way she handled this situation had repercussions for more than just herself. What had she thought was going to happen when they rode
Sigurd wasn't done. "My group alone accounted for nearly fifteen Salamanders, and six of those were most certainly a clearing group. Once they fell, the other group they were with went down very quickly, and they dropped quite a lot of mats—it's very likely they were farmers. Perhaps this loss will make the others wary of returning."

Farmers. Low-to-mid-level players who wouldn't stand a chance in a stand-up fight against clearers. So much for de-escalating this, Sakuya thought. She recalled Argo's earlier message and grimaced. I'm sorry, but as much as I'd like to give you the time you asked for... it's time I don't have. "I very much doubt that your seal-clubbing is going to do anything but enrage the Salamanders, Sigurd. I thank you for defending our lands, but going forward I would appreciate if you would at least try to pretend that the Treaty of Arun still exists."

"What does it matter now?" Sigurd demanded. "The Salamanders have clearly abandoned the Treaty. Why should we hamstring our own responses to their aggression?"

"What do you think the endgame is here, Sigurd?" Sakuya shot right back. "This isn't the real world—we can't simply invade their city any more than they could ours. Not without the kind of ridiculous luck Kibaou had in catching the Imp leader outside right after he'd been elected. Neither faction can truly _defeat_ the other, and I don't care for the idea of living in a perpetual state of war until the game is cleared. You kill them. They kill us. To what end?"

"Until the cost of camping our territory becomes unacceptable to them," Sigurd replied shortly. "Is that not obvious?"

"It is obvious that is what you _hope_ will happen. It is not at all obvious to me that it will happen. You know what kind of person Corvatz is. You know he's not going to be intimidated. What if he keeps throwing Salamander lives at us? What then?"

"They'll run out eventually." Sigurd might well have been describing material resources rather than the human kind, for all the care he showed.

"Not before we do!" Sakuya nearly yelled before getting her voice under control again. "We _cannot_ win a war of attrition with the Sals, Sigurd. If that's your only plan for handling this, I've overestimated you."

"Don't be so quick to judge," Sigurd replied coldly. "My plan does not simply amount to 'kill them until they stop coming'. Part of the plan involves denying them resources and making their farming too inefficient to justify the costs. To name just one element, the direction from which our attacks come matters. With Searching we can spot large groups from quite some distance. By watching their movements we can identify which groups are the clearers and which are the farmers. Even if we only force them to stop farming long enough to defend themselves or move locations, it inflicts an opportunity cost on them."

Sakuya had to admit that there was more depth and merit to Sigurd's strategy than she'd assumed. "And what of our clearing? Every day we dedicate clearers to this, we fall behind in progression through the World Tree."

"As do our enemies," Sigurd said. "I've sent the groups with the least PvP experience back to Arun. They will provide us with progression while we deal with the immediate threat."

The turmoil in Sakuya's thoughts remained—if anything, it grew into a tempest. Bit by bit she ordered those thoughts, pushing aside uncertainties and irrelevancies until she arrived at a decision...
she could live with. "Continue your campaign of harassment," she said. "But no more extermination missions—your orders are not to kill without cause. Out-maneuver them. Drive them away. If they fight to the last man and won't give up, that's one thing. But you will adhere to the Treaty, or before tomorrow is out the Militia will have a new leader—one who still remembers that he's human. Do we have an understanding?"

Sigurd held her gaze for a few beats, scowling. At last he relented. "Fine."

Now Sakuya smiled at him—a smile that did not touch her eyes. "Good. Now will there be anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Sigurd said, not yet turning to leave. "There is one thing you can do that will make it much easier to distinguish Salamanders from others using Searching. Something that takes only a few moments and leaves no doubt as to where we stand."

"And that is?" Sakuya asked.

"Well," Sigurd said, "right now all Salamanders display a yellow cursor until engaged in combat. That complicates quite a few things—not least of which is being able to tell them apart from anyone else with Searching." He did turn then, showing her his back as he walked calmly to the door and rested his fingers on the handle. "We are in a state of de facto war. Sooner or later our faction leader might want to get around to making it de jure."

Griselda could not recall ever being so exhausted as she was by the time she stumbled her way down the subterranean corridors of Nissengrof. Not from her housework in the real world. Not during the Salamander blitz, when she'd once had to stay up for a full day straight. Not in the long journey to Domnann once she found out where her husband was, nor in all of her days spent farming mats.

Mapping. All we're doing is mapping, and I feel like I've been juggling watermelons all day while balancing on a floating log.

It hadn't been just mapping, though. That happened automatically whenever a player visited someplace new, or even explored a new nook of somewhere they'd been. The resulting data could be turned in to NPCs for a modest sum, or selectively traded directly to another player. It required little more than simply having been there, and it was just one of the little ways that a smart group recouped the maintenance costs of adventuring.

The work her group was doing was something else entirely, as was the zone in which they were doing it. Her arms and legs ached from more than 12 hours of ascending and descending through the labyrinthine caves of the Frozen Underways using rope and natural hand-holds—ached to just below the threshold of actual pain. Occasionally they'd even had to use her and Schmitt's superior STR stats to bodily lift the others up to where they could secure a route for everyone else.

No wonder nobody wants to map this place, she thought, as she had found herself doing so more than once over the course of the day.

And yet, there was something incredibly satisfying about it, a satisfaction which touched some heretofore-unknown craving—filled some void within her that she'd never even known was there. They were doing something more than just

If what Chellok had privately told her that morning was true, then the changing mob spawns had implications far beyond just affecting the drops her group brought in. The fact that every other
farming group was bringing back a different balance of drops of course meant that the overall balance was changing.

And that was a problem the likes of which she had scarcely imagined. The known, renewable nature of where those drops could be found and in what volume dictated a vast number of things taken for granted every player in the NCC—every player in the world, now that she stopped to think about it. It wasn't just the fact that the stock of every type of NPC vendor changed based on what got vendored to them. The ready availability of one mat or another meant that players in general were more likely to make equipment choices that relied on those readily-available mats. Equipment with any dependency on less common or otherwise more expensive mats—whether by virtue of outright rarity, distance to where they dropped or could be harvested, or difficulty in doing so—would of course be less popular.

They needed to push into territories that had been written off, places in the game that players—especially farmers—avoided for one reason or another. Skylands that were uncomfortably high, zones that took too long to reach to be efficiently farmed…and dangerous dungeons with a poor risk-reward balance, zones where no one wanted to go.

The word expendable had passed through her mind more than once while she'd listened to him impress upon her the essential nature of what she was doing. But if he considered her group so, it was hard to tell—he was certainly sparing little expense to support them. As tired as she was, she owed it to him to fulfill this one last task of the day.

Far fewer players were out and about this late in the evening, which meant that she didn't have to hide her exhaustion or feel self-conscious about occasionally needing to lean against a wall to let a bit of dizziness pass. She'd expected there to be more people the closer she got to the Depot, but apparently it was just as quiet as the rest of the city now. Not even the boy who worked at the reception desk was there—she honestly wasn't sure why she'd expected he would be; he wasn't an NPC.

That absence left her with a problem, though. The Depot wasn't closed off entirely, but it was clearly well past any hour where they expected to need to screen visitors—anyone here now was likely authorized to let themselves in. Chellok had instructed her to come straight to him rather than turning in data to the Surveyor, but how was she supposed to do that if there was no one to let her in?

This is silly, Griselda thought clearly amidst the cotton-like haze of weariness. I should just come back in the morning when someone's actually here.

Except that hadn't been what Chellok had asked, and she was very reluctant to deviate from what she'd been told to do. It wasn't his fault she was late, it was hers. Frowning, she leaned back against a wall—she didn't trust herself not to fall asleep if she sat down—and opened her menu.

「Please forgive the hour of this message and my own lateness. I'm at the Depot if you still are, but I can't get in. I will wait five minutes and then return in the morning if need be.」

It felt like she'd barely blinked, but the clock in her HUD told her that more than a few of those minutes had passed before she got a reply. 「Sit tight. I'll be there in a jiff.」

Obligingly, she sat down and awaited his arrival. She must have closed her eyes again; the next thing she knew, Chellok was shaking her shoulder, startling her awake. He cut through her sputtered, groggy apologies with a wave of the hand. "I'd offer you some coffee or tea, but that doesn't actually work in this world. You weren't supposed to be overnighting this assignment yet, you know."

"Forgive me. It wasn't intentional," Griselda said, head bowed and eyes on the floor. "It was my
failure, not my group's—I underestimated how long it would take us to get back."

"Take it easy," Chellok said gruffly. "No one's punishing you. I was just getting worried is all, and I couldn't send a message while you were underground." His eyes went up to the top of his HUD. "I wanted to sit down and go over the data with you, give you some direction for tomorrow. But your brain's probably deep-fried tofu at this point, so just trade me the data and we'll review it all tomorrow instead."

When Chellok's trade window opened, Griselda straightened herself and selected «Map Data» from the «Other» drop-down. A list of zones containing data new to Chellok then appeared, and a few more taps sent and accepted the trade. Tired as she was, she was amazed she managed the process.

Chellok nodded, satisfied. "Good. I'll take a look later; if the quality of this work is anything like your first go, this'll help immensely. Come back in the morning before we hand out assignments, and see me directly. We'll discuss your needs and get you direct access to the stores so you can resupply at whatever times of day your group happens to check in." He paused meaningfully. "I'd appreciate it if you continue to keep this arrangement to yourself."

Griselda bowed deeply, taking care not to lose her unsteady balance. "Thank you so much for your kindness. I won't fail you."

Chellok seemed amused for no reason she could discern. "Don't think you could, dearie. Go on, get some sleep. I'm sure your husband is wondering where the hell you've been."

The simple comment sent a dense wave of guilt and shame through Griselda, one which lingered painfully during the long walk home. Grimlock typically checked in with her when she was out late farming, or if he didn't hear from her every few hours—his concern for her well-being ran deep, and she knew it was his way of showing how much he cared and how worried he was for her.

This time, no messages had come—they'd spent all day within the Underways, where messages couldn't be sent or received. Worse, a ferocious blizzard topside had reduced visibility and pushed temperatures low enough that they made the rest of the trek home in the shallow tunnels just beneath the snowpack—lacking the innate Cold Resistance of the northern races, even the buffs that Caynz and Yoruko gave her hadn't been enough to keep her HP from slowly dropping in the open.

It had been a very, very long day, and she was looking forward to being home.

To her surprise, her husband was still awake when she stepped through the door. The living room was lit only by the fireplace tuned to its medium setting, filling the room with flickering light that quickly attenuated and cast dancing shadows beyond the player-crafted chairs that perched in front of it. Grimlock was sitting in one of those chairs, and his head half-turned at the sound of the door. "Where have you been?" he asked quietly.

He could not have been unaware of her status; they could see each other on their game maps and lists of friends, and her exact location would've shown up once she came topside or entered the city. Which meant that the question behind the words was really: *why are you so late getting home?*

Griselda was still wearing her armor; she made her way to the front of the chair and carefully knelt in front of it, head lowered. "Please forgive me for causing you worry. I was going to message you as soon as we came topside and started heading back, but the weather forced us to take an underground path home."

"And then?" Grimlock said, his voice anxious. "You were at the Depot for quite some time. A lot longer than it ought to take to turn in some data. You had plenty of time to check in. What were you
doing there for so long that kept you from sending a message?"

"I'm so sorry," Griselda said earnestly, leaning lower until her forehead touched the floor, the curtain of her bangs shrouding her face. "It's my fault. I was so tired, and I must've nodded off while I was waiting for someone to show up."

"If no one was there," Grimlock said, "you should've just come straight home. That is what you should be doing any time you return, unless we've discussed otherwise. You shouldn't be out this late anyway, and I expect that it will not happen again."

An alien, unfamiliar feeling rose within Griselda then—one which she could not recall ever feeling towards her husband. It was uncomfortably similar to the defiance she'd shown Chellok, but addressing her husband that way was all but unthinkable. The words she should have spoken then were yes, dear—that was what was expected, that was the response she was obligated to provide. Instead, without raising her head from the cold stone floor, she said something else entirely.

"Forgive me, Yuuji. I don't think I can promise that."

Silence. That was all that greeted her ears in response to her unexpected answer. The silence stretched so far that it was all she could do to keep her head bowed, to not look up to see her husband’s face and know what he was feeling. She'd hurt him, she knew—the question was how much, and whether he would understand the reasons… or even want to hear them.

At long last, when she was on the verge of breaking her own silence, he spoke. "Please do explain what you mean by that."

Now Griselda did raise her gaze, meeting his with trepidation, but also with a touch of gratitude for seeking an explanation and caring about her thoughts. There was anger and hurt on his face, certainly—but more than anything else, confusion. Straightening only a little, she rested her palms on her thigh guards and tried to give him what he needed. "You know that our guild has been assigned to map the Frozen Underways. It's a very important job for the NCC and our guild, and there will be times when it keeps us out in the field for days at a time. When we do return, it may not be possible to predict exactly when—and I'm expected to report directly to Chellok."

She knew that someone had discussed this with her husband. Chellok or Agil—most likely Agil. But the way he responded suggested that the matter was not at all settled. "Are Chellok's expectations more important to you than mine?"

Griselda hastened to deny the loaded question, mouth opening in protest. The correct answer, of course, was no. But a counter-question rose in her mind then: was that really true? Grimlock's expectations were entirely within his rights; she'd volunteered for Chellok's work. She tried to answer a different way. "I have a job," she said. "I love you, and I would not dare diminish your place in my life. But surely you understand that having taken on that task, I have an obligation to fulfill my side of the bargain?"

"You have an obligation to me," Grimlock said crossly. "An obligation that comes before all others—one which you have been neglecting more and more the longer you spend in this forsaken world." He reached out and touched her cheek, fingers tracing down until he lifted her chin with gentle pressure. "When you put on the Nerve Gear," he said softly, "you were the perfect wife. Then you disappeared for over a month after launch day, and by the time you made your way up here, you'd changed." His eyes traveled over her armored form with clear distaste. "Now look at you. There are days when I question whether or not I even know you anymore."

"Please don't say that," Griselda said, her tone just this side of pleading. "There was a war—you
know I got here as soon as I could. I've changed, yes, but I'm still the same woman you fell in love with, Yuuji. I am still yours, and yours alone." She reached up and took his hand in both of hers, pressing it against her face. "I'm just also this. This, here…” She let go of his hand and gestured towards her hip where her sword would have hung if she hadn't unequipped it before getting home. "This is me, too."

"That is precisely the problem," Grimlock said evenly. "It shouldn't be. A battlefield is no place for a woman, least of all a man's wife. I have tried to indulge this whimsy of yours in good faith, hoping that you would come to your senses once the reality of fighting for your life sunk in. I made equipment for you. I permitted you to form a farming group. I created a guild so that your farming could bring in more money." He leaned forward in his chair, arms resting across his knees and hands clasped before him. Firelight danced across his glasses, obscuring his eyes in a way that briefly made him look less than human—an thought for which she immediately chastised herself.

He wasn't done. "But you just keep asking for more. Pushing the boundaries, taking on more obligations without consulting me, spending longer and longer outside… becoming a leader, of all things. And now you're proposing to stay underground and incommunicado for days at a time? It is out of the question, my dear."

Tears welled in Griselda's eyes as she bowed her head again. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Please understand, Yuuji. This is something that I must do."

"You 'must' do nothing of the sort," Grimlock said with finality, before shifting to a softer, gentler tone. "Now, it is time for us to go to bed. In the morning you will go to Chellok, apologize for wasting his time, and humbly request an assignment that keeps you closer to home."

Griselda's avatar had no heart to pound, but the simulated sensations were there in force, and her breath felt like a golf ball stuck in her throat as she whispered a word that she had never before uttered to her husband in this way, eyes fixed firmly on her hands where they clung to the overlapping armored scales of her skirt. "No."

The open-palmed slap stung her cheek; there was no pain, but the shock of the impact—let alone the fact of it—was enough to stun her. "I don't think I heard that correctly."

"I…” Griselda's cheeks were wet save for the warm spot where Grimlock's light blow had landed. As horribly awake as she was now, she still couldn't think clearly, her mind in turmoil, and she did not dare look up. "Please forgive me, but I can't do what you're asking me to do."

"You can and you will."

"No, I—"

Heat radiated from her other cheek in the moments that followed the slap. Her husband had never raised his hand to her before, and now he had struck her twice in the space of a minute. He might think she had changed, but the man sitting before her almost felt like a stranger here and now. He had always been full of smiles and gentle humor—and strict expectations, to be sure, but that was his right. Not… this.

This was not the Yuuji she knew. What had gotten into him? What had she done to deserve his ire?

Nothing made sense to her now; Griselda felt like her whole world was being upended and shaken like a snowglobe. When she finally did dare to raise her gaze, Grimlock was looking at her expectantly, a mixture of anger and sadness on his face. "I'm appalled that you've pushed us to this point, Yasuko. You've forgotten yourself—and your place."
"Yuuji," she began, flinching when his hand twitched. "Can a person not be more than one thing? You are my husband first and foremost, but you are also a blacksmith and mechanist. I am your wife above all else, but I am also a swordswoman who works for the NCC."

"Do not lie to me," Grimlock said with an affronted frown. "If you truly cherished being my wife above all else, this conversation would not be necessary. It is precisely because you have strayed from your place that we have come to this."

"I would never lie to you, Yuuji!" But Griselda could taste the lie even in that protest. Was she not being shamefully dishonest about the sword that he had made for her, crafted out of love and concern? She lied to him every day when she allowed him to think that she still used it. She lied about fighting for her life and faction during the blitz, lied about the Salamander she'd been forced to kill. She lied about giving business to Lisbeth. She lied about how much pride she had in her leadership, and she lied about how strong she'd become. She lied about Penny. She lied about **not lying**.

Lies, lies, lies. Lies of omission, mostly, but lies all the same. Was that what now defined her life? Lying to her husband about everything outside of the home that shaped her as a person or brought her even a little joy? It was little wonder he didn't trust her anymore—wasn't it her own fault that it had come to this?

**No,** said a small voice, coming from somewhere deep in her chest—a voice that was not Yasuko's. A voice she hated, a voice that threatened the peace and tranquility of her married life. A voice which was no longer quite so small as it once was, no longer so easy to bury and ignore.

**No,** said the voice of Griselda, Sylph swordswoman and NCC farmer. **This isn't right.**

"Then prove it," Grimlock said at last, cutting into her turbulent thoughts. "If you are truly my wife above all, then you will prove your loyalty by going to Chellok in the morning and ending this silly farce."

A small spark of strength from that unwanted voice from deep inside filled her, and this time she did not avert her gaze. "I'm sorry, Yuuji, but I can't—"

She didn't get to finish. Eyes now forward, Griselda saw it clearly this time. It had come in the space of a blink before, but now that she was paying attention, she saw her husband's expression change and twist into something ugly. As if watching a video slowed to half-speed, she saw his right hand lift from his lap, saw him begin to draw back his arm, the right shoulder going back with the motion. She saw his gaze shift ever so slightly, dropping to a point just below her eyes.

The strike was no slower than the others had been, but Griselda had spent nearly her entire time in the game learning how to fight mobs, how to anticipate and react to their actions in the heat of battle —how to recognize a telegraphed attack. When the slap came, her own arm rose to meet it before she'd had time to consciously think about it, rose in exactly the same motion she would've used to deflect an attack with her shield if it had hung there. His wrist struck the armored back of her forearm, and he cried out—as much from surprise as anything else; it could not have caused him pain, but she knew she was **strong.**

Shame threatened to flood through her immediately at what she'd unthinkingly done. Apologies bubbled up and demanded to be spoken, her arm dropped to her side, and she felt the overwhelming urge to prostrate herself and beg forgiveness for her presumption.

Instead, what came out were five words, spoken calmly but firmly in a voice she barely recognized. "Please don't do that again."
The look on Grimlock's face now was shock as he clutched his arm, but there was an undercurrent of barely-restrained fury just beneath, coming through in his eyes and in the aborted twitches in his expression. Had he pressed her then, she did not doubt that she would've broken, capitulated—unable to bear his disappointment or anger.

Instead, Grimlock rose from the chair and strode towards the bedroom door. It slammed shut hard enough behind him that a system message briefly appeared on it, calling out the pointlessness of this use of force.

Still in shock herself, Griselda stared at the closed door as if expecting it to open again at any moment. Perhaps she was—perhaps a part of her hoped that Yuuji just needed a few minutes to cool down, that he would come walking back out with his usual gentle smile and quiet humor. Maybe he would even apologize for what had just happened... and things could go back to normal again.

Minutes passed with the crackling of the fireplace, the sounds it made as fake as the world in which they lived. Time and again she was tempted to simply shed her armor and clothing, open the door herself, and crawl into bed with Yuuji, to have him hold her the way he always did, stroking her hair and whispering reassurances when she was upset.

But who would she find waiting for her there? Ohto Yuuji, the loving husband who took care of her and never had an unkind word for anyone? Or Grimlock, the Leprechaun who couldn't bear her newfound strength and had struck her in anger tonight?

Was there even a difference?

_We are more than just one thing,_ Griselda echoed in the privacy of her own thoughts. _We aren't paper-thin characters in some simplistic manga written for children—we're human beings with different, sometimes contradictory sides of ourselves. If I'm both Ohto Yasuko and Griselda, and both of them are a part of the real me... is this darkness a true part of Yuuji, too? Or is it just some horrible circumstance we found ourselves in?_

As rhetorical as the question might otherwise be, she could not find it in her to give it an answer. That uncertainty stayed her hand, kept her sitting on the floor by the fire instead of getting up and joining her husband in bed. She could not have said how long it was that she sat there, hoping against hope for some change, some indication that her presence in the bedroom would be welcome. Eventually she could remain upright no longer, and she sank to a curled-up fetal position in front of the false warmth of the fire.

Restless sleep took her as soon as her head touched the stone floor.

"This was a stupid idea, and we will all regret it. I told you as much."

The blunt statement lingered uncomfortably in the torchlit observatory long after being spoken. Eugene was not typically a man given to mincing words; he usually depended on his brother's more diplomatic ways to mitigate a trait he knew to be as much a failing as a benefit. In present company, at least, he was fortunate that Corvatz had a much thicker skin than Kibaou's had been—the former soldier bore this caustic criticism without blinking, and probably even appreciated the directness.

That, however, did not seem to extend to appreciating the sentiment itself. "Yes, you've both made your opinions clear," the Salamander leader answered curtly, wine-colored eyes shifting between Eugene and Mortimer before returning to the three-dimensional miniature map of southern Alfheim on the table before him. "If either of you have new intel, let's hear it. But if this is just beating a dead
horse, save your breath. My orders stand."

Mortimer, standing at his brother's side, nodded. "Yes, my lord, your orders. Orders which reflect a plan you had. Who was it who said that plans rarely survive enemy contact?"

"Moltke," Corvatz answered instantly. "And you have the quote wrong."

"It's gone through several layers of translation anyway." Mortimer said, striding up to the high table and folding his arms. "The point is that you had a plan, and that plan was contingent on the Sylphs backing down. Instead, their new leader has upped the ante. The risk of war has now turned into the fact of it, and your plans must change to reflect that."

Corvatz looked as if he'd bitten into something unpleasant. "Who do you think you're lecturing on this subject? I do not have a fixed plan, Mortimer. I have objectives I intend to achieve, and the evolving battlespace dictates the plans necessary at any given time to achieve those objectives. The change in Sylph leadership and her declaration of war affects how we deploy our forces and the rules of engagement, but it does not alter the primary objectives. We must have those mats and preserve our independence. Our clearing will grind to a halt without proper upgrades and repairs, and you two damn well know it better than anyone. Where is the issue here?"

"We could have traded for them," Mortimer pointed out. "No doubt other races are finding themselves short on mats we might have in surplus. If we reached out to the NCC, I'm certain we could easily secure what we need. That option is not foreclosed to us if we act soon."

"And why should we?" Corvatz demanded. "Why give up valuable resources in trade when we can simply redeploy our farming groups to where the mats are now?" Before Mortimer could answer, their leader's hand chopped at the air with finality. "Enough. I will not allow keroppi threats to dictate where we farm. They attacked our people in a public zone."

"And paid for it, from what I heard," Eugene pointed out.

"As did we!" Corvatz said, planting his hands on the table and leaning towards the two brothers.

The harsh reminder drew a flinch from Eugene. It wasn't a reminder he needed, but the blow hit home nonetheless. His brother, however, took it in a different direction.

"Yes, we did. Which brings me back to my point: nothing is free. Your decision to farm Sylph territory—"

"Stop calling it that," Corvatz said flatly. "It's not."

Mortimer's crimson eyes met the direct challenge in Corvatz's expression. "Your decision to farm the Ancient Forest is not a recipe for getting free mats. The path of conflict comes with its own cost, in terms of both casualties and the diversion of clearing groups who could be in Arun, doing the job they're supposed to do. And we've lost at least one group of them as-is." Mortimer was as angry as Eugene had seen him in months, and he knew very well how much force his brother's anger could deliver despite being the smaller and less imposing of the two. When he went on, it was in cold tones of restrained fury.

"Those people are gone forever, Corvatz. Yes, we can replace them with players from our reserves much more easily than the Sylphs can—but we cannot replace the months of practical clearing experience that we lost with them, and this comes on the heels of our already-painful losses against Hrungnir."

As Corvatz regarded him in silent thought, he added, "That is the price we have paid already, and it
is a price we are likely to go on paying if this war continues—or worse, escalates further. Money and crafting resources are both fungible and replaceable. People are neither. How does that weigh against the Yuld or surplus mats the NCC might've asked in trade?"

"If that were the whole picture, I might be tempted to agree," Corvatz said. "But it's not. The inescapable problem I have with trying to trade for what we need is that it puts our progression and survival at the mercy of our enemies. It makes us dependent, and I will not give anyone—not even the NCC—that kind of leverage against us. Ever."

"The NCC are not our enemies," Mortimer pointed out.

"And that is where you're wrong," Corvatz answered crisply. "That kind of indulgent naivete is why the Salamanders demanded new leadership—strong leadership. Do you know what defines an enemy, Mortimer?"

"Don't be insulting," Mortimer replied. "I know what the word means. The issue here is the expansive scope to which you apply it. The Sylphs can be said to be our enemies. But the NCC? They offer no threat to us."

"No threat except the fact that we are in competition with them to escape," Corvatz retorted. "They could every one of them be saints for all I care—the fact still remains that if a Gnome, Leprechaun or Puca defeats the end boss first, they defeat us as well." He accented his words with a finger drawn across his throat. "At that point, we had all best pray that the naive rumors about three waves of clearing are true, because otherwise we are all as good as dead."

His glare then pointedly took in both Eugene and Mortimer, who bore the look stolidly. "Understand this, both of you: one does not have to make a threat to be one, nor does it require active malice. A thing—or a person—can be a threat by simply existing. Neither of you ought to be fool enough to regard the NCC as a neutral party. They have their own interests to protect, and those interests are not ours."

Eugene exchanged a look with his brother; much passed between them in that moment. He knew then that Mortimer had decided to write off any renewed push to persuade Corvatz against the current course of action… just as he knew that Mort was already thinking of a plan to deal with it. There was no point in dragging this out any longer.

The last thought, at least, seemed to be shared by every man in the room—including Corvatz. "Anything else?"

"No, sir," Eugene said. "Come on, Mort. It's late and I'm getting hungry."

The muted sound of their footsteps on dusty stone thudded away as Eugene and Mortimer made their way back towards the residence they now shared, nodding as they went to the many players they recognized—or who recognized them. It was a short enough walk that they didn't feel the need to use their wings, but long enough to afford them time for a much-needed chat.

"You're thinking of something," Eugene said without prompting once the immediate vicinity was clear of green cursors. "Tell me."

"Brother mine, I am always thinking of ten or fifty somethings," Mortimer said, clapping a hand against the armor covering one of of Eugene's arms. "But in this case, I'm thinking I am at an end of trying to talk sense into Corvatz. And I am ever-so-very-done sitting around with my hands tied, hoping the situation will improve. His willingness to indulge our counsel is sincere, but it's still pointless if it doesn't move the needle in the end. Something must give and it's not going to be him."
Eugene nodded. "If there's anything you need from me, better tell me now. We've got a call shortly, and I have to take my group and head back to Arun in the morning."

"As a matter of fact," Mortimer said, stopping and looking up towards his taller brother, "there most certainly is. Your position at least hasn't really changed, and you still have oversight of the farming groups. What would you say their average level range is?"

Eugene considered the question, a bit confused at the sudden change in direction the conversation had taken. "I'd say... fifteen or so for the closer zones, low to mid twenties further out. The ones farming the Ancient Forest now are mostly, but not all, towards the high end, and those ranges are all going to start going up again with the rebalancing and higher EXP gains. Why?"

"The Salamanders need me back at the helm, whether they know it yet or not. Corvatz will lead us to ruin—or will, at the very least, ruin all the progress I'd made towards detoxifying our diplomatic relations so that the common Salamander can have an easier time finding groups."

"You won't get any argument from me," Eugene said unnecessarily. "Occurs to me that the trick is convincing everyone you're the better leader. They seem to have decided otherwise for now."

"Correct," Mortimer said with a grimace, nodding. "Preferably on a timeframe that doesn't require Corvatz to buy himself a gallows paid for in Salamander blood." A small group of players heading in the direction of the bazaar passed near them; both brothers responded to their waves with friendly nods, keeping their silence until the others had passed by.

"So where do our farmers come in?"

"Who besides our clearers do you think is suffering the brunt of Corvatz's foreign policy right now?"

Eugene frowned, trying to puzzle out where his much-smarter brother was going with this. "Well, obviously, yeah. It's not like they're geared or skilled for defending themselves against Sylph clearers—I don't even think there are any testers who are farmers; after Kibaou we got those who survived trained up. Kind of why we've got some of our own clearers there, much as I hate it—if we have to do this, better to do it right instead of hanging the farmers out to dry."

They had reached a wide intersection with a clear view in all directions; the street was brightly lit by a high and full moon, and there were no other players nearby at the moment. Mortimer stopped there and looked up at Eugene again, solemn determination plain on his face. "I need you to find me five people from our reserves who don't have a current assignment other than the usual grind. Get me a proper healer, a tank who can hold agg, an off-tank with solid deeps and good switching, a DPS mage, and a utility mage covering all the major bases, especially Wind and Dark. And keep it quiet."

"Five," Eugene repeated. "Room for one—" Then it hit him, and he growled at his older brother. "You're level ten, Mort, and that was mostly from killing Kibaou—your skills levels are still damn near base. And that's not a raid group, it's a balanced party. You planning on doing some adventuring?"

Mortimer grinned, breaking his usually-serious facade. "Something like that."

"Like hell."

"Hear me out. I asked for that group mix, and for people who didn't have anything important to do, because I want you to have them power-level me. You know I can take care of myself just fine in terms of actual combat skill, which will get me skill points—I just need a group that can carry me until I get caught up enough to hold my own."
"Caught up with who, Mort? I guarantee you it won't be a clearing group—sorry, but you're too far behind, even if you weren't rusty and went grinding day and night for months. That door is closed."

"Not clearers," Mortimer said. "Farmers."

Eugene's stony features creased in puzzlement as he tried to sort out just what the hell was going on in Mort's head. His brother had always been the one to think multiple steps ahead, and Eugene was used to not quite picking up on all the long-term nuances of his plans... but he couldn't imagine what there was to gain from this. "You want to join a farming group?"

"One close to home for a few days or so. Then a transfer to one in the Ancient Forest. Hate to say it, but it's not unlikely there'll be an opening at some point."

"But..." Eugene's jaw worked as he tried to find words. "The hell, bro? You trying to get yourself killed?"

Mortimer shut his eyes briefly as he shook his head. He rested a hand briefly on Eugene's shoulder again. "No," he said. "I'm going to where I can make a difference right now. And speaking of making a difference, I believe we've got an appointment with an old friend of ours soon."

Friend wasn't the word Eugene would've chosen, except in the most literal sense of being on his friends list—but he glanced up at the digits that hung in the upper edge of his vision, and nodded. "All right," he said grudgingly. "I'll get you your twink group. But if you get yourself ganked, I'm going to beat on you until you wise up, then beat you some more."

Mort snorted and nodded. "Deal. Just make it happen. I need this, and you know I wouldn't take the risk if I didn't think it was important."

"I will. Now let's go get this over with—you know I hate this cloak and dagger political shit."

His older brother let out a laugh as they turned and headed in a different direction. "So feel free to leave the talking to me," he said. "It's my plan anyway. You just need to be the comm anchor and stay in the loop on it."

At least staying in the loop, in this case, involved filling his belly and sitting down for a bit; it was getting very late and he was going to be doing precious little of the latter once they headed back out to the World Tree in the morning. It didn't take long to get back to Eugene's residence, and once they'd withdrawn their dinners from their inventories, they ate in silence while waiting for the minutes to tick away. At last a soft chiming sound played for Eugene, and when he glanced at the icon in his peripheral message he saw the name and simple message he'd expected. "It's time."

Mortimer set down his spoon and rose. "Excellent. Let's do this in the living room—big bay windows and a blank wall. Tell him to initiate thirty seconds after your message."

Whereas the dining room had been lit mostly by candles and orelight, the living room was nearly all natural light—in this case, bright moonlight casting harsh shadows of the window frames against the far wall. Eugene seated himself in front of the cold stone fireplace while Mortimer remained standing and faced the wall. The scene was quiet and still enough that Eugene immediately noticed when the light level dimmed unnaturally, most of the moonlight seeming to coalesce around an ultraviolet ripple that split the air with a crack.

The image on the other side of the «Moonlight Mirror» spell was that of the same Imp who'd messaged him moments before, a long-limbed young man of indeterminate age wearing unadorned robes of simple design that Eugene's practiced eye could still recognize as requiring some fairly
expensive mats. He brushed his long hair out of his eyes with the backs of his knuckles and turned the gesture into a halfhearted salute. "Boss."

"Not for some time," Eugene remarked, trying not to be abrasive about it. "You're freelance."

Burns shrugged. "What can I say. You two are pretty decent, but I can't say the same for some of the assholes you work with. Mort's still my boss, far as I'm concerned."

"We have plenty of time?"

That question had come from Mortimer, to whom Burns sketched a bow that seemed honest. "About as much as you'll ever get out of this spell—ideal conditions. Doesn't mean we should waste it."

"Agreed. So first thing's first: is it done?"

Burns nodded, grinning toothily. "Aww yeah it is. Thing of beauty, too. We—"

"No details now, please," Mortimer said, holding up a hand calmly. "Will Coper play ball now that he has his star?"

"Without a doubt," Burns answered immediately. "He knows just how much he owes us—and still needs us."

"It's the latter part I'm more concerned with," Mortimer said. "The boy's fifteen tops, and he just got his position by way of murder and betrayal. I don't trust his loyalties or sense of obligation. I trust his sense of self-preservation a bit more."

"Well, you can keep on trusting that," the Imp replied. "I've dropped enough subtle hints that I'm pretty sure he's well aware of just how bad the Sals can roast him if he goes rogue."

"Without mentioning our names, I'm sure," Eugene said, making the warning unmistakable.

"Well, yeah, duh," Burns said, eyes darting upwards briefly before going back to Mortimer.

"So here's the problem," Mortimer said, hands clasped at the small of his back. "The political landscape has changed a bit since I first engaged you."

Burns snorted, tossing his glossy black hair. "Yeah, I noticed. Didn't you used to have a gold star of your own, boss?"

"Something like that," Mortimer agreed. "Before the election, this would've been the opportunity we've been awaiting for months. Now? It's more than a little inconvenient."

The Imp ex-clearer spread his hands. "I didn't pick the timing. I just helped it go down once the opportunity came up."

"And we're grateful. There are two problems. The first is that I'm not presently in a position to offer Coper all the help I might have before. The second, which follows from that, is that I'd rather not hand Corvatz political capital that ought to be mine. I'm sure you can understand that."

Burns nodded, scowling at the mention of their new leader. "Yeah, fuck that guy. So what do you need from me?"

Mortimer began to explain: not for the first time Eugene marveled at his brother's ability to adapt to unexpected situations and formulate plans on the fly. Eugene himself could do that pretty well when it came to raid tactics and combat, but Mort had always been better at the strategy games—at seeing
the big picture, and how the moving parts of people's motivations fit into it. By the time his instructions drew to a close, all three of them were grinning.

Burns not least of all. He clapped both hands and rubbed them together happily. "Hot damn, but it's good to deal with organized, competent people who have their heads on right. You would not believe what a shitshow Penwether is."

Eugene refrained from again pointing out that it had been Burns who'd long ago left their clearing groups. Under the circumstances, he didn't think the comment was likely to help advance his brother's plans. He didn't have to; he caught Mortimer's side glance and wry smile. "That's part of what you're going to help change," Mortimer said after a barely perceptible pause, turning back to the shimmering portal and the image of the Imp within. "It's good to have you back on board, and I promise you this: help me make this happen the right way, and I'll give you and your team every reason to want to come back for good. We need people with your skills, all the moreso now."

"Ten seconds," Burns said, calling out the time remaining on their connection.

"We're done anyway," Mortimer said. He gave a proper bow to Burns, who—much to Eugene's surprise—returned it in kind. "You're a good kid, Burns. Always were. Do this, and we're all that much more likely to get out of here one day."

"On it, boss," said the Imp, touching two fingers to his brow as the portal began to shrink around him. "Be seein' ya."

When the last violet hues had faded from the room, and the moonlight had shifted back to its usual levels, Mortimer turned to his brother with crimson eyebrows upraised. Eugene gave a loud snort. "Now that, ladies and gentlemen, is a Legendary-class shit-eating grin. You want some smug to go with your smug?"

"So that I can be smug about my smugness?" Mortimer responded automatically, completing the old running joke of theirs and then chuckling at it. "Oh hell, Kenji, I'm neither a genius nor a psychic. You should know by now I'm just winging this, same as everyone else. But I do think we've got a pretty solid chance of polishing this turd into mithril."

"I trust your 'winging' a lot more than most people's considered plans," Eugene said, rising and stretching each shoulder alternately with upraised arms. "But this is a big steaming turd, no lie, and I'm glad I'm not the one who has to buff it until it shines. Especially since it's damn near midnight and I have to be up in six hours."

"You'll get your sleep," Mortimer said as he slowly paced over to the large windows set into the northern wall, silhouetting himself against the city's glow. "And I'm genuinely sorry to ask more of you, but there's one last thing I need you to do for me."

Eugene sighed. He'd been afraid that was coming. "Go on."

"I'm assuming you have more than a few messages from Argo by now?"

That was putting it mildly. The PMs had been stacking up in fits and starts; whatever she was doing, she seemed to be only intermittently able to send and receive them. He'd actually tried to respond more than once, and as often as not had gotten a message that suggested she was in a dungeon somewhere. He nodded cautiously; communicating with Argo could be like dancing on a bed of nails.

"Yeah, I do. And no surprise: she's flipping her shit about what Corvatz is doing. I've been stalling
her, because frankly? I don't have any answers for her anyway."

Mortimer's back was turned to him, and he only half-turned his head; it was just enough to illuminate his smile in profile. "You do now."

When Yuuki first laid eyes on Rei the next morning, the word that leapt to mind before any other was: tiny.

Coming as it did from her own perspective, Yuuki knew that the impression was a little ironic. Their avatars were based on scans of their real-life bodies, and her health issues had always kept her from being particularly athletic or putting on much weight; she had never been a big girl even for her age. But although Rei's voice had a mature depth that could've been that of a girl closer to or older than Asuna's age, she seemed to be one of those people who had just stopped growing after a certain point; Yuuki would've been very surprised if Rei even topped 150 centimeters—or ever would.

The other girl's childish appearance was somewhat enhanced by her round face and the simple pageboy haircut her avatar wore, with hair of a violet almost light enough to threaten an invasion into the realm of pink. Yuuki of all people knew that appearances could be deceiving, especially here in this virtual world—but all told, the effect almost made her feel like she was talking to one of Sasha's charges.

Aside from the topic of discussion.

"I… I think I've heard the names," Rei said after a moment's pause, a thoughtful but disturbed look clouding her delicate features following Yuuki's recounting of the incident in the Sewers. "But only the names. It might take some time to ask around and dredge up anything more. That's all you've got on them? And you're sure they're Imps, right?"

"Positive," Yuuki had only personally seen Black, but Kirito and Asuna had dealt with XaXa directly and had a reasonably good description for him—not that it mattered much now that he was dead. They didn't know much about Wraith—not even the player's true gender, although Kirito seemed confident in labeling them as a girl—but the fact that all of them except Prophet had been able to fly underground was a dead giveaway for their race, at least.

Yuuki's certainty didn't seem to be what Rei had been hoping to hear, however. The other Imp sighed, stopping in place and gazing down at the well-trodden stone of the market's narrow, winding streets. She kicked at a small rock as if annoyed at its presence, sending it skittering across the street; it pinged off the leg of an NPC merchant, who took no notice of it. "Sorry," she said unnecessarily to the uncaring NPC before turning back to Yuuki. "Look, I'm not going to lead you on, here: the fact that you're after other Imps makes this difficult."

"Why?" Yuuki asked. "If they did something like this, why does it matter?"

Rei then raised her eyes to Yuuki's, providing her with the novel experience of looking down at someone to meet their gaze. "It was Kumi who referred you to me, right? How much did she tell you?"

Yuuki wrestled with a moment of confusion. "Just that you might be able to help me… both with these PKer guys, and with some Salamanders who did some bad things."

"See now," Rei said a bit more enthusiastically, deep violet eyes suddenly alight, "that is something I can definitely help with. Your monkey problem, that is. You're not the only Imp who was hurt by
"And do what?" Yuuki asked, terribly afraid that she knew the answer after talking at length with Kumiko.

Rei didn't respond right away, though. She seemed to be searching Yuuki's face for something; the other girl was looking at her, but her eyes never fixed on one point for long. "I suppose that depends on what they did," she said.

"One of them killed my sister during the invasion," Yuuki explained, only managing to keep her voice from cracking because of how many times she'd had to recount or relive the experience in the past few days. "The other tried to take me with him… he was going to… I mean, I don't know, but…"

"That's enough," Rei said, her arctic expression at odds with the gentle way she said the words. "You don't have to tell me any more. Give me their names and I'll find them."

Yuuki did not fail to notice that her question remained unanswered. "Then what?"

"When I track them down," Rei said, then hastily interrupted herself. "And make no mistake: I will. Once I find them... you'll have right of first refusal on their punishment. Seems only fair."

A tension that Yuuki hadn't realized was there began to unknot itself at this answer, a little bit of relief edging out her apprehension. "I'll decide what to do then," she told herself. "They don't have to die—not if we can scare them so badly that they'll never do anything like that again. Nobody has to die. Nobody has to kill."

"Will that be acceptable?" Rei prompted.

Yuuki nodded. "What about Wraith and Black?"

Rei fell silent once more, and for an uncomfortable length of time. "Yuuki—your name was Yuuki, right?" At Yuuki's un of confirmation, she went on. "From what you said, these two Imps were involved with a group who killed a Salamander. Consider the history we're dealing with here. Just how much sympathy do you think most Imps are going to have for that boy?"

The implications had never crossed Yuuki's mind—for the most part, she tried not to think of players as their races, and she didn't really understand the labyrinthine intricacies of politics. But now that Rei had pointed it out, the dilemma was obvious even to her: how many Imps were going to care what happened to any Salamander, after living in their shadow for so long?

Haydon and Kumiko, that's who, Yuuki reminded herself. Especially Haydon. They're good people.

"Now," Rei went on, "imagine that—hypothetically speaking, of course—you had some Imps who were trying to make sure justice is done. Justice for crimes committed against Imps by the Salamanders. How much enthusiasm do you think they'd have for punishing any Imp who killed a Sallie?"

"It's not that simple though," Yuuki insisted. "Robert wasn't one of the Salamanders who attacked Everdark. He was just a boy, even younger than me. He didn't have anything to do with the Salamanders who hurt us."

"Maybe not," Rei said, sounding a bit less certain. "But you also said it wasn't even either of them..."
"Technically, it was XaXa," Yuuki said, remembering the detail that Kirito had mentioned. "But he's
dead and the three of them were part of the same group."

"So let me paint a picture for you," Rei said, beginning to count on her fingertips. "You've got three
Imps. One of them killed a Sallie boy, but he's dead now too. The other two were just part of the
killer's group. You want to punish these other two for the Sallie boy's death, a kill that wasn't even
theirs. And you're asking for help from someone who tracks down monkeys that hurt Imps."

Put that way, it made Yuuki start to wonder of the entire trip had been a waste of time—if she might
not have been better off just staying with Kirito and Asuna. She hung her head, feeling stupid. Why
can't anyone see past their avatars? Why does it have to be like this?

"I'll help you," Rei said unexpectedly, with a decisive note to her voice.

Yuuki's head whipped right back up in surprise. "You will?"

"I can't promise anything," Rei cautioned her with a light touch on the arm. "I'm willing to help, but
that doesn't mean everyone I talk to will be—not if it means setting up a fellow Imp, no matter what
you say they've done. Not when it's your word against theirs. To get anywhere, you're going to have
to build some credibility so that your word—absent any proof—is worth more. Make sense?"

"Okay," Yuuki said, jumping eagerly on the opening. "How?"

"You have a monkey problem," Rei said, changing direction and heading towards the large open
plaza at the edge of the market. "Let's sort that out first. It will go a long way towards demonstrating
common cause when it comes time for me to go digging around for information on your Imp PKers.
Got names for these Sallies? Descriptions?"

"Trey was the one killed my sister," Yuuki said. "Young man, tall, with a curved sword of some
kind. Gitou was the name of the one who tried to… who was going to take me away. He was an
older guy who used a short sword and had a thin moustache, and I sent him to jail when he tripped
the anti-harassment code." Yuuki very clearly remembered the sensation of impact and the horrible
feeling of numbness when he'd used that sword to cut clean through her forearm. At Rei's prompting,
she added a few more details about Gitou—as much as she could remember.

When she finished, Yuuki did not fail to notice Rei's tiny hands turning into fists at her sides. The
other girl's eyes were so narrowed that the hue from the orelight almost turned them completely
black. "We'll track down the pedo first," Rei said with an obvious effort at controlling her voice.
"You're lucky he was a noob, you know. Ever heard of the Ethics Code?"

The words tickled a faint memory, but no more. Yuuki shook her head. "Is that part of the anti-
harassment system?"

"Not exactly," Rei said, lowering her voice a little. "But it's kinda related. Seriously though, if
anyone ever tries to make you toggle the Ethics Code off… no matter what they're threatening you
with, don't do it."

"Why?"

Rei turned her head from Yuuki, looking around until her gaze rose to where a cluster of buildings
descended from the rough stone roof of the plaza like windowed stalactites. "Because when the
Ethics Code is disabled, you won't be protected by the anti-harassment system. It's meant to be used
in private with…" Rei stopped in mid-sentence, giving Yuuki a glance with a compassionate
expression. "Just leave it alone," she concluded.

Yuuki had never heard of the option, and couldn't imagine where to find it or why it even existed. Why would anyone want to turn off being protected by the anti-harassment system? "Okay," she said. Realizing that they'd stopped, she followed Rei's gaze as it returned to the buildings hanging from the cavern ceiling.

"Up," Rei said without further ceremony, translucent bat-like wings materializing on her back. They rose quickly above the thinly populated streets, leaving the octagonal terraced basin of the plaza sprawling out some fifty or sixty meters below them. It was Yuuki's first time in the air above this part of the city; only from this vantage point could she now see that the phosphorescent garden in the center of the plaza was landscaped to resemble the curious two-part shape of the Imp faction's sigil.

She was distracted enough by the sight that she almost flew right past Rei, who had glided in for a landing on the balcony entrance of one of the suspended buildings. There was a carved sign with scalloped edges hanging over the door, the image of a stoppered bottle both engraved in the stone and highlighted with luminescent paints; although the sign was otherwise unlabeled, Yuuki recognized it as the game's standard icon for «Alchemy».

"Is there something you need here?" Yuuki asked curiously after her boots touched down on the rock-hard wood planking of the balcony platform. "I'm stocked on potions and stuff."

"Something, and someone," Rei answered vaguely, pushing open the door and allowing a chaotic parade of odors to escape from the store's interior. "C'mon in."

With the way the city of Everdark lived up to its name, Yuuki thought the unnamed alchemist's shop ought to have been named something like The Void. The store was almost devoid of light sources; only a handful of small candles broke the pitch darkness and provided just enough illumination for an Imp's enhanced vision to make out details and navigate the store, and even those candles cast their flickering light through the hollow eye sockets of several beast-like skulls sitting on the shelves. Faint layers of some kind of smoke hung at waist level and just above Yuuki's head; her nose wrinkled as the collection of smells she'd caught on the way in presented themselves much more strongly.

Someone obviously doesn't want business from anyone who isn't an Imp, Yuuki thought. Even if another player could somehow get up here without being able to fly underground, I don't know how they could see a thing.

The door shut behind them, cutting off what little additional light was coming from the orelight embedded in the cavern ceiling outside. Following that dull sound, a harsh voice spoke up from deeper within the store, somewhere on the other side of a set of bottle-lined shelves. "Who comes?"

Yuuki stirred uncomfortably at the curt demand and the raspy, unfriendly way in which it was delivered. Rei, however, stepped forward without hesitation, the layer of smoke churning in her wake as she walked down the narrow aisle. "Me plus one, Jonas. Chill."

The effect of these words was so dramatic, Yuuki would've almost sworn that the next answer came from a completely different person; all traces of hostility were gone and even the ugly rasp had dropped from the man's voice, making him sound at least ten years younger. "Sue!" came the delighted response from the back of the store. "Come on in, who's the friend?"

"Monkey survivor," Rei said as they rounded the corner of the interposing shelves, hollow footsteps transitioning to a muffled beat as they stepped onto an elaborately-decorated rug spread out before the shopkeeper's counter. "Name's Yuuki."
The Imp named Jonas managed the neat trick of both confounding and meeting Yuuki's expectations. Between the shop's ambiance and the affected voice from the initial hostile greeting, she had imagined someone who looked like a classic fantasy-world necromancer or warlock—dark robes, a severe countenance, magic totems or focus items galore adorning a frayed robe. And at first glance, he certainly seemed to fit the part; the underlighting from the candle on the counter cast his features in sharp angles, and he was dressed in Imp-styled mage robes with a seemingly excessive number of pockets and pouches, greasy-looking dark hair flowing out from under the hood of robes that had either seen better days or were designed to look as if they had.

Then he smiled with genuine affability, breaking the spell. "A pleasure, Yuuki. Any friend of Sue's is welcome here. Genuinely sorry to hear about your monkey problems."

Confusion threatened to overtake all else on Yuuki's mind; she glanced over at the shorter Imp girl. "Who's Sue?"

"Me," said Rei with a tight smile. "But don't call me that. My real name is Su Rei; my father was Chinese. Jonas is just an Anglophile, and he thinks it's funny to call me by my English nickname."

"It's not funny, it's cute," Jonas insisted.

Rei snorted lightly. "Suuure. Is Karisa in?"

"Figured you were here to see her," Jonas said, eyes briefly rising as if looking at his HUD. "But yeah, she's in the archive room."

"Sweet. Let's go, Yuuki."

"Go where?" Yuuki asked.

To Yuuki's further confusion, Rei answered only by bringing out her wings. Her feet dangled as she slowly rose as if to bump her head on the ceiling… and then kept rising, disappearing through the layer of smoke above their heads. Yuuki wasted little time in following her, and when she broke through the smoke layer she flinched slightly, almost expecting to hit her head even though she'd just seen Rei pass through.

No impact came. There was a vertical passage beyond ceiling level, which angled up through the rock and ended not long afterwards at a closed door in the side of the tunnel. Yuuki could see a thin line of light shining out from the crack at the bottom of the door, light which hadn't been visible from below.

"Watch your eyes." Rei rapped her knuckles on the door, and opened it without waiting for an answer. Light flooded out from the room, an office-like light level that would've been comfortable for a human to read by, but which was nearly blinding in comparison to the dim interior of the shop. Where the barely-illuminated shelves downstairs had been filled with bottles and ingredients that Yuuki couldn't even begin to name, here the walls were lined with storage nooks for scrolls and books, all of which seemed to be neatly organized by some scheme that she couldn't puzzle out at a glance.

Against one wall was a simple and sparsely-decorated working desk, where sat a plump female Imp in casual clothing cut in the faction's racial style—a style vaguely reminiscent of 19th-century Japanese garb. Karisa did not raise her eyes from the scroll that she was transcribing, her quill moving nearly as quickly as Yuuki could follow. "Be done in a minute," she said.

Rei didn't respond to the curt greeting, instead turning to Yuuki. "Karisa used to be a librarian," she
explained in a whisper. "When the Salamanders took over, any Imps who had useful real-world
skills got conscripted. They made her take the Scribe skill, and put her to work doing all their record-
keeping." The other girl watched Karisa continue to work without interruption, and giggled softly.
"Idiots."

Just when Yuuki was about to ask what she'd meant by that, Rei's smile turned wicked. "They really
clowned themselves on that one. Karisa made copies of everything she wrote for them. Farming
areas, resource manifests, disciplinary records..." She grinned wider. "Military rosters, clearing
group members, and duty assignments. A lot of it's outdated now, especially with the spawn
changes, but it still comes in handy sometimes."

Two and two suddenly clicked for Yuuki; the purpose of this visit became clear to her. "You think
she can find Trey and Gitou?"

Rei shrugged, still speaking very quietly. "Maybe. And if she can't, I know someone else who can
get more current intel."

"If you can get ahold of him," Karisa interjected as she lifted the scroll, shook it, and then carefully
placed it on a stack to her left. "Things are pretty busy right now in Gattan." Turning to one side in
order to face the pair, she gave Yuuki a searching look and brushed a wisp of straight black hair
away from her soft, pale features.

"Don't I know it," Rei said, hands clasped at the small of her back. "Got a couple of names for you.
Hopefully you can do something with them."

"I heard," Karisa said, attention still on Yuuki as she sounded out the names the way she'd heard
them. "You said Torei and Gitou, right?" She gave her own nod of acknowledgement after Yuuki
did. "Are the names phonetically straightforward?"

"Pardon?"

Karisa elaborated. "Are they spelled the way they sound? Character names can only contain Latin-
alphabet letters, you know, and not everyone romanizes words the same way."

Yuuki gave a slight shrug, getting the general idea if not the exact terms. "I'm pretty sure Gitou is a
Japanese name. Dunno about the other."

Karisa steepled her hands and rocked slightly in her chair as she thought. "Well, I can't recall any
Japanese words that start with to-re-e or to-re-i. Toree in katakana is an English word for a small
table or serving platter, tray, and if you write it slightly differently it's a somewhat uncommon man's
name, Trey. I'll try all the spelling variants."

"We'll probably have a better shot of finding Gitou's name," Rei said. "That's the first monkey we
want to deal with anyway. He's an old creeper who seems to have a thing for little girls."

Swiveling in her chair again, Karisa reached into one of the desk drawers and pulled out a clean
scroll, then began using it to take notes. The action clearly marked her as someone who liked to write
with her own hands; most anyone else would've simply opened the note-taking window in their
Quest Log and used that. "He goes to the top of the list," she said in an abnormally calm voice,
considering the context. "Tell me everything you know about him. Everything, even details you
might think otherwise trivial."

Apprehension turned to ache in Yuuki's heart, and she cast her eyes down at the blurry reflection of
her boots in the polished stone floor. She'd known that she was probably going to have to tell the
story all over yet again, but that didn't mean that she was looking forward to it. Even after all these months, she still felt horribly guilty for running away when Aiko had told her to. She knew her sister wouldn't have blamed her for that, but Yuuki still sometimes felt like she'd left Aiko there to die alone, and rehashing the story in that much detail was like picking at a wound that had never truly healed.

That wasn't the only source of guilt that gnawed at her, however. Never far from her mind was the fact that Kirito and Asuna were at this very moment still pursuing their own quest to hunt down Prophet and his crew—which was the whole reason why she herself had come to Everdark. I should be with them. I should be fighting by their side, keeping them company. Instead I'm here in the last place on Alfheim that I want to be, chasing after ghosts of the past.

In fairness, she was aware that wasn't the whole picture—she really was trying to find information on the Imps who followed Prophet. Rei had offered to help with that task after tackling this unexpected side quest, and if Yuuki wanted to make progress, she was going to have to play along and do this first.

She wasn't just playing along, though. God had presented her with an opportunity to get some kind of closure for her sister's murder—to see justice done—and that was an opportunity, perhaps even a duty, that Yuuki simply couldn't allow to pass her by. Not when the process of getting that resolution still led to accomplishing the goal that had brought her here in the first place.

I'm sorry, sis, she thought. I promise, I won't run away this time. I'll find a way to make it so that the people who did this to you—to us—won't hurt anyone else ever again.

Mere moments had passed since Karisa had spoken, moments that seemed longer only from being deep in her own thoughts. But in that time, determination hardened Yuuki's expression... wiping away the fear and pain, banishing guilt and doubt to the back of her mind where it wouldn't show on her face or in her voice.

When her eyes rose again, she took a deep breath and began.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, my apologies to AO3 readers for falling behind in keeping this location updated with the latest chapters.

This year I don't quite have the luxury of so much time to spend dedicated to writing in November that I have in years past, but I do have a week's vacation planned and will be spending some of that time trying to get as much progress done as I can on the next chapter. And busy or not, I couldn't let an anniversary pass without marking it with a new chapter.

The majority of Act 3's plot threads are now in motion, and some of them are going to be the slow-boil variety rather than the quick, immediate flurries of activity that have characterized much of this act thus far. Events have been moving so quickly that it's easy to overlook the fact that only a handful of days have passed in-game since this act began! We won't be seeing too much from the POVs of Eugene or Mortimer, but they will provide a useful window into what's going on inside Salamander politics—as well as being tied to various other plots in more ways than are yet obvious.
As always, let me know what you think, and thank you for reading!
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The term «trap» refers to an extremely broad category of hazards which can be detected, avoided, set, or disarmed by the appropriate skill, item, or magical effect—or sometimes simply even by careful observation of the environment. The «Trapping» skill covers non-magical detection and disabling of traps, while the Illusion Magic spell «Detect Traps» is exactly what it sounds like; both cause the trap’s essential mechanisms to be highlighted from the POV of the affected player. While there are many traps which pose little more than a nuisance, some can afflict a player with deadly poison, trigger a lethal environmental hazard, or even alert powerful mobs to the player’s presence…”

—Alfheim Online manual, «Traps»

9 May 2023

Day 185 - Early Morning

As always, morning greeted Argo’s awakening with the stylized speech bubble of the «New Message» icon in the far left edge of her vision, flashing insistently against the black curtain of her avatar’s eyelids. The icon would not go away until she had at least looked at those messages, but prudence and the memory of where she’d gone to sleep demanded she open her eyes first and check her surroundings.

The isolated «Safe Zone» in which they’d chosen to camp was a small subterranean chamber of roughly-hewn stone with walls that that twinkled in various colors from the trace amounts of orelight crystals that poked through the ragged surface here and there, sparkling like decorative lights. It wasn’t enough illumination to read a book by, but it was a comforting change from the near-total darkness of the tunnels surrounding them—a darkness that made her very grateful for the Illusion Magic that their Spriggan companion had used to light their way.

“Oh good, you’re up.” Thelvin’s quiet voice caused one of Argo’s feline ears to track unconsciously in the direction of the sound, and she came to a sitting position just in time to perform a one-handed catch of an apple that he lobbed in her direction. Not one to turn down free food, she immediately bit into it while glancing around their campsite.

Terquen and Whiskers were still sound asleep, both curled up separately on the packed earth floor within thick sleeping bags—accessories which Thelvin had insisted they buy before setting out. Veldt was as still as death in his own field bag, which showed the faint signs of extensive use that the game engine seemed to apply to crafted objects over time. Rather than the floor, he’d decided to lay out his bedding across the fallen slab of smooth black stone that dominated the center of the room. As far as Argo was concerned, he was welcome to it; the thing looked even harder and more uncomfortable than the ground.

“Any news about the war?”

Argo shook her head, light brown bangs bobbing with the motion. “Haven’t even looked yet. Gonna remedy that. But first…” She glanced over at their still-sleeping companions, then gave the loose folds of her flowing green cloak a few quick pats with her free hand while making a chittering sound through her teeth. Her current favorite rat emerged from within one of the inner pockets where it had lain dormant, claws and dark brown fur tickling the skin of her neck in a convincingly realistic way as it squirmed free and perched on her shoulder.
She made a little squeaking sound again; it communicated nothing of substance but seemed as fitting a way as any to get the thing’s attention. It turned beady black eyes upon her as she extended her arm to let it clamber down to the floor, looking expectant. Argo nodded towards the nearest passageway back into the contested areas of the Corridor.

“Time to earn your keep, Jim. Go see what’s out there. Scout and Tag."

Thelvin snorted lightly as the tiny mob scampered off into the darkness. “You named your pet?”

Argo paused. “You sound like you think there’s something odd about that.”

Thelvin shrugged, contemplating a stick of jerky which, along with an apple of his own, seemed to constitute something that passed for breakfast. “Just seems unusual for you to give a mob a name. You’ve always struck me as having a dim opinion of larping, especially when it doesn’t serve any real purpose in game mechanics. You’re different when you talk to your pets. I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you address one by name.”

“You’ve never had a pet.”

Thelvin looked a little confused. “What, you mean a Cait Sith tamed pet? Or in the real world?”

“Tamed, I mean.” Argo’s eyes left the gloom beyond the faint illumination in the chamber and went to Thelvin’s gaze. “As in, you don’t know pet mechanics. There’s a place in your UI to name a pet, right? I’m convinced that’s more than just a cosmetic convenience. I can’t prove it, mind you, but I’d bet real-world money that giving a pet a name and using it to refer to them increases the rate of Rapport gain.”

“Today I Learned. So why Jimu, of all things? Is there a reason behind the names you choose?”

Argo gave the Cait Sith tank a sly grin. “I’ll tell you for 10,000 Yuld.”

Thelvin replied with a narrow-eyed look. When she didn’t immediately relent, he rolled his eyes and—to her surprise—opened a trade window. Accepting payment, she glanced back towards the path the rat had taken outwards, briefly tempted to transfer her senses. “I know it’s not logical, and I can’t explain how their AI is scripted, but pets do have personalities, or at least emergent behavior that feels like a personality. They all act a bit differently, depending on circumstances and how you interact with them. I name my rats after rats they remind me of, once I’ve had ‘em for a while.”

“That is not an answer worth ten-k Yuld.”

“James diGriz.”

The collection of syllables clearly meant nothing to Thelvin. “What?”

Argo grinned at him, feeling a surge of pride in her cleverness. “The rat’s name is James diGriz. He’s my longest-lived pet and is slippery enough to get out of every situation I put him into—he’s clever, mobs have never caught him. I got another one who doesn’t seem to do well in high places for some reason; I named him Rizzo and use him in towns. I had one I left in Freelia all the time, but I kept having to re-feed him—him I called Templeton. Then there’s Daikoku—”

“That one I know, but if the rest are fictional references, I’m not getting them.”

Argo sighed. Does no one read actual books anymore? “They are, and never mind. Anyway, there’s your answer. Hope it was worth the price.”
Whatever Thelvin’s opinion on the matter, he didn’t get a chance to voice it before a dismayed outburst yanked Argo’s attention to the left, where Veldt had just sat bolt upright, jaw hanging open and eyes wide with shock. Thelvin directed an inquisitively raised black eyebrow towards the younger man.

“Nightmare?” Argo asked as she brought up her first message window and reviewed its contents.

Still appearing somewhat stunned, Veldt took a few moments before looking at Argo and jerkily shaking his head. “Just a message. I thought I’d read them before getting up—” He stopped there, eyes flickering between the two Cait Sith. “It’s nothing.”

The hell it is. Argo wisely decided not to voice that thought, and went back to her messages. There was a new one from Kirito, which she quickly scanned—

“Holy shit,” she said without thinking.

The apple in Thelvin’s hand paused partway to his mouth as he looked at her in turn. “Pardon my nosiness, but I’m starting to feel left out of something important.”

Argo’s thoughts accelerated like someone had just kicked in the afterburners. This was not information that was in any way relevant to their journey, and by no stretch of the imagination was it even something she would freely share with Alicia. But she now thought she knew exactly what had prompted Veldt’s outburst, and when her eyes met his, she was fairly certain that he knew she knew.

“Important, yeah, but not to what we’re doing. Don’t worry,” she hastened to add when Thelvin started to give her that look. “If I thought it’d help, I’d tell you. I mean it. This’s got nothing to do with this zone, the Cait Sith, or with the Sylph-Sal conflict.”

That much seemed to mollify Thelvin, who returned his attention to his unremarkably boring meal. Veldt was looking at her in a very curious way, and she looked back at him unblinkingly until his eyes dropped, leaving her to her rapid thoughts.

Were you one of Yoshihara’s supporters? Did you know her... or even Coper? She wanted to hit him with more than a few questions, but didn’t think she was likely to get any traction after the way he’d just clammed up—not at the moment, anyway. She opened a new window to reply to Kirito’s PM.

「Thanks for the heads-up on the Yoshihara ganking—those are some juicy details. You’re sure it was an intentional assassination, and not just a garden-variety robbery gone wrong? ‘Cause that could be a bomb waiting to go off, depending on how the whole thing played out and who was involved, and we both know it.」 She paused there, resting her hands on her knees and leaning forward almost to the point where collision with them would’ve auto-closed her menu. 「For that, I’ll give you everything I got on Coper—which ain’t as much as I’d like. About fifteen years old, smart, cocky, bit of a smooth talker. Was part of a few Privateer groups after launch. Now does freelance clearing and mapping, has a couple regular groups he parties with—most of them Imps, other Spriggans, even a few Sals; I can get you bios for a price if you need them, but spoiler alert: they’re mostly merc or former privateer types. He’s run for leader before, and I’m sure you’ve seen the blurb he wrote up for that—pretty vague stuff, wants to make the Spriggans less isolated and get everyone clearing work but is short on specifics about how, no idea what he thinks of the Treaty.」

Argo glanced up. Thelvin had his menu open and looked like he was scrolling through something or other with one finger while he finished eating, and Veldt seemed to be gearing up to go scout ahead down the eastern tunnel where they hadn’t explored. She briefly considered letting him know she had it covered, but after a moment’s thought reasoned that another set of eyes couldn’t hurt. Returning her attention to the working PM window, she mulled over whether or not this was the best time to ask the question she wanted to ask, what with everything else going on... but her curiosity had been eating at her for over a day now.
「There’s something else we gotta talk about, Ki-bou. You’re up to your pointed ears in something big right now, and you haven’t told me a thing—in fact it feels kinda like you’ve been going out of your way to keep it from me. I know it has something to do with a PK incident in the Sewers the other day, and whatever it was took you from Penwether to Nissengrof and back so fast that you had to be hauling mad ass the entire time. That’s dangerous and we both know you wouldn’t do it for lulz. It’s time you brought me in on this—whatever it is, you know I can help.」

Argo couldn’t put a finger on quite why it was so frustrating to be kept out of the loop on this—more frustrating than she usually found being so, that is. She could tell that events of significance were unfolding, and she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that more than a few of them were connected somehow.

*With Loki in the mix, I can’t rule anything out. He pretty much up and said that his aim was to keep us trapped in Alfheim forever—anything that creates conflict between the factions or slows our clearing benefits him.*

“Thelvin,” Argo said, glancing at the still-sleeping forms of Terquen and Whiskers. When the Cait Sith tank looked her way, she met his eyes. “I need you to watch me.”

To his credit, Thelvin didn’t bat an eye or ask what she meant; he’d been traveling with her long enough. He gave a slight nod and went back to his menu, but his gaze flickered around the campsite periodically.

Just as weapon techniques had their opening motions and some spells had somatic gesture components, many non-magical abilities had postures or motions that triggered them rather than manual activation through the game menu. «Sense Possession» was one such ability; it required Argo to sit down in a particular cross-legged position and lay her hands on her thighs. As soon as the game detected her posture it filled her vision with a portrait of each of her pets against a background of dim sunset-colored fog. She wasted no time in using Focus to select Jim’s 3D model, and did her best to ignore the brief stab of disorientation as her view rushed in and joined with the rat’s.

It was hard to know how much area the rat had scouted in the time since sending him out; it couldn’t have been too far. Although the rat’s vision was nowhere near as sharp as her own Cait Sith senses, she stopped in place, urging the rat to look around and show her what he’d tagged along the way.

Looking back the way he’d come, Argo immediately saw only the yellow cursors of non-aggro mobs through the cavern walls. That was good news; it would let the party cover some ground before they had to fight or bypass anything, unless they ran into roamers. Directing the rat’s focus back the way they needed to go, she needed only the slightest nudge of intent to send it scurrying northeasterly once more, flagging mobs with markers that would linger in her sight for a time once she returned to her own senses.

Although the rat’s vision was realistically poor compared to other types of pets she might’ve chosen, its hearing was as superb as a real rat’s would’ve been. Some mobs were tagged not because the rat saw them, but because it *heard* them well before they even would’ve come into sight. The non-aggro mobs she noted mentally, while the aggro mobs she gave a wide berth—she didn’t think most of them would KOS a rat, but she wasn’t anxious to take chances, even with Jim’s track record.

It was the rat’s keen hearing that let her pick up on the faint sound of a person’s voice, far down one of the forks of a passageway that lay before her pet. The words were so unintelligibly quiet that had it been her or Thelvin in their own avatars with their enhanced senses, Argo doubted anyone would’ve heard a thing; even with the rat’s senses she couldn’t even be certain what had been said. Her pet’s tiny feet carried it rapidly down the tunnel, following her curiosity.
Argo had half-expected to run into Veldt anyway; there were only so many passageways that led to the exit, and he couldn’t have gotten far either. But she was fairly certain she heard him speaking to someone else as the rat descended further down the spiraling hallway; she hadn’t been able to make out the words, but she knew the sound of conversation—and it was usually very different from someone talking to themselves.

“...huge room, with an obstacle course of environmental clutter and tough mobs,” came Veldt’s voice a few moments later, faintly still but understandable. “And I don’t like the roamers. Do they have a set pattern?”

The other voice was a girl’s; Argo could hear it clearly now through the rat despite how soft it seemed. “To a point. All but two mobs in this room have fixed spawns. There two are Lugru Orc Sentries, and they patrol the perimeter of the room in a standard pattern between waypoints. The entire cycle takes five minutes and twenty seconds, but sometimes a Sentry will stop and perform a contextual action if they come near something interactive, such as a plate of food or a note on the wall; this pause delays that Sentry’s pattern.”

Hello, Miss Well-Informed, I want to be your friend. The rat couldn’t speak, and Argo wasn’t even certain exactly how far away they were, but she kept her thoughts inside nonetheless. Where did this extremely knowledgeable friend of his come from, anyway? Veldt never even hinted he had a companion in the area, and she sure didn’t pass us. She’s gotta be a tester. Maybe even one of the former GM helpers, from the sound of it. There was something odd about the girl’s voice, but Argo couldn’t put her finger on it.

“So the effective patrol pattern and overlap between them might be different at any given time,” said Veldt. “Getting past them would come down to observation, patience, and timing—waiting for the right window to emerge. We’d first need a path through the fixed mobs so we know where to watch the roamers for that window.”

It sounded to Argo like a sound analysis based on good intel—possibly even someone with an inside line on the mob behavioral mechanics. The girl with the quiet voice seemed to have the same idea. “All correct.” There was a pause, and then the girl’s voice—previously calm and analytical—became emotionally invested, expressing clear affection. “You’re so smart, onii-chan.” Then just as suddenly, it was as before. “One is pathing this way. We should shift position.”

Okay, I officially need to know what the hell is going on here. Argo urged the rat forward, although between her level of Rapport and the rat’s simple AI, it didn’t take much to get the rat to move in the direction she wanted—unless, of course, it was in clear danger. In those situations its AI seemed to take over; it was very difficult to get it out of what she called “panic mode” before it had put some distance between it and the threat.

Why are they talking so loudly, this close to aggro demihuman mobs? I heard them from a long ways away. But as Argo took a moment to turn that thought over in her head, she realized that wasn’t entirely right—the rat was quick for its size, but it was still a tiny creature with tiny legs. It could put on tremendous bursts of speed when it was in danger, certainly. But she knew her perception of distance was skewed because of how small and close to the ground she was. And the rat has better hearing even than a Cait Sith—which means it’s definitely better than an Orc mob’s. I might’ve first heard them from maybe twenty or thirty meters away in the corridor above, but I’d be surprised if their voices carried a third of that distance in normal hearing ranges.

She saw the torchlight long before anything else; simple timber supports began framing the tunnel as the passage leveled out, and beyond the first few of those opened up into a roughly-excavated room the size of a small passenger van before continuing further around a bend. The room was lit on either
side of a large doorway framed in dark wood by a pair of torches. That, out in the contested zones of Alfheim, almost *certainly* meant that there were mob or NPC patrols maintaining the consumable light sources—most likely the aforementioned orcs.

Veldt was kneeling by the door; his friend—or maybe his little sister, from the sound of it—was nowhere in sight. Argo was assuming she’d repositioned herself inside the next room and was scouting a path through the mobs there, but then the girl’s voice spoke up as if she was right there in the room with Veldt—right next to him, even.

“All right, it’s stopped. It pathed near the workbench and entered the «maintain weapon» animation, which will run for at least one minute.” The voice was there, clear as could be, but the girl wasn’t. An idea hit her. *I wonder if she’s invis. Jim wouldn’t be able to see through that. It could explain why Veldt’s acting like she’s right there.*

Indeed, Veldt then nodded as if she could see him do so, eyes watching through the doorway.

“Thanks, Matti.”

Matti continued in that oddly matter-of-fact tone. “Also, there is a small non-aggro mob approaching us.”

*Uh oh.* Argo had the rat stop in its tracks and stay as still as possible. The young girl clearly had her searching up, wherever she was hiding. *Just another harmless roamer pathing around, pay no mind.*

Veldt frowned and glanced around. “Where and what is it? Come out and show me.”

Argo was so stunned by what she saw next that she very nearly sent the rat into panic mode. An actual, honest-to-goodness *Navi-Pixie*, of all things, poked its tiny head out of one of Veldt’s many bandolier pouches. The loose brown bun of hair on the little pixie’s head bobbed as she flew from of the pocket and pointed directly at Jim. “A player pet, over there. I believe it is one of your Cait Sith companion’s rats.”

“Matti?” Veldt’s voice was tightly controlled as his head turned to track along the invisible line connecting the pixie’s hand and Argo’s pet. “Next time lead with that part.”

If Argo could have spoken then, she doubted what she had to say would’ve been in any way controlled. Not since she’d blackmailed Raikouji into resigning his post had she willed a rat to go so fast as she did then, and something of her sense of alarm must have come through—the rat shot across the ground faster than Argo could even keep track and react. She wasn’t taking any chances; as soon as she was able to focus on it, she cancelled the active Sense Possession effect from her HUD, and with a rushing feeling of disorientation she found herself safely back in her avatar moments later.

It was impossible for Thelvin to miss the abrupt change in her demeanor; she probably looked as panicked as she felt as she whipped her head around to see if anyone else was awake. They weren’t, which was a bit on the small side as favors went, but favorable all the same. Thelvin was on his feet at once, preparing to equip his weapon and shield. “You look like you just got chased. Aggro mob, or is it Salamanders?”

“Neither,” she said cryptically, turning to look as Whiskers slowly sat up and began to put on a remarkably catlike stretch. Argo lowered her voice to a whisper and drew close to Thelvin, speaking quickly. “If Veldt comes running in here looking worked up about something instead of disappearing without a trace, try to act normal and give him room. I’ll tell you later.”
“You’d better, young lady,” said Thelvin almost as quietly, giving her an odd stare.

Argo had every intent of doing so—as soon as she figured out what to tell him. *Okay, so Veldt is obviously one of the very few people who got a Navi-Pixie. He’s not the first I’ve found, but I’ve never heard of a Navi-Pixie giving out the kind of detailed game information I heard before. It’s almost cheating.*

Half an hour passed; her rat returned, but Veldt did not. With the rest of the party now awake, it was getting increasingly difficult to fend off the curiosity of the other two and buy time. When he finally did return, he said nothing about his encounter with Argo’s rat, instead almost immediately opening his map and beginning to debrief on what he’d learned about the passages ahead of them. “Got some bad news,” he said. “There’s a fork ahead. The left branch leads down to a long arterial passageway that loops around the outside of and connects to the Moldering Barracks, which used to be inhabited by undead trash mobs.”

“Used to be?” Terquen asked. “I’ve never taken this route myself, but I know where we are now; my friends love that dungeon. They go to the Barracks all the time to farm undead mats.”

“Well, apparently now it’s Orc territory. I took a look in there, and I don’t like it.”

“Why specifically?” Thelvin asked.

Veldt’s response was immediate and confident. “Too many unpredictable roamers. I didn’t see Warg riders, just sentries, and that worries me—because it means we have no idea where the really dangerous mobs might be. I’d take a stealth party there, or one with balanced roles and an overleveled tank. We’ve got the tank, but no balance. I recommend giving it a miss.”

“Well, I know there are multiple routes,” Thelvin suggested, eyes roaming over the layout shown.

“Here,” Argo said, walking up to Veldt until she was close enough to point to his map. “Since we can’t shortcut through the Barracks, we have to either take the mine shaft loop or go backtrack and pick another route. And from what you said,” she added, tilting her chin up to look at Veldt, “the main route is incredibly dangerous now. This is our best bet.”

“It’s still a long slog,” Veldt cautioned, locking his silver-gray eyes with her gaze as they stood barely half a meter apart, Argo’s chin still raised. There were a few moments there where they simply stared at each other, as if each was waiting for the other to say something else. He finally did. “I took a look. Those shafts are wide enough for maybe three people to fight side by side. When we move as a party, we’ll have to clear as we go—there’ll be no avoiding the mobs there.”

Thelvin nodded. “Which are?”

“That’s the good news. The only aggro mobs I saw were undead—mainly skellies and zed types around levels 24-25. Looks like this is where they went when the Orcs drove them out. I didn’t see anything above level 26, and no named.”

Argo smiled. That was very good news indeed. Any player who’d ventured into dungeons knew to expect tons of undead trash mobs—and to look forward to them, because they were usually easy to clear. Most were among the safest sorts of mob to fight: they were, for the most part, completely unintelligent, didn’t use advanced weapon techniques, had no enhanced senses, and were incapable of any but the most basic of scripted tactics. They simply came straight at you and hacked away, and they were trivial to kite or outsmart. And a maximum of level 26 meant even she was overleveled for it, although just barely—Veldt and especially Thelvin certainly were by more. Terquen and Whiskers might have trouble, but not with Thelvin tanking.
“Word of warning, though,” Veldt went on while the rest of the party went silently thoughtful. “I only scouted so far ahead. We don’t know what to expect beyond there, and shouldn’t make assumptions.”

“Sound advice on any given day,” Thelvin said, nodding his approval. His gaze took a brief circuit of the group, and he began equipping himself. “Anything else happen out there? Anything we should know about?”

Thelvin’s question sounded perfectly ordinary and reasonable, but Argo was fairly sure it was phrased that way because of her comment to him. Whether the intent was imagined or real, Veldt’s face froze for a moment before relaxing. There was nothing off about the tone of his reply; it was completely neutral. “Nothing worth mentioning.”

If Thelvin had any issue with the brush-off, he didn’t say. “Okay then, let’s stow our sleeping gear and get moving. There’s not much further to go after this, so I want to see us reach Arun by nightfall.” He gave the entire group another once-over with his eyes, this time much more pointedly. “All of us.”

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Asuna had read the previous night’s messages from Kirito at least three times over, and she still had no idea what to think—or where to begin in responding. If she didn’t know Kirito better, she might’ve suspected he was trying to have some fun at her expense. Kirito could be infuriating, and there was no doubt he liked to yank her chain from time to time.

But this… this would’ve been too far. She just didn’t think he would troll her about something like this. Multiple somethings, really—it was a toss-up for which set of news was more shocking.

Prophet got away, and he’s working for an NPC Norse goddess who rewards him for killing people. Yoshihara was assassinated, and half the time it wasn’t her anyway, it was her friend using that mimic spell to imitate her. Now that jerkhead ex-privateer we met is leading the Spriggans.

Asuna closed her game menu and leaned forward, resting her forehead on her arms crossed before her at the inn room table. At least Yuuki seemed to be getting somewhere. The girl’s last few messages had been much shorter than the others, but she’d apparently managed to make contact with someone who was going to help her track down information on the Imps in Prophet’s gang. That was something.

For Asuna’s part, Nissengrof was a bust. She’d spent the remainder of the previous day wandering the city, searching for clues—half-hoping at times that there was someone from Prophet’s gang following her, and that by exposing herself she’d draw them out. That now felt like wasted time. Nissengrof was a huge city, and much of it was underground; there were very few places where it was even possible to see someone until you passed them in the corridor.

And what would I do if I even recognized one of them—fight them? Shame them in public? We didn’t really have a Plan B here. Ever since the Sewers, it feels like we’ve just been reacting to them, going far out of our way and wasting time chasing phantoms. That’s three days we’ve been away from clearing. Three days in which we’ve gotten very little EXP. Three days of near-death experiences and hoping for a breakthrough.

Asuna’s thoughts stopped there suddenly, shifting direction. She re-opened one of Kirito’s messages and skimmed through it, re-reading a particular passage.

‘And that’s the part that worries me the most, Asuna. How do you deter someone who thinks
they’re already dead? Prophet not only doesn’t want to leave Alfheim, he wants to keep everyone else here too—the only thing he seems to fear is having the game end. You could use your credibility to warn the clearing groups, but if they start hunting him down, that’s just giving him what he wants—to make the clearers waste their time looking for his people instead of clearing the game. He seemed eager for it. And he could literally be almost anywhere by now.

Asuna stared at those words and the ones that followed for some time, feeling them resonate more strongly now than they had the first time. They still burned in her mind when she opened a new message and began pouring out her thoughts.

「Kirito, I’ve been thinking. You said Prophet doesn’t want the game cleared, and seemed eager to have the clearing groups waste their time searching for him instead of trying to clear the game. Well, doesn’t it sound a bit as if we’ve been giving him exactly what he wants these last few days? And look where it’s gotten us: we’re separated, exposed to ambush most of the time, gaining little EXP or skill progress, we’re absent from the front lines… and for what? Sure, we know a little more now about Prophet and why he’s doing this, and that’s great, but we’re no closer to dealing with him—or even having the first clue where he and his people are based out of。

「I think it’s time we both admitted that we’re just grasping at straws now, letting ourselves get swept along in what’s happening without really affecting it, because we can’t stand to not be doing something about these murderers. You said yourself you’re not sure what to do from here, so how about this for a suggestion: let’s stop giving Prophet what he wants. If the only thing he fears is having the game cleared, then let’s focus all our energy on doing exactly that.」 She paused there briefly, thoughtful. 「I do still think you should talk to Argo for us, figure out how much to tell her and how to get the word out. But then let’s both return to Arun and go back to clearing. Don’t get me wrong, Prophet still needs to be dealt with… but we need to be smart about how we use our time, and we can’t do this alone。

That goes double for you, Mister I-can-take-anyone-in-a-one-on-one-fight. This was a point she needed to hammer through Kirito’s thick skull until it sunk in; he was just too reckless when left on his own. 「We don’t know if anyone from Prophet’s group is still watching us, or even how many of them there really are. I’m considering joining a party that’s headed to Arun. You should do the same. Safe travel, Kirito, I—」

Asuna bit her lip, hesitating before typing further. 「I care about you, and I don’t want to see anything happen to you just because you decided to be stupid and think you can defeat anyone who comes after you. Message me if you need anything。

Once the message was sent, she flopped backwards onto the thick-furred cloak she’d purchased the day before and laid out in front of the fireplace like a rug. Lying there in that spot, she couldn’t help but think back to that one single night Kirito had spent here before racing off to Penwether the next morning. Only been a day had passed, but absence and circumstance had conspired to make it feel so much longer. It would’ve been nice to have had this cloak to sleep on that night, she thought ruefully. Then again —

It wouldn’t do to dwell too much on that night. She’d had plenty of time to think and gather her composure after waking up, but Asuna had just about frozen scared when she’d first awakened to realize where she was, how she’d fallen asleep... and whose lap she’d been using as a pillow. She was just grateful Kirito hadn’t been awake yet; it was embarrassing enough knowing that he must’ve still been awake when she’d fallen asleep like that.

Her eyes went up to her clock. It wasn’t long after seven, and Kirito did seem to like to sleep in; she doubted he would even be awake yet. She herself had a few tasks ahead of her—not least of which
was tracking down a reliable player smith to repair all of her gear before she made the long trek back to Arun. She and Kirito had intended to do that the morning that he’d gotten the message about Prophet from this Philia person, and his sudden departure had thrown a kink in their plans.

Nothing to do for it now except get it done, Asuna thought, sighing as she sat up and began gathering her belongings. One by one she tapped the items to open their context window and dragged their icons to her open inventory menu, the glowing wire skeleton of each item model shimmering before disappearing as if it had never existed. She could feel the additional weight, but it was still below the encumbrance limit that would slow her movement.

There was no need to check out with the NPC innkeeper; with no advance rent paid, the room would simply revert to vacancy if she didn’t renew it. Nonetheless, Asuna paused at the doorway with her fingertips resting on the cold metal handle, looking down and back at the fireplace and the now-bare floor in front of it. As uncomfortable as it had been to sleep on the floor that night, she was sure she would always remember this place for the time she’d spent with Kirito here—there were so many memories to pick from. It was these memories that she needed to hold close to her if she wanted to be able to move forward—memories of warmth and friendship. Not the shrieks of frightened children, or XaXa’s profane screams in her ear just before he died. Those screams still haunted her, a parting gift that she didn’t want and couldn’t give back.

She needed to fill that space with something else. Something better.

When Asuna emerged from the inn, she found a Nissengrof that was much changed from the last time she’d been out. Granted, she’d only been spending time above-ground on the short route between her inn room and the city below... but ever since she and Kirito had first arrived the city had been beset by what seemed to her a ridiculously unseasonal blizzard for early May, even here in the far north. But at some point overnight the storm must have broken; the eastern sun was low in a nearly-clear blue sky, and a considerable number of players were in the surface streets simply because they could be.

Despite the direct sunlight and light wind, the temperature was nothing even approaching warm—Asuna would’ve still figured it for well below freezing. Still, even the winter-geared players going about their business as usual seemed to lack some of the haste shown the night before by so many of Nissengrof’s denizens. Any sensible person would hurry when forced to step out into a winter storm, exposing themselves to the elements only long enough to get from one building to another. But this morning there were players who stopped to talk in the street—there were actual conversations going on, as well as loitering clusters of what were obviously full or partial parties grouping up.

Asuna needed to get into one of those groups, or one like them, but she had to take care of her gear first. There were a few open stalls with what looked like player-rented smithies, and she briefly considered the convenience. Agil had given her a handful of names for recommended smiths and where to find them, and she thought she recalled that one was nearby.

But clear skies or no, Asuna didn’t really fancy the idea of standing around in the cold waiting for a player smith, and she wouldn’t dare entrust her gear to an NPC. Wishing she’d thought to do so before leaving, she stopped to open her game menu and quickly recalled her saved messages, one of which was a PM from Agil with the names and locations she needed.

Nearly all of them were in an underground commercial district very close to the Depot, which she supposed did make sense. Since Agil had recommended them, it stood to reason that they had a working relationship or were at least well-known by reputation, and crafters working directly for the NCC would find it convenient being that close to the faction’s resources.

That location was not, however, very convenient for Asuna; the inn where she’d spent the last few
nights was all the way on the other side of the city. Fortunately, nearly was not all. One name stood out to her for a few reasons, not least of which was that the directions led down below to a district she knew was close by; she’d spent a lot of time in that area the day before.

Repeating the directions to herself a few times after closing her menu, she hurried towards the nearest tunnel entrance as quickly as one could in ankle-deep snow.

In Kirito’s opinion, Asuna’s lengthy message—while welcome—could have been better-timed.

In the time that he’d taken to both read and be impacted by the content of that message, Philia had apparently long since stopped fidgeting; impatient foot-tapping seemed to be her message of choice. Kirito flicked the window closed and snapped his attention back to the young woman in front of him. “Sorry about that,” he said.

“Do your larper friends write short stories about their adventures, or something?” Philia asked with a quirky smile and raised eyebrows. “Seriously, you should get lore quest EXP for how long it took you to read that PM.”

Kirito wasn’t sure whether it was naturally in Philia’s personality to be so snarky, or if it had rubbed off on her after so long playing the part of her much more abrasive friend and faction leader—her attitude sometimes had a forced quality to it, as if she was trying too hard. Rather than being taken aback, he decided the best course of action was to respond in kind, and grinned at her suddenly. “That’d be cool. Do you have any idea how easy that mechanic would be to exploit?”

A roll of the eyes seemed to be his reward for that joke—but it did succeed at redirecting the conversation. “Okay, so what then? You went all derp-face for a minute there. Must be a good reason, right? Because I’d like to get on with finding this friend-murdering shitweasel and having a chat with him about his life choices.”

And that, there, was the dilemma. The night before, he’d promised Philia that the two of them would go and talk to Coper in the morning—or at least, that they’d try. There was no guarantee they’d be able to find their new faction leader; having just assassinated Yoshihara, there was a good chance he was laying low somewhere safe in the city.

He certainly wouldn’t count Coper as a friend, but the two of them had the kind of understanding—and even a degree of mutual respect—that tended to develop between people who cross paths in the same line of work. Coper had reached out to him before in common cause against Yoshihara, and before meeting with Philia this morning, Kirito had sent messages to a few of Coper’s known acquaintances in the city saying that he wanted to meet with the new faction leader. There’d been no word yet, but he was fairly sure the other boy would oblige him. Eventually.

A few minutes ago, that had been the plan. Now it was a complication. Because what Asuna had written in her message rang all too true for Kirito—in their rush to mete out justice, they might well have played right into Prophet’s hands. In retrospect, that certainly seemed to be the implication of the words he’d exchanged with the killer in the city prison. Prophet thought he could live forever in the game world, as long as he kept the clearers from clearing the game.

What could be more effective at thinning the front lines of the clearing groups and delaying their work than a worldwide manhunt for a killer who could be hiding anywhere—a killer with the favor of an NPC goddess, leading a group with unknown numbers?

It had certainly worked on Asuna and Kirito. He’d put in long, dangerous hours grinding to get
ahead of the leveling curve for the front lines, and if he stayed away from them for much longer, it
would only mean greater danger and a harder grind once he returned.

And towards that end, Asuna was going back to Arun ASAP. That was where Kirito needed to be
as well: headed back into the World Tree. If he couldn’t imprison Prophet, and being chased was
what the man wanted, then until a better lead came along the wisest thing to do would be to jump
right back into the front lines and catch up with exploring the new zone.

Philia snapped her fingers. “Earth to—”

“I know, sorry,” Kirito said quickly, trying to regain momentum before she could get started. “Look,
Philia, I’m not sure how to say this…”

“You can start with sentences,” she suggested when he trailed off for a moment. “Sentences that say
something would be good.”

“Can I finish one, then?”

Philia made a magnanimous gesture. “Sorry. You’ve got the floor.”

Kirito took a deep breath. Before he could speak, however, the distinctive chime of a new message
sounded in his ear, and a small flashing icon appeared in the notification area at the left edge of his
view. He actually winced; if that was another message from Asuna, he was going to have to look at
it before going further with this conversation—just in case plans had changed somehow.

However, the name shown beside the PM was not Asuna’s. It was, in fact, from one of the only
other people who could’ve gotten Kirito to stop the conversation again in order to read the message.
But it wasn’t just Coper’s name that got his attention; the icon beside the message not the usual line-
art envelope icon in a circle.

“What did you just—?”

“Yeah,” Kirito said in response to the beginning of Philia’s question. “It’s a faction-wide mass-mail.
He can do that.” He immediately focused on the message to open it.

“Oh for crying out loud,” Philia complained. “He did write a damned novel.”

“Well then maybe we’ll find out something important from what he wrote,” Kirito suggested as he
began reading the opening, determined to learn from it whether she did or not.

『I’m sure you’re all wondering what the hell happened last night, and what this change in
leadership means for your independence. So I’ll make the TL;DR version real simple: it doesn’t
mean anything if you don’t want it to. Most of us would rather do our own thing, and that’s cool—
keep on doing it. If you’re not with me, I’m not going to sit here and tell you what to do any more
than Yoshihara did.』

So there it was: from the sound of it, Coper had no intention of enforcing the Treaty. Kirito had
wondered, especially given the manner in which he’d taken the leadership. There had always been a
surprising amount of ambiguity surrounding Coper’s actual stance on that particular point; in his bio
he preached independence but then turned around and talked about the need to improve relations
with the other factions. Kirito wasn’t sure how Coper expected to do that from what he’d heard so
far—but his eyes kept scanning ahead, looking for answers.

『So why did I want to replace her? Simple. I challenged Yoshihara because I don’t want to spend
the rest of my life in this game, and that’s what was going to happen with a leader who thinks being
‘hands-off’ means doing nothing to help get us out of here. I think the results of that attitude are pretty clear.

Yoshihara talked about wanting us to be able to take clearing group work with whoever we wanted—but what did she ever do to help make that possible? When was the last time you heard of a Spriggan group being hired for an actual raid? How many Spriggans take part in raiding Gateway Bosses, period? Being independent sounds great, but the fact is that if we want to be one of the races who gets out, at least some of us need to organize and show that we’re worth having along.

‘Who’s writing this dude’s campaign speeches?’

Kirito segued an aborted snort of amusement into a shrug, and read on.

But like I said, I’m not gonna tell the whole faction what to do. I consider myself the leader of all Spriggans who want to align with my guild and my goals, voluntarily. For them, yeah, there’s gonna be a few rules. There’s gotta be if we wanna play ball with others. Don’t like the sound of that? Then just keep on doing whatever you’re doing, if that’s what you wanna do. I’m not gonna mess with you.

So here’s my call for volunteers. Last night my group and I relocated to Arun—

“Wait a minute, he what?” Philia’s outburst came not long after Kirito himself had read that line; he’d almost been expecting it from her. “How in the hell did that brat make it all the way to Arun without standing out like a beacon saying ‘please gank’?”

“If I had to guess?” Kirito ventured. “Probably the same way you and Yoshihara got around. Coper’s a clearer. If mid-levelers like you and your friends could grind that skill level, he sure could.”

The wide ‘O’ of Philia’s open mouth slowly closed, as her incredulity seemed to almost visibly deflate. “…damn.”

Kirito left Philia to her moment and returned his gaze to Coper’s message. Last night my group and I relocated to Arun, because this is where the clearing is—and this is where we’re based from here on out. Any Spriggans who wanna be a part of what I’m doing, start making your way there if you aren’t already. We’ll get you set up as one of us and ready to go.

For everyone else, for all the Spriggans who just want to stay in Penwether and do things your way… consider the city yours.

A few moments of silent musing followed as they each came to the end of the lengthy message. Kirito commented first. “I didn’t expect that,” he admitted. “As a way of splitting the difference, that might just work.”

Philia nodded, looking very unhappy at the prospect of admitting Coper might have done anything right. She sighed. “Well, I’m sorry, Kirito, but given this lovely news, I don’t think right now’s the best time for you to unload your soul. Whatever it was you were about to say before this, can it please wait for later?”

“Forget it,” Kirito said almost too hastily, more relieved than he wanted to show. “We need to get to Arun right away.”

Philia gave him one of the few true smiles she’d shown him. “Yeah... we do. So in the interest of not wasting any more daylight, how about we get partied up and dust this place as soon as I collect a few things?”
Oops. Kirito’s eyes went immediately to the party list in his HUD, where he could still see the smaller status bars for Asuna and Yuuki. Asuna’s name had a small icon in her Active Effects list, a stylized trio of simplified people shapes, the kind often seen on public signage. Asuna’s the party leader; I don’t have invite permissions. No problem, I’ll just —

Kirito’s thoughts ran into a wall there. He didn’t think it was a good idea to message Asuna and ask her to change the party permissions… but he could not, no matter how hard he tried, quite nail down why it was a bad idea.

“Kirito?”

“There’s a complication,” he said uncomfortably. “I’m already in a party.”

“Oh right,” Philia said. “With your girlfriend. Is she going to turn into a raging bitch if we show up tog—”

“She’s not my girlfriend!” Kirito said a bit too insistently, managing to lower his voice only for the last word.

Philia’s scoff, by contrast, was so quiet that it was little more than a forceful exhalation. “Whatever you say. That’s your girlfriend whether you know it or not.” She waved him off as his protests turned into uncomfortable silence. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll just head there separately.”

“At your likely level range? The spawns have changed everywhere, Philia. The zones around Arun might be too dangerous for you to take on alone.”

“Who’s planning on wasting time taking on anything? Remember, my Illusion skill is pretty high—much higher than most people my level. I’ve got spells I don’t even have the MP to cast once, but the ones I can cast are pretty awesome. The more mobs I can bypass, the better.” She shot a meaningful look at him. “We both probably know a lot of the same tricks and exploits… and we both know how the best of them only work on the caster… which means you can’t use them unless you’re soloing.”

Kirito did know, but that wasn’t the end of it. “And we both know how most Illusion spells—most spells in general, really—are less effective against anything higher level than you. It changes their effective resists to everything you cast. You could very well run into something you can’t stealth or cheese your way past, and you wouldn’t know until it aggroed you. What then?”

Philia looked down at the ground for a few moments. When she raised her eyes again, her smile looked a bit more strained than before. “I’ll be fine.”

Kirito shrugged, very done with arguing. “It’s your life. But we’re going the same direction anyway. Doesn’t it make more sense to travel together? We both probably use the same spells for soloing, so it doesn’t matter that they’re caster-only. We can always split up if we need to, but since we’re not partied it’ll be harder to find each other again if we’re not traveling together to begin with.”

Philia threw up her hands. “I give up. I take no responsibility for the consequences.”

The response didn’t make any sense to Kirito, but it sounded like a victory nonetheless. Considering the last few days… he’d take them where he could get them.

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Lisbeth whistled while she walked. It had been a pretty good day so far.

Good night’s sleep? Check. Clear skies and no stupid blizzard? Check. Major commission delivered
and paid for? Check. Over three hundred heavy mats converted into fifty much-lighter subcombines so that I’m not crawling the whole way? Check. Everything packed for the trip home?

That last detail was still a work in progress, but she wasn’t worried. It was tedious work, manually sorting her inventory into bags and then moving the bags into her inventory, but doing so would keep her inventory menu free of clutter—instead of scrolling through hundreds of items, the list would be stripped down to a bunch of bags and her traveling essentials. Granted, they still weighed the same, and she couldn’t access anything that was contained in the bags when they were packed like this; it wasn’t possible to drill down into a container’s inventory using that menu. She’d have to manifest the entire bag from her inventory and open it. But until she reached Arun, she didn’t have any need to get at the hundreds of mats, components, and work products she was carrying.

I’ll get started on that as soon as I get back to the shop, Lisbeth thought as she turned down the corridor that led to her district. Should take maybe half an hour at most, and then if there’s no customers I’m free to head out whenever. I’m so glad this conference is over!

The only worry left on her mind, in fact, was the trip itself. The spawns had changed while she was in Nissengrof, and from what she was hearing everything was a lot tougher now. In the neighborhood of ten-twenty levels tougher. At level 28 she was no slouch in combat, but after this change she wasn’t sure she could solo the entire thing the way she usually did. I feel sorry for the crafters who don’t do much combat at all. At least I farm a lot of my own mats.

She’d considered partying up with some of them—there was talk of organizing a caravan for the low-level crafters. But any caravan wouldn’t be leaving for days yet, and she shuddered at the thought of trying to babysit some lowbie crafter who was painfully underleveled for the new content.

Maybe I’ll check the job boards on my way out. There’s bound to be some group that needs a little more DPS today.

On any other day, Lisbeth would not have been surprised to come back to her shop and find a customer waiting. She did have a pretty decent reputation, or so she thought. But she’d specifically hung out her usual sign telling people to come find her at her main shop in Arun; there was no reason for any player to linger.

Perhaps the Undine girl peering through the window was lost, or had just arrived. Whichever it was, Lisbeth couldn’t just ignore her. “Excuse me,” she said to the girl’s back. “Looking for someone?”

Her unexpected address must’ve startled the other girl, who did a little hop, wings briefly manifesting as she spun in place. “Oh! I’m sorry, yes. My name is Asuna. I’m looking for a smith who goes by Rizubetto.” Asuna gave her a tentative smile. “Please tell me that’s you. I was about to curse my luck when I read this sign.”

“That’s me,” Lisbeth confirmed, stepping towards the door and touching the handle. She glanced at the Undine girl, and the dawning of hope she saw there made it extremely hard to say the next words. “But the sign’s correct—now that the conference is over, I am done with this ice skating rink for the next month, maybe longer now that the trip’s tougher. I’m about to pack up and go.” Her practiced eye made the rounds of what she could see of Asuna’s gear, and she paused to meet the girl’s blue eyes. “You’re a clearer, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Asuna said, her smile less hesitant now. “I’m on my way back to Arun to rejoin my clearing group, but it’s been a very long trip from Parasel. With all the new mobs, I wanted to make sure my equipment was in top condition before setting out.”

Repairs are quick, trivial work. Doing a bulk job of everything she might have with her, though,
could take as much as an hour if she has a lot of swap gear. But if I help her now, there’s a good chance I could score her as a client—maybe even sell her and her clearing group some commissions! And then another, more exciting thought occurred to her: I’d just been thinking about looking for a companion for this trip, and she’s going to Arun too. And she’s a clearer! Of all the luck!

There was no question in Lisbeth’s mind about the correct thing to do. She smiled at the other girl, and pushed open the door. “Any clearer is welcome in my shop,” she said. “Come on in, and I’ll make sure your gear comes out of here better than new.”

The relief on Asuna’s face was overwhelming. “Oh, thank you so much! Now I’m really glad I didn’t just turn around and leave when I saw your sign.”

Me too, girl. Me too. “My pleasure.” She led her new client towards the forge area, and selected a couple of tools hanging on a rack above her workbench. “Now, show me what you got.”

Asuna began unequipping the items she needed serviced and handing them over to Lisbeth, who whistled appreciatively when she brought up the status windows for each. “These are really nice. I don’t recognize the maker’s name on the crafted pieces, though.”

“Portni is one of the in-house smiths for the Undine clearers. He does a lot of our commissions, and maintains our gear whenever we’re back in Parasel.”

Damn. That likely meant she had no need of a regular smith. Turning over a very lightweight breastplate in her hand, she made noises of approval. “This is really good work. Max number of upgrade slots for something made from Deep Beryllium. See the crystals inset as your faction symbol?” Asuna nodded. “Those aren’t just a decorative customization. He could’ve used anything there, but Dzarri Vespid Crystals are an AGI-attuned material. It’s why the base enchantment has such a high boost to that stat.”

Her evaluation had the desired effect. Asuna smiled at her and seemed impressed. “You know a lot about your craft.”

“ Been doing it since launch,” Lisbeth said matter-of-factly before moving on to boasting. “I used to supply gear to the Lepu and then NCC clearing groups, and I’m still one of the top smiths with an endorsement.”

“Ah! That must be why Agil recommended you.”

“That big bald lunkhead sent you to me?” Lisbeth laughed and slapped her apron. “Why didn’t you say so, dummy? Agil’s my pal. I’ll give you my special discount on today’s work. Special, you hear me? You won’t be sorry you came here.”

Hand over her mouth, Asuna’s shoulders hitched as if she was trying to suppress a giggle. The Undine girl glanced around before seating herself on a stool by the front counter. “I’m already not.”

“Good to hear. You got boost mats for these?”

“I was hoping you’d ask.” Asuna seemed to be fiddling with her menu, and after a few moments a trade window opened with stacks of various mats added to it. “I’d rather not use my rare ones—those I save for when I’m going straight into the World Tree with my group. I don’t think I’ll need the extra durability for this trip.”

“Your call,” Lisbeth said, accepting the trade. “These should max out success and get everything to 125%, at least.”
“I figured. So why are you going to Arun? You seem to have a good business here.”

Lisbeth cracked her knuckles and opened the repair interface for the first item, adding the correct mats and deciding to start with the lovely breastplate she’d just evaluated. “I hate the cold,” she said as her hammer fell in the steady rhythm of long practice. “Yeah, I know, I sure picked the right race, huh? I mean, I love the people, but this is not where I want to live. Soon as I could, I up and relocated to Arun. Weather’s better, and I still see my friends and clients from the clearing groups on their way in and out of the warpgate.”

“There’s a crafting conference held here about once a month, where we all get together to share info—new recipes, mats, or farming grounds we’ve discovered, you know, that sorta thing. Even some non-NCC players come to attend. The trip sucks, and I don’t like leaving my business, but it’s worth it for what you can learn.” She came to the first pause in her routine, waiting for the item’s glow to almost completely fade before starting up again. “And while I’m here, I help out Agil and Chellok with this and that.”

Lisbeth never failed to be surprised at how much more quickly a tedious task went by when you had someone to talk to, and conversation seemed to come easily with Asuna. As it turned out, there wasn’t quite as much work to do as she’d anticipated; it seemed that most of Asuna’s alternate gear hadn’t been used on her current outing, and was already in pristine condition. The whole job cost Lisbeth less than fifteen minutes of her day, and when it was done, she proudly presented the last piece—Asuna’s rapier—with both hands held out.

“I can’t thank you enough,” Asuna said, the gratitude in her voice exceeding that in her words. “I didn’t want to stand out in the surface streets waiting for a smith there, and going all the way to the areas around the Depot didn’t seem much fun either. Besides...” She hesitated there, as if rethinking what she was about to say. “I was kind of hoping your name meant you were a girl. I get sick of being talked down to by guys who assume I must know nothing about the game, even after seeing my gear.”

“Oh. My. God.” Lisbeth’s surge of righteous indignation was not the least bit exaggerated. “You have no idea. You know what it’s like being a female blacksmith? I get the same crap from customers and even other smiths.” Her voice dropped to a husky, mocking growl. “‘Oh, are you watching the shop for your boyfriend?’ ‘Okay sweetheart, let me explain stuff you learned how to do while I was still noobing in the starting zones.’ ‘Can you recommend a smith with external plumbing?’” She beat her hammer into the empty anvil so hard that Asuna winced at the noise. Lisbeth cleared her throat a few times. “Sorry-not-sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Asuna said, her words followed by a lopsided smile. “I’ve gotten the ‘boyfriend’ thing before too. Because I’d totally be able to wear some guy’s gear if I wasn’t high enough to equip it, right?” Her eyes rolled. “Even in my clearing group, I’ve had to work twice as hard as anyone to prove I deserve my rank, even though almost a third of our clearers are female. No, I don’t know what that’s like at all.”

Lisbeth and Asuna looked at each other for a few moments before bursting out into mutual laughter. Asuna managed to recover first. “Boys—”
“—are so stupid,” Lisbeth finished, or at least assumed.

“Some of them, sometimes,” Asuna said. Giving her rapier’s status window one last look, she equipped it at her side. “Really good work, Lisbeth, and fast. What do I owe you?”

“Call me Liz. And let’s see, for your full gear set, plus labor time, mats provided…” She trailed off there, thoughtful, and then grinned at Asuna. “Say. You’re going to Arun. I’m going to Arun. You wanna maybe—”

“Travel together?” Asuna laughed again. “I’ve been sitting here thinking that for a while now. What’s your level range?”

“High Tier 3. I could probably solo my way back, but I’d be a lot more comfortable with a healer along.”

“Well, don’t be fooled by the rapier—healing is my primary role in a raid.” Asuna didn’t look exactly thrilled about that, but it was still good news. “I’m well into the thirties, of course, but the gap should be fine. You might not get a lot of EXP, but we’ll get there safe.”

“In that case…” Lisbeth gave Asuna a knowing grin once more. “Let’s say I knock another twenty percent off the top.”

With the business side of things settled, Lisbeth turned to the mundane. “Okay, I have some packing to do, and that’ll probably take me about half an hour at most. You mind waiting?”

“Not at all,” Asuna said. “What do you mean by ‘packing’?”

“Just inventory management,” Lisbeth clarified, manifesting several large bags from her inventory and then beginning to withdraw stacks of mats and shove them in the bags. “I don’t need all this stuff while I’m traveling, and I don’t want it cluttering up my inventory, so I’m just putting it all in bags. Bunch of boring micro-management I wish the game automated. In the meantime, you want to get partyed up?”

Asuna’s mouth opened as if she was about to reply, but something seemed to occur to her that yanked her words back before they emerged. “Actually, can we wait on that a little bit while you pack? I’m already in a party with a few friends who are far away right now, and I think it’d be rude to abruptly drop the party or invite someone they’re not expecting without sending a message first.”

Lisbeth thought it a bit odd to stay in a party with someone who wasn’t even there to fight at your side, but didn’t want to say anything that might make Asuna think twice about taking her along. “I need her help more than she needs mine,” she reminded herself. “Sure, I guess. Just send me an invite when you’re ready.”

To Lisbeth’s surprise, it didn’t take Asuna long to get answers from her party members. “Actually,” she said, “this turned out to be convenient for everyone. I guess both of them ran into situations where they wanted to group up with someone near them, and since I’m not there to invite anyone new…”

“It’s easier to just drop the party and form new ones where everyone is,” Lisbeth finished.

“You got it,” Asuna said, although something in her smile looked a little stiff. Lisbeth fought against her customary urge to cheerfully pry into everyone else’s business, and gave her a smile back.

Asuna seemed quick about navigating her game menus, but then her finger hesitated briefly above some prompt that Lisbeth couldn’t see, something like uncertainty flashing across her face. Whatever
it was, it passed in a blink and within moments Lisbeth was confirming a new party invite.

“Good friends of yours?” Lisbeth asked.

Asuna nodded, her smile much more serene and earnest now. “The best,” she said. “They can both be a pain at times, but they’re my best friends in the world, and I miss them. We were staying in a party while we traveled so that we could keep track of each other.”

“I’ve got a few friends kind of like that,” Lisbeth admitted, thinking of people she’d known since the start of the game—people who’d had a huge influence on her path through the game, like Agil or Kirito. Her friendship with them wasn’t nearly as close as it sounded like Asuna’s was with her friends, though, and she was a little envious of the Undine clearer. “Mostly crafters and clearers. But I don’t see most of them very often, whether because they live in the NCC or they’re always out clearing.”

Asuna seemed a bit bemused about something, so Lisbeth decided to leave her to her thoughts and get back to packing, beginning to shovel handfuls of Winterberries into a drawstring bag as quickly as she could manifest the stacks. When all the preparations were done and Lisbeth’s inventory screen was significantly cleaner, she gave one last look around the shop, stopping to open the forge’s context menu and switch it off.

It was always like this before leaving. As much as she complained about the cold and the city’s layout, this had been one of her first shops, in the early days of the game when she was still up-and-coming in the NCC. It was small, it and didn’t have much in the way of display space for her creations… but it had been hers. She always felt a pang of nostalgia when shutting everything down and walking out the door.

Once her moment had passed, it seemed as if Asuna’s had as well; the girl’s friendly smile was back on her face and she was waiting patiently just outside the front door with her hands clasped low before her. After the key had turned in the lock and been sent back to her inventory, Lisbeth turned to Asuna with a grin. “Race you to the surface.”

Asuna proved perfectly capable of a playful grin of her own. “You’ll lose, you know. My AGI is pretty high, and smiths need STR.”

Lisbeth’s laugh was full of bravado. “Bring it, clearer girl, I bet I know these tunnels better than you.”

“Doesn’t matter if there’s only one way up.”

“Who says there’s only one way?”

The staring contest that followed lasted only until the two girls broke into laughter. “Okay,” Lisbeth said, “seriously now. When that Puca finishes crossing the intersection ahead, we go.”

I can tell already, Lisbeth thought as they both burst into a run. This is going to be a fun trip.

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“This is going to be so much fun,” Rei said cheerfully, slapping Yuuki on the back.

Yuuki wasn’t so sure, but she was extremely happy to be headed back in the general direction of Arun, even if they weren’t going there right away and the purpose of the trip made her uneasy. In truth, she had been a bundle of nerves ever since Rei had showed up and told her they had a reliable lead on Gitou’s whereabouts—or rather, where he would be that evening.
It didn’t help that she’d had to drop the party with Kirito and Asuna in order to party up with the violet-haired Imp girl, and even then she’d still been trying to work herself up to messaging Asuna when her friend’s PM came through. She didn’t think there had been many times in the passing months where she and Asuna hadn’t been in a party together, and the feeling of isolation was not one she enjoyed.

_I guess I’m on my own now_, Yuuki thought solemnly, the sentiment making it difficult for her to bring a smile to her face in answer to her new companion’s. She managed, but she was sure that it was transparently fake. “So where are we going, anyway?”

If Rei noticed, she wasn’t letting it deter her mood. “There’s a neutral town called Ott’s Rest in the far northeast of the Aldmari Desert. It’s pretty out of the way for almost anywhere you might wanna go, unless you’re going to Duneswallow—and everyone hates that dungeon.”

That didn’t sound especially useful to Yuuki. “So why do you think Gitou is going to be there?”

Rei wore a secret smile as she glanced over. “That’s ‘cause of the _almost_. It’s out of the way, yeah, but that and the lack of faction law in neutral towns makes it a convenient place for people who don’t want to be found—or people who are looking for services you can’t find in Gattan or Everdark.”

They slowed to allow a cluster of Imp players to pass in front of them; it looked like two parties banded together in an ad hoc raid. The two could’ve just flown up and over, but they had been resting their wings. Yuuki took the opportunity to look over at Rei; the other girl’s eyes slid left to meet hers. “What kind of services?”

Rei was silent until the large group had completely passed. When the two resumed their brisk stroll, she kept her voice low. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m trying to decide how much to tell you. It isn’t really common knowledge, even among adult players.”

Yuuki frowned, stopping and turning towards Rei with her arms crossed. “That doesn’t sound very nice—or very trusting.”

“I said don’t take it the wrong way,” Rei said, sighing. “Look, Yuuki… how old are you?”

No one had asked her that directly in a long time, and her answer was delayed by a moment’s confusion before her chin rose. “I… I’m twelve. I’ll be thirteen real soon, though. Why, how old are _you_?” She was sure Rei was at least several years older than her, but she wouldn’t have bet on her being much older than Asuna either.

Rei rolled her eyes. “Old enough to buy my own drinks on karaoke night, let me put it that way.”

“Well, what does it matter? You know I’m a clearer. I can take care of myself.”

“That’s not what I meant. It’s more…” The older girl—or, she supposed, young woman—seemed genuinely torn about something, and Yuuki found her skepticism wavering. “How much did your parents teach you about stuff?”

“Stuff?” The vague term did not help with Yuuki’s confusion, and the subject of her parents was always fraught with conflicting emotions and bittersweet memories.

“Is there an echo, echo?” Rei said, and despite her nerves Yuuki tittered slightly. “Stuff. Grown-up stuff.”

Yuuki had, in fact, not the slightest idea what Rei was getting at. “I’m a smart girl, Rei. Instead of all this wishy-washy ‘stuff’, can you just come straight out and tell me?”
“It’s a brothel,” Rei said flatly.

Yuuki blinked at the unfamiliar word. “A what?”

“A place where adults go to pay other adults to have sex. I know some players who run one, and they try to keep it off Mortimer’s radar. We found out that Gitou is known to be a patron.”

“I don’t think I want to know any more,” Yuuki said quickly, extremely sorry that she’d asked and even more apprehensive about the trip on which they were about to embark. How and why was something like that even a thing in a virtual game world? She wasn’t sure she wanted to know that, either. “And I’m not so sure I’m the right person for this... ‘assignment’, as you called it.”

Rei nodded calmly, as if unsurprised. “I’d wondered,” she said. “Well, no matter. It’s understandable if you’d rather stay here. I can deal with him myself.”

Deal with him. You mean kill him. “No, no,” Yuuki said. “If you’re going after him, I need to be there. I’m the one he wronged. I’m the one who should decide what to do with him.” She chastised herself in the privacy of her own thoughts for her hubris, although the words that had come out probably sounded worse than what she really meant. In truth, she was still hoping to come up with some way out of having Gitou die—some way to punish him, to truly make him see the hurt his actions had caused, short of committing the horrible sin of taking his life.

She’d said as much to Rei before, and as always she reassured herself with the other girl’s promise: that Yuuki would have right of first refusal, as she’d put it, on Gitou’s fate.

That was assuming Gitou would give them any choice in the matter, and she still didn’t know what Rei’s plan was. With the matter of Yuuki’s staying or going settled, the two resumed their journey down Everdark’s main western thoroughfare, making their way through the network of tunnels leading to the East Aldrnari Desert overworld zone.

Yuuki was glad. It would be nice to be able to spread her wings and spend more time in the air. As essential as flight was to getting around Everdark, Imps had learned not to use their energy trivially; the flight meter depleted much more rapidly underground, and no one ever wanted to be so empty they had to wait to recharge. When they finally saw the faint light of the midday sun, Yuuki felt such a rush of joy to be out of the claustrophobic tunnels that she dashed forwards and sprang up to fly the rest of the way out, earning a laugh from Rei.

“You really didn’t spend much time in Everdark before this,” said her companion, drawing up alongside Yuuki. “It doesn’t feel like home to you at all, does it?”

Yuuki shook her head, long purple hair whipping past either side of her face as they bent their flight path towards the north. “I’m sorry, I know you’re attached to it, but it’s not really home to me. I don’t think it ever could be.”

“I’m not, actually,” Rei admitted. “I mean, I like it there, and I like my people. But I don’t spend most of my time there—I spend it scouting unexplored areas, grinding all over the place, and doing assignments. I only really come back to Everdark to report in to Kumiko and pick up new assignments.”

“Assignments,” Yuuki said. “Assignments like the one we’re doing?”

Rei smiled just as Yuuki glanced over toward her. “Sometimes. My skill set is pretty versatile, especially with some of the cool stuff I’ve learned recently. I’ll show you some magic tricks you won’t believe when we subdue Gitou.”
The word *subdue* bolstered her hope that they could find a non-lethal solution to the Salamander predator. Curiosity piqued, Yuuki peered at Rei. “How do you plan on doing that, anyway?”

Instead of answering, Rei slowed rapidly, causing Yuuki to do the same. Near arm held out horizontally like a barrier to discourage forward movement, the older girl pointed with the other. “Aggro mobs. We’re out of the safer areas near the cave entrance now.”

Sure enough, Yuuki’s Searching skill revealed a rapidly densifying population of cursors before her, some aggro but many not. Out of long habit her eyes picked out what seemed to be an optimal path through the mobs with light red cursors, one which would minimize the amount of clearing necessary. Rei seemed to have the same idea. “No healer, so we’ll need to be a little cautious. We overlevel these mobs by a lot, but they’ll still wear us down, potions or no.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Yuuki said, indicating the path she’d been eyeing and the large shaggy quadrupeds dispersed there. “That direction is mostly Lopers. They’re territorial and have a ton of HP, but they’re slow and we’re not. Everywhere else there are a lot of Dune Beetles, and we might have trouble with those. They come in groups, and we’d need a blunt weapon to crack the shells and reduce their physical resistance.”

“I use blunt weapons,” Rei reminded her, squinting under the naked sunlight. “But yeah, the Lopers are probably lower-risk to clear, even though it’ll take longer to burn ‘em down.”

“You said Gitou wouldn’t be getting to Ott’s Rest until sometime tonight, right?” Yuuki drew her weapon, a slim cobalt-blue longsword that had come with the fitting name of «Penitent Wrath».

“Sure, but we’ll want to get there plenty early so we don’t cross paths with him or any of the other evening patrons, and so I have plenty of time to set up the ambush.”

Yuuki was still curious, but this wasn’t the time to indulge it. “Alright, I’m ready. How do you wanna do this?”

Rei’s reply was so immediate that it was obvious she’d already thought this through. “Pop potions, you run in and take aggro, I’ll debuff the hell out of it and then come in to switch. Lather, rinse, repeat.”

“Got it,” Yuuki said, an eager grin dimpling her cheeks just before she quaffed an HP pot.

The Loper defied comparison to any single real-world animal; Yuuki had only ever been able to describe them by picking bits and pieces. It was somewhat comparable to a double-sized gorilla in general layout, but tended to prefer all fours and had a thick covering of bison-like light brown fur that went all the way down to its broad prehensile feet. A mask of sun-blanced exoskeletal bone covered much of the creature’s face, leading up to blunt horns, while a similar sheath of bone covered the edged shovel-like tip of its tail. That tail dragged an easily-spotted path through the desert sands, occasionally stopping and performing an idle animation such as rooting through the sand with its hands and tail.

It was at the start of one such animation that Yuuki dashed towards their first target to initiate the fight, Focusing on its light red cursor to target it and display its HP bar. “Incoming!”

The opening sword skill she used was one of her hardest-hitting; it definitely earned her an immediate spot at the top of the mob’s hate list. Windmilling *Penitent Wrath* in a cobalt blur which alternated between both hands, the six-hit flurry of strikes tracked glowing red vertical lines down the Loper’s flank, depleting more than a third of its HP just in her opening attack.
“Yatto yojikke navamdu jan!” Rei’s incantation came from a position not far behind her, and Yuuki heard the bolt of Dark Magic energy sizzle past her ear and unerringly strike the mob before her. Thick violet-black tendrils erupted from beneath the Loper and wrapped tightly around its back legs, pinning it in place. The spell had barely had time to take effect before Rei spat out another rapid incantation. “Yatto zabukke juminu jan!”

The Loper was already turning towards Yuuki when the second projectile splashed across its fur, filling its eyes with the black fire of a short-lived Blindness status effect. Into that opening came Rei with a dash, leaping past just as Yuuki yelled “switch!” and jumped back out of the way of a follow-up swing. The other Imp girl’s tonfas were already out, leather-wrapped grips spinning in her grasp as the striking surfaces of the short baton-like weapons whirled around and battered the mob, occasionally reversing alongside the length of her arm in order to parry a counterattack.

Rooted and blinded, the Loper could do little more than bellow and flail wildly as the two girls rapidly burned down its sizeable HP pool with only a few glancing blows taken in return. Even that HP loss was quickly mitigated by the slow regen of the potion she’d taken, and barely fifteen seconds had passed before the mob shattered into a shower of glowing blue fragments.

Yuuki cheered as she settled back to the ground, wings vanishing just as the Result window appeared and granted her a pittance of EXP and Yuld. No items or real progress, but not bad for how little time it took. “Yeah! That was great!”

Rei offered up a fist, weapon still in hand; after a moment Yuuki reached out with her free hand and bumped it the way she’d seen others do. “Dumb trash mobs. Still, that went real smooth, Yuuki. You’re good. And fast, faster than most longsword users I’ve met. Let’s pull the next while our pots are still up.”

Yuuki nodded to her new companion, trying to put her internal conflicts on hold and focus on the fight ahead of them. She readied her sword and picked a target, HP and MP already recovered. “Incoming!”

The route that took Argo and her party through the mine shaft loop might have been a long slog of tedious clearing, but it proceeded without incident. Their pace was helped by the fact that even the weakest member of their group was much more competent than she had seemed on first introduction: Whiskers might not have cared about game mechanics or gamer lingo, but after ruthlessly drilling arrows into the mob’s critical locations during their first battle, she’d admitted that her choice of weapons was because she’d been a member of her school’s archery club.

She was, in point of fact, an excellent shot. She just wasn’t a gamer.

Terquen, for his part, sufficed adequately as a healer once he got his ego out of the way, and in addition to being invaluable as a scout, Veldt’s magic DPS was consistent and reliable.

No one had even gone yellow yet, which was more than she or Thelvin could say for their trip in.

Unfortunately, the narrow tunnels and steady pace of clearing meant that there had been no opportunity whatsoever for Argo to speak to Veldt alone. She didn’t really feel safe following him when he went ahead to scout, and he seemed to avoid getting too close to her whenever he was back with the party.

"This is driving me nuts," Argo fumed quietly. "I know he has no obligation to indulge my curiosity, but hell, I'll pay him if I can just find an excuse to to take him aside."
"Well," Thelvin said just as softly, eyes forward while they waited for the Spriggan scout to return. He was smiling as he spoke. "You know what they say—"

Argo's hackles rose with her suspicion. "If this is the curiosity thing again—"

"—curiosity—"

"—don't say it."

"—killed the cat."

"Wrong!" Argo said, a bit too loudly. Her voice echoed down the tunnel, drawing stares from the other pair of players trailing them, and as her feline ears flattened against her head she whirled on their tank. "Curiosity's one of the driving forces of human progress, Thelvin. Without curiosity, some monkey never woulda stopped to wonder if maybe this rock would make a good weapon. Next thing you know we have the Internet—"

"And look where that's gotten us," said Terquen piquantly from behind her.

Argo tried not to laugh; she hated this idiom and it would ruin a perfectly good rant in progress. "It's not the Internet's fault some egotistical shitlord wanted to be god of his own virtual world, and it's not curiosity's fault either. You know what killed the cat? Not knowing what rat poison smells like. You know what kills people? Believing stupid, ignorant crap like vaccines causing autism, or that you just log out if your HP goes to zero. Ignorance is what keeps ganking humanity, Thelvin. Curiosity is the white knight trying to take out Ignorance before he can fuck everything up again."

When stunned silence followed her rant, she looked around at the others, one by one, waiting for a response. Thelvin’s usual calm, collected voice was the first. “You done?”

“Yes,” Argo said with a sigh. Having made a spectacle of herself, she opened her menu and pulled up Eugene’s earlier PM, still unsure of what to do or how to respond.

「That’s bullshit. I don’t know what you’re talking about, and neither does my brother—and we would. I have every clearing group leader friended, and none of them are anywhere near either end of Lugru. There is no blockade. Any Sylph who says otherwise is talking out of their ass. You get a name for any Salamander who’s out there trying to do that, you tell me and I’ll put an end to it.」

That at least was welcome news that had come as a tremendous relief to everyone in the party. Thelvin had even stopped the group to ask if they wanted to backtrack to the safe zone before they got too many repops, and wait there for a clearing group. They were so close to getting out now, though, the consensus had been simply to continue pushing forward.

It was the bulk of Eugene’s message that weighed on her mind, and these were details that she hadn’t even shared with Thelvin—and likely never would.

「I don’t like what Corvatz is doing, but our orders are specific and you need to get your facts straight about what they are. Fact is, our forces did not attack first. We went farming in a public contested zone, Sylph patrols tried to kill our farmers—and we defended those farmers. There are no gank squads, no KOS orders, and no pursuit of anyone who flees combat. But we’re not pulling punches either: if a Sylph gets too close to where we’re farming, we’re ordered to drive them off. And if any of them are stupid enough to attack our farmers, they’re throwing away their lives. We’ve given them plenty of warning, Argo. They are the aggressors here, not us.」

「Now, you said you wanted to stop this war. Mort and I do too, and we all know Alfheim is better off with my brother calling the shots again instead of Corvatz. If you’re serious about all of that—and
I know you are—there’s a few things you should know…

Now Argo knew. And despite the badgering she’d just given Thelvin about ignorance and curiosity, she had to wonder if these were details she would’ve been better off not knowing. Eugene just handed me a loaded weapon, and then asked me not to use it. What really bugs me is that he might be right about why.

There were some pieces of information that Argo would not sell at any price. People’s real names or character stats were at the top of the list, and as soon as she discovered the first Cait Sith owner of a Navi-Pixie, she’d decided that she wouldn’t reveal their identities either. The background Eugene had given her could very well qualify for the same status.

I’d make a joke about them playing with fire, but that’s low-hanging fruit. And anyway, this isn’t a joking matter. This plan could get people killed—hell, it already has. Argo wasn’t exactly an absolutist when it came to the taking of life—she hadn’t done it herself with her own hands, and hoped she never had to, but she’d come very close; she knew it was sometimes unavoidable. But when it was an intended outcome… that was different. Very different indeed. It was that kind of premeditated bloodshed that the Treaty of Arun had been intended to stop.

So let’s review the high-level options. I can burn Eugene and Mortimer for treaty violations and murder-by-proxy, which earns me a ton of enemies, costs me some of my best Sal sources, probably gets them killed, destroys my reputation for not burning sources, and pretty much guarantees Corvatz his position. Or I can help these two with their morally questionable plan, which puts that blood on my hands but has a good chance of fixing a whole lot of problems—not least of which is ending this war and helping get the Spriggans off the world’s shit-list.

She could, she knew, also decide to stay neutral and hope it all worked out. That was definitely the safest, most conservative option, and it was one that gave her plausible deniability if any of these details ever actually came out. I can’t take sides, she tried to tell herself.

But if she had to be honest with herself, even that wasn’t true. She’d conspired with Sakuya and Eugene to rescue Mortimer and defeat Kibaou; that had most certainly gotten people killed. She was conspiring again to hand-pick which factions got out first, and they’d never even know if she was right until they tried. Her recent meddling had a body count as well, and arguably helped put Corvatz in power in the first place. She was taking a side every single time she went out of her way to help anyone in a way that went beyond her impartial role as an information broker.

There was an uncomfortable realization that had been growing within Argo over time. A self-conscious awareness that she was in a position of real power, and that the choices she made could have serious consequences if she screwed up—or even, as with the 25th gateway boss, if everything went according to plan. The lives of others were an enormous weight to bear, and the stakes were unimaginably higher than they had been in the beta—or really, had even been at the start of the game.

Corvatz, she chastened herself again, distracted enough that she almost stumbled over the start of a steep incline as the tunnel angled sharply upwards. It’s my fault he’s leading the Salamanders now. I mean, not my fault alone, obviously, but I’ve got a responsibility to try to make it right.

For better or worse, I’m a player in the biggest high-stakes game there is in this world. Mom would be so proud. Except for, you know, the people-dying part.

When at last they caught sight of the widening northeast entrance to the Lugru Corridor, with no mobs between them and the outside world, the whole party burst into a cheer. Looking out from their vantage point on the cliffside high above the steep mountain slope, the dwindling foothills and vast
stepped grasslands of West Yggdrasil Basin stretched out as far as the eye could see. Here and there
with the darker green of forested land carpeted the landscape, cut through with the wending blue of
rivers slicing their own path. The World Tree itself was easily visible even from over a hundred
kilometers away, its gnarled trunk reaching high into the sky and coming well short of the exit vortex
—and although she couldn’t see it from where they stood, their destination was at the base of that
monstrosity.

“About six hours,” Thelvin said in answer to the question that was undoubtedly on everyone’s mind.
“In a straight line, at the full cruising speed of our slowest members, it’d be around two and a half,
three. But we’re not going to be traveling straight the whole time, and anyway I’d at least double
that: half again for wing rest breaks, and another half for clearing.”

Argo nodded. “If everything goes well, we oughta get to Arun somewhere around what, five or six
tonight?”

Thelvin agreed. “Maybe sooner, maybe later, but I’d say that’s sounds about right. Bear in mind the
mobs are likely to be tougher than those we faced in the Corridor, and taper off in difficulty as we
near Arun. The overall average level ranges and specific mobs types might have raised, but those
ranges should still be distributed so that the relatively lower-level areas are near Arun.”

He then turned to address the party as a whole. “You’ve all done excellent work. Why don’t we
break for lunch here? We’ve been on the go since we woke up, and could probably use the breather
now that we’re out of the Corridor.”

“No argument from me,” said Terquen, a sentiment that was quickly echoed by Veldt and Whiskers.
The outcrop where the cave emerged was fairly large, and there ended up being more than enough
space for everyone to sit down and relax while they dined. Terquen and Whiskers sat with Thelvin
and started talking about some of the battles they’d seen on the way out, while Veldt went and sat a
respectful distance away, seeming uninterested in being social.

_Social or no, this might well be the best chance I get, and I really need to sort this out._ Veldt had
barely spoken to her since the incident with the Navi-Pixie, had not in fact even acknowledged the
event to her or anyone else. If Terquen and Whiskers wondered why he seemed to be avoiding
Argo, or even noticed, they had given no sign—but Argo certainly had, and so had Thelvin.

As her soft footsteps approached Veldt’s solitary picnic spot, he glanced up at her and spoke without
raising his head or his voice. “You sure you want to do this?”

_So that’s how it’s going to be._ She kept her voice as low as his, and sank smoothly to a cross-legged
position in front of him, hands on her knees. “If I wanted to make trouble or tell anyone, I woulda
done it already, don’cha think?”

Veldt shrugged slightly. He tilted his head a bit towards one shoulder, a motion she’d seen him do
before but had assumed was just a body language quirk of his. After a moment he answered Argo,
still speaking in a soft voice that someone without the enhanced hearing of the Cait Sith might not
have even heard. “Matti thinks you mean well. That’s the only reason I’m not already gone.”

“You’re not the first I’ve found, y’know.”

Veldt’s head rose sharply. “How many others?”

“Three that I know of. Unsubstantiated rumors of half a dozen others. Not gonna tell you anything
personally identifying about them, though. Just like I’m not gonna tell them, or anyone else, about
you… other than that the number’s now four. Who knows how many there actually are?”
Veldt digested this in silence after a delayed nod. While he did, Argo caught sight of Matti peeping out of what must have been “her” pouch, one of the largest on the bandolier that wrapped around his chest beneath his yellow-trimmed black cloak. “I have seventeen sisters,” Matti said quietly, light twinkling from her tiny eyes in the shadow of the pouch flap. “But many of them are sleeping.”

“What about you?” Argo asked, ears canting forward to catch every word and nuance of tone.

“We sleep when there is no one left to help, and we awaken to need.”

Argo turned that cryptic statement over in her head, considering what she already knew. She knew there were two Cait Sith pixie owners for certain, a man and a woman; they’d each relocated shortly after Argo tracked them down. It frustrated her that the game had been running for three months by the time she’d heard about them, but to most players who didn’t know what was possible in the game, they had simply blended right in with the thousands of other pets in the city.

Beyond that, there was an Undine girl who mostly kept to herself; she lived in a neutral town not far from Parasel and hadn’t wanted to talk to Argo at all. Rumors came from here and there of a glimpse of a player with a pixie, or someone who talked to themselves a lot, but those leads had never panned out, and Argo had largely set the pursuit aside months ago in favor of paying attention to more important things.

Seventeen sisters, Argo thought. What’s so special about the number seventeen? It’s a prime number for starters, but I don’t know of anything significant in Norse folklore about it.

And then it struck her as she looked back at Matti, still peeking out from her niche. Not seventeen, she thought. Seventeen plus the one right in front of me, so eighteen. What’s eighteen? Nine times two. Two is—

Argo’s jaw gaped. “There are eighteen of you,” she said, forcing her voice not to rise to match the excitement she felt. “Two players from each faction. Probably one male, one female of each.”

“That’s about what I reasoned out from what little she can tell me,” Veldt said. “And I know there’s more she won’t say—not can’t, won’t.”

“Navi-Pixies were implemented in the beta because players complained about how bad the game was at teaching you how to play,” Argo said. “They were basically the game’s help system before the manual was written. So she sleeps when there’s no one left to help…”

Matti gave a little nod, the unbuttoned flap of her pouch rising and falling on top of her hair bun. “I slept for a long time,” she said.

Argo glanced over at Thelvin and the others; they were still talking, loudly enough to be heard over the wind. Thelvin caught her looking his way and quickly turned back to the others, seeming to pointedly offer her privacy. “You slept when there was no one you could help?” she asked of Matti.

Another nod from the pixie. “And then onii-chan woke me up,” she said with a happy smile.

Argo had a working theory on what some of these vague, almost metaphorical terms meant. “You didn’t get Matti at the start of the game, did you?”

Veldt stared at her for several long moments, face frozen. “I think I’d be more comfortable if you were a bit less insightful, young lady.”

“Flattery won’t et cetera. Here’s what I think. I think Matti’s original player died at some point. With no one to help, Matti ‘went to sleep’, whatever that means, then you eventually found her
dormant and somehow reactivated her.” She paused. “How am I doing so far?”

“A bit too well, actually,” Veldt said neutrally. “Maybe rein it in a bit.”

Argo wasn’t sure whether to take that as a warning or not. “Matti, how many of your sisters are sleeping right now?”

Matti looked back at her silently, almost as if the little NPC was actually thinking about whether or not to tell her. “Eight,” she then said.

Argo met Veldt’s intense scrutiny face-on. “Eight dead players, with eight dormant pixies out there waiting to be found the way you did Matti. What do you think about that?”

“I think,” Veldt said carefully, “that you are not telling me anything I didn’t figure out a long time ago. Looking for them—or for others like me—is why I came to the Ancient Forest in the first place.”

Thought so. “And what would you do if you found them?”

Veldt sighed. “I’ve asked myself that. I don’t know if you can have more than one Navi-Pixie, and Matti will only say that they ‘awaken to need’. I found her in a chest, of all things—nothing special about it with «Detect Treasure», and once I disarmed the trap and opened it, she appeared in front of me and thanked me for waking her. I can’t even tell you how many treasure chests I’ve found and opened in the months since finding her—lots of loot, but no little pixie sisters.”

“Matti,” Argo said, “can you tell me anything about the last player you were with?”

“I’ve asked her that,” Veldt interjected.

Matti’s head lowered. “Mama was nice,” she said. “She didn’t like being around other Spriggans, so she wanted to go to Arun. I told her the Sekhal Passage was the fastest route, and along the way she found a treasure chest. I tried to warn her about the trap… but she started to open it before I could.”

Whether it was Argo’s imagination or not, the little pixie sounded genuinely sad, even guilty about the death of her first player. Veldt, on the other hand, looked grim. “Poison spike trap,” he said. “Pretty simple one to disarm, really, but if you didn’t have one of the right skills you’d never know it was there until it hit you.”

Argo’s thoughts shifted into high gear again. “If I understand right,” she said slowly, “you told me that you found Matti after disarming the trap and opening the chest.” She glanced at Matti. “Was this the exact same trap and treasure chest that killed your, er, mama?”

Matti nodded.

Argo looked back up at Veldt. “You’re not looking for treasure chests. You’re looking for whatever killed the last owner.”

Veldt’s jaw dropped. “Son of a bitch.” Looking down at his pouch, he gently poked it in the side. “You could’ve said.”

“You never asked the right question, onii-chan.”

Argo had to sharply restrain a laugh. Did that pixie just get sassy with her owner? It was an extremely amusing thought, but it was also a little unsettling, especially given what Sakuya had said about Loki. “You know, your pet doesn’t talk much like an NPC.”
“I’m not a pet,” Matti insisted. “I’m Veldt’s Navi-Pixie.”

“She doesn’t like being called a pet,” Veldt explained. “I made that mistake at first. But yeah, I don’t know. After she thanked me for waking her up, I guess I just assumed I should talk to her like a person. She usually responds the same way—gotten better at it over time, too. It’s mostly when she talks about mobs or game mechanics that she uses what I call her sofuto voice.”

Software. I bet that’s her falling back on her generic NPC helper dialogue.

Veldt suddenly gave Argo another look of close scrutiny. “I hope you’re not expecting me to pay you for any of this.”

She grinned. “You kidding me? This has been more than a fair exchange. So what if you find what you’re looking for, but a ‘sleeping sister’ won’t wake up unless someone needs their help? You don’t need it—you already have one.”

“I honestly don’t know. I just don’t like the idea of so many of Matti’s sisters being asleep somewhere out there after losing their players. Matti’s almost like a person sometimes. What if the others are, too?”

It was hard to know what to say to that answer. Argo considered it in silence, a silence which Veldt matched. She could hear Terquen’s laugh carry above the general muddle of wind-stolen voices from the rest of the party, and this time when she looked over towards Thelvin, he met her gaze and gave her a subtle tilt of the head in the direction of Arun.

Argo decided to table further thought for now, and take Thelvin’s gesture as a hint. “I think we’re heading out soon,” she said. “Look, if you don’t mind, I’ve got a lot more questions I wanna ask if I get the chance, and I’ll pay well for the answers. Any leads I get on where to find one of Matti’s sleeping sisters, you’ll be the first to hear. We’ve got each other’s names, and my mailbox is open.”

After several long moments of thought, Veldt’s cautious nod was a relief to Argo. They both came to their feet, Matti ducking back down into her pouch as Veldt rose. Neither of them said a word to the other as they walked back to rejoin the others, who themselves were packing back up.

“Good timing, both of you,” Thelvin remarked as they drew near. “Much as I’d like to stay and enjoy the view from up here, we should probably descend to just above the treetops and start making our way towards the city. Mobs will be easier near ground level than they will be if we try to cruise the whole way or hop the skylands.”

“He’s right,” Argo said, addressing the others. “No matter where you are, the higher you go, the higher the levels of the mobs you can encounter. If we set off at this altitude, we’d probably run into stuff we can’t really handle without a full group.”

“I’m ready,” Whiskers piped up, almost at the same time as Terquen’s assent. Thelvin glanced towards their Spriggan companion, a curious look on his face. “Anything for you to sort out before we go, Veldt?”

Argo met Veldt’s eyes when he glanced her way. She said nothing, but simply raised her eyebrows. Your call, buddy.

The corners of Veldt’s lips turned upwards just a little. “I’d better get to scouting ahead,” he said, summoning his wings. One by one the rest of their pickup group did the same, stepping off the edge of the cliff and gliding towards the valley below.
After this chapter, it should be clear that certain characters have a bit more complexity to them than they might have initially appeared to have, Coper and Veldt in particular. As I mentioned to a reader recently, a recurring theme in this act is going to be the need to sometimes accept imperfect compromises, flawed people, and morally gray solutions. As for the Navi-Pixies, I get readers asking now and then about when and if we're going to see Yui. All I can say is... stick around. The Navi-Pixie subplot is really just getting started.

I originally posted this chapter on FFN in January--my apologies for the delay here. The next chapter is already done, and I'll be posting it shortly; FFN's login servers are currently offline.
“Looting items from defeated players in PvP works differently than from defeated mobs. Once a defeated player’s Remain Light disappears, each victorious player who participated in the battle receives a share of the currency carried by the defeated player. Each victor also has a chance of receiving one or more items at random from the defeated player’s inventory, with the balance weighted towards the player who dealt the Last Attack. Certain items are excluded from this lottery and cannot be looted under any circumstances: items that are unusable by any member of the victorious party/raid, items related to a quest in progress that a victor does not have, keys or key items (q.v. «Access Quests») used to access a container or entrance of any kind, Leprechaun Constructs, and various miscellaneous crafted items such as furniture or clothing...”

—Alfheim Online manual, «Looting: PvP Kills»

9 May 2023
Day 185 - Morning

“I’m sorry,” Asuna said earnestly to Lisbeth’s back as soon as they landed, both of them trudging awkwardly on foot through the shin-deep snow. It was far from the first time that she’d attempted to mitigate the fallout from her earlier oversight, and judging by the lack of progress so far, she suspected it would not be the last.

The Leprechaun smith’s footsteps crunched loudly in answer. In fairness, they were both struggling to keep their footing as they made their way down the unevenly-forested slope, which began to level out the closer they got to the lowland region of the Valley of Giants. No words were forthcoming, but she had no doubt Lisbeth had heard her; there was so little wind that the zone’s reaction to their descent was eerily quiet.

Asuna sighed, watching the game simulate the fog of her breath in the frigid air when she exhaled. At first she had been confused; now she was just frustrated. “Liz, I wasn’t trying to hide anything from you, honest. Can we talk about this?”

“What’s there to talk about?” Lisbeth grumped, bringing out her nearly-depleted wings only long enough to lift her up and over the thick trunk of a fallen pine tree. “So we’ve got a friend in common. A good friend. You could’ve said something before.”

“What’s there to talk about?” Lisbeth grumped, bringing out her nearly-depleted wings only long enough to lift her up and over the thick trunk of a fallen pine tree. “So we’ve got a friend in common. A good friend. You could’ve said something before.”

“But I did,” Asuna insisted, and then immediately recalled that she hadn’t exactly mentioned Kirito by name at first—just alluded to him indirectly. “Sort of,” she added a bit lamely. She began to gracefully vault herself over the same obstacle by planting her hands on it and using her agility to swing her legs up and around. It was a mistake that put an end to both her reply and any pretense of grace.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t until she was already in mid-swing that she realized why Lisbeth had done what she’d done despite the depleted state of their wings. As soon as the bulk of Asuna’s weight was on her hands and she had angular momentum, her palms skidded across the snow-covered surface and out from under her. Her head bounced uncomfortably off the side of the tree trunk and found herself unexpectedly face-down in the snow, stunned. Literally stunned; for several seconds she was disoriented by a status effect from the blow to her head.

“Well that serves you right,” proclaimed Lisbeth from somewhere just above Asuna. A booted toe
nudged her shoulder. “Didn’t I say to follow my lead while we’re in the forest? I’ve done this trip a billion times. You okay?”

“I think I’m just going to lie here and make snow angels,” Asuna groaned, rolling over onto her back. She flapped her arms uselessly at her sides.

“Well, you have fun with that,” said the other girl with mock cheer, gloved fists planted on her hips. “With your gear, and you covered in snow the way you are, I give you at least a few minutes before your HP starts dropping noticeably.” She freed up one hand and extended it down towards Asuna.

It was just as well. Both girls were wearing leggings as a concession to the cold, and Asuna’s resist gear was better protection against the elements than what she usually wore, but when she’d fallen, some loose snow had gone down her neck—as well as other places it had no business being. She accepted the hand and let herself be hauled to her feet by the much-stronger smith, bringing out her wings briefly to right herself. “Thanks.”

“Yeah. So what’s this you were starting to say? I thought you said it was Agil who referred you, not Kirito. You didn’t even mention him at all.”

“It was both,” Asuna protested before sighing again. “Look, it went like this: Kirito gave me your name because we were trying to track down someone who made a weapon, and we had to split up for reasons. But you weren’t at your shop—”

“I was at the conference or doing work for Chellok most of the day,” Lisbeth interjected. “You saw the sign.”

Asuna shook her legs alternately to rid herself of the last of the snow that had ventured up her skirt and clung to her leggings. “Yes, I saw. Anyway, Kirito warned me you might be, and told me to go to Agil if I couldn’t find you; I met someone who works at the Depot and was willing to take me there. While I was there, I asked Agil for a referral to a smith who could fix my gear before I set out, and your name was at the top of his list. I figured since you were recommended by two different people—one of whom I trust quite a lot, remember I mentioned that?—I should probably listen to them.” She looked expectantly at Liz, hoping the explanation would settle the matter.

Lisbeth’s cheek puckered as she seemed to chew on her lower lip for a few moments, giving Asuna a narrow-eyed look that came across as skeptical. What’s with her sudden attitude? Asuna wondered, bewildered. We were getting along so well when we first met. It wasn’t until I happened to mention Kirito’s name that she… well, got kind of ticked at me. You’d think she’d be happy to find out we both knew him!

Whatever Lisbeth had to think over seemed to run its course. Some of the intense skepticism faded from her freckled face, and her posture relaxed somewhat. “Okay. Look, I’m—”

It wasn’t the sound that drew Asuna’s attention, though it was certainly strange—a bit like the static white noise of surf, or maybe the hiss of a bunch of rice spilling. Rather, it was the unnervingly-shaped shimmering effect that accompanied it, distorting the air several meters above and behind Lisbeth—a clear threat that instinctively filled her with a sense of revulsion and alarm just before a light red cursor began to fade in. “Pop!”

Asuna had to give Lisbeth credit her immediate and appropriate reaction; she leapt away from the sound, bringing out her wings just long enough to propel her further and draw her legs up under her as she spun around. Another dog-sized pale spider seemed to form out of the ripples in the air, and it leapt straight at Asuna without hesitation—as if it wasn’t just now spawning, but rather had already been there, and was making itself visible.
Asuna’s wings were on her back again before she finished kicking off, carrying her up and backwards in a surge of speed that brought her near the lower edges of the tree canopy. Her rapier was still at her side, but she was better off ranging a spider mob anyway. She brought up both hands before her in the somatic opening of an aimed attack spell. “Setto—”

That sound came again from just behind and above her, almost right in her ear. There was no time to react before Asuna felt impact and a spreading numbness in her shoulder, accompanied by the appearance of a status effect in her HUD. Her every movement slowed, every act becoming an effort, and she could feel what had to be another spider clinging to her back, interfering with her wings and causing her to slowly lose altitude.

Lisbeth was occupied fending off two of the ambushing mobs that had dropped from the trees; one of them exploded into blue particles and a spray of snow as a three-hit mace technique knocked it up into the air and then slammed it back down into the ground. Asuna felt another spider bite dig into her; it wasn’t doing a very significant amount of damage, but it would keep her debuffed with «Delay» and wear her down. She could cure the debuff, but it would just get reapplied, and if there were others—

Asuna’s thoughts raced, and she tried to force herself to relax despite the incredibly creepy thing on her back. It’s a weak mob that’s not going to kill me outright, and it wouldn’t make sense for it to have more than one kind of poison. It’s biting about once every three seconds. Wait for it—

The searing numbness dug into her back again. The very moment she felt it, Asuna spoke as rapidly as she could. “Setto yojikke yavaz yasun!”

Asuna was already moving slowly backwards before she finished casting, and as soon as the «Delay» status was cured, that movement turned into a surge of speed. She slammed into the trunk of the tree behind her, knocking the spider loose and sending it tumbling away from her. Drawing her rapier as she planted her feet against the trunk, she shot after the falling mob, bright light building up in her blade.

The impact had to have already damaged the mob; its light red cursor disappeared and the single hit of her «Shooting Star» technique drove her straight through the burst of light that signaled its death. Asuna came to rest in a skidding crouch just in time to see Lisbeth uppercut the last leaping spider with her mace. The mob died in mid-air with a high-pitched shriek, and moments later a «Result» window appeared.

It was very little EXP, almost too little to even care about—but Asuna was more concerned with the ambush they had just survived. Eyes wide, she looked up and over towards Lisbeth, who was glaring at the trees warily. “What just happened?”

Lisbeth’s expression was grim, and she did not put away her weapon. “I’d say we just found some «Arboreal Cloaking Spiders». They’re this new mob our farmers discovered out here; from what I heard we lost some very good people to them.”

“A warning would’ve been nice,” Asuna said a bit crossly. “You need to tell me these things if we’re partying together.”

“Sorry. Bad luck—I was hoping we wouldn’t run into the damn things if we kept moving; they aggro on noise and they follow you, but slowly. Speaking of which...” Lisbeth jerked her head southwards. “We need to go.”

Asuna could very easily see how the mobs they’d just fought could be deadly to an unprepared group. But if sticking around in one spot the way they did had anything to do with the encounter, Liz
was right—this wasn’t the time to review the fight in detail. “I’m convinced; let’s move on. How are your wings?”

Lisbeth wasted no time in trudging south through the snow. “From the way they felt when I dodged the first one, I’d say maybe a minute’s level flight time, if that. Dunno, I’ve always been bad at estimating it.”

That made sense despite her uncertainty; they’d only just landed to recharge. “Mine are in similar shape. But if these things track us like you say...“ She thought it over for a moment while they walked. “I wonder if they use a variant of the actual «Tracking» skill. If they do, we can lose them by keeping to the air for long enough. With a minute’s time, we can probably cover the better part of half a kilometer, maybe less. Treetop level has been pretty thin on mobs, and if there are any more spiders tracking us, that might give us breathing room.”

Lisbeth grinned at her. “Not a bad idea, clearer girl. Let’s do it.”

Way to make an ass of yourself, Liz.

Lisbeth didn’t spend too much time mentally beating herself up for the way she’d been acting, but it did force her to re-evaluate just what had happened. She and Asuna had really hit it off well, and they’d started talking about what they were going to do when they got to Arun. Asuna had mentioned that she was rejoining Kirito…

That, right there, had to have something to do with it. The way Asuna had phrased that—re joining Kirito, as if traveling together was a usual thing for them—it made her feel edgy even just thinking about it now. Lisbeth had never really made any significant effort to analyze her feelings for Kirito too deeply, nor had she ever managed to work up the courage to say anything to him. A part of her, she supposed, had been hoping that if she stuck around long enough—and saw him regularly in order to maintain his equipment—eventually he would be the one to come around and make the first move.

But Kirito was so hopelessly dense that it never once occurred to Liz that she might have competition. And he’d never mentioned having a girlfriend. Or... well, that he even knew any other girls. Which might be overstating things a bit, she thought, but not by much.

“Sorry I flipped out at you back there,” Lisbeth said as they cruised at treetop level, adjusting course to weave through the gaps in the clusters of red cursors they could see. “You do business long enough in this game and sometimes you start getting suspicious about people when something catches you off-guard or doesn’t add up. I guess it just felt weird that you hadn’t even mentioned Kirito until then, even though he was the one who sent you to me—one of the people,” she quickly amended.

There were several encounters of «Agitated Frost Drake» mobs roosting in the treetops not far ahead; the two girls swung their legs under themselves and came to a stop, hovering several meters above the peak of a particularly majestic pine. Asuna scrutinized them with a focused expression for a few moments, then pointed. “There’s a lot of those drakes spread around this area—they must spawn in this part of the zone. We could go up or around, but it’s probably safer and faster to just clear our way through.”

Lisbeth nodded. “Sounds good to me. With my Cold Resist, frost drakes are no biggie, even the
Agitated variants.” After taking a few seconds to count cursors and size them to estimate distance, she rotated in place to face the Undine clearer. “Problem is, our wings are pretty well drained. We’ll have to land and charge anyway if we’re gonna fight in the air.”

Asuna pointed up and to the southeast. “There’s a little skyland not far away. I only see one aggro mob between us and it.”

It wouldn’t work; Lisbeth shook her head immediately. “You might make it up there, but my level and AGI are a lot lower. Dunno if I’ve got the wing power left to gain that much altitude, especially after fighting. Here’s another idea: do you have «Dispel»?”

From the smile that touched her face, Asuna seemed to be amused by the question. “Of course I do. Why?”

Lisbeth pointed at the larger tree jutting out from the forest canopy below them; some of the upper branches looked perfectly capable of supporting their weight. Assuming they were otherwise safe... something that Liz did not feel like assuming. “Can you cast the biggest, best AOE version you have, right there?”

Asuna did not question that request; she took aim at the spot Liz had indicated, on the trunk right where the taller tree met the rest of the forest canopy. Lisbeth was impressed despite herself at how calmly and smoothly the other girl intoned the awkward incantation. “\textit{Zutto mezal, kewejilth shippura tepnaga yasun}.”

From a pinpoint of light in the place Asuna selected using Focus, a faint translucent sphere of blue energy rapidly blossomed outwards, growing until it reached the limit of the AOE’s range and faded away.

Nothing else happened.

“Alright,” Lisbeth said with some relief. “I don’t think there are any spiders hanging out there. We can rest for a few if we keep an eye peeled. Don’t suppose you got Wind too?”

Asuna, unfortunately, shook her head as she settled herself into a sitting position on one of the larger branches; this high up on the tree it barely held despite how slight of build she was. Leaning slightly against the trunk, she spoke once she was in a stable position and had dismissed her wings. “But some spells show up in more than one element, so tell me anyway?”

Lisbeth accomplished the same feat on the branch below and in front of her, metallic wings disappearing in a twinkle. “Detect Movement?”

Another head-shake deflated Lisbeth’s hopes. “I think you’re right; that’s Wind-only—it’s definitely not Water.” The Undine smiled ruefully down at her. “Right now I sure wish I had one of those machines Agil’s workshop partner was tinkering with yesterday.”

Lisbeth was fairly sure that Agil had only one partner in his workshop, and the reminder was a sour one. “Grimlock?” At Asuna’s nod of acknowledgement, she grimaced. “Ugh. What was he working on?”

“You mentioned the Detect Movement spell; he was working on some device that used it to light up if it detected movement nearby. I wonder if these mobs were the reason why.” She paused, and then gave Lisbeth a puzzled look. “You don’t like him? He seemed polite, if a bit stiff and traditional.”

Lisbeth waved at the air with her free hand. “Yeah, yeah, everyone loves the guy, he’s so smart and kind and everything blah blah—” She made a gagging sound. “In public. His wife’s a friend and
customer of mine, and the way she talks about him makes it sound like he’s a total control freak at home; she has to have his permission for everything. He lets her go out. She has to be home by such-and-such time. For crying out loud, she’s afraid to even tell him that she’s outleveled the sword he made for her!” Aware that her voice was carrying, she fought to tamp down some of her agitation. The immediate area covered by Asuna’s spell might be clear, but it wouldn’t do to aggro more spiders if there were any within earshot.

“Well that doesn’t sound very good,” Asuna replied empathetically, face crinkling in disapproval. “That poor woman. Kirito would never treat me like that.”

The shock that ran through Lisbeth then very nearly caused her to lose her balance; she brought out her wings reflexively when she felt herself tipping back. “What do you mean?”

When Liz looked up at her, Asuna’s smile was slightly distant as she gazed off at nothing in particular. “Well, you’re friends with him—I’m sure you know what he’s like. He’d never treat a girlfriend or wife like she was a thing—or treat anyone else like that, really. He values people’s individuality and freedom, and though he tries to protect me, he knows I can take care of myself, too. He doesn’t shrink away from making sacrifices, or putting his life on the line for someone he doesn’t even know. He’s…” She seemed to reach a point where she was struggling to find the right words before settling on something simple. “He’s just a good-hearted person, and that’s a big part of what drew me to him.”

The rushing sound in Lisbeth’s ears was, she presumed, the sound of her hopes fleeing with every word Asuna spoke. They’re together. She hasn’t said as much outright, but I can tell. Whatever chance I ever thought I once had… it’s gone.

I waited too long.

“Liz?” Asuna’s voice held concern; Lisbeth realized that she’d gone uncomfortably silent all of a sudden.

She tried to salvage the situation. “Sorry,” Lisbeth said after taking a moment to make sure her voice was steady. “Just got me thinking about my friend. I should try sending her a message while we rest our wings, see how she’s doing.”

It was only half a lie, but it did the trick just as well as a full one. Although she couldn’t see Asuna’s face without craning her neck, the Undine girl sounded pleased by the explanation. “That’s kind of you. You’re a good friend to her, Liz. I should give Kirito an update too, see how his trip to Arun is going.”

「Hey Griz,」 Lisbeth typed as soon as she had the window open, leaning against the trunk to keep her balance while she freed both hands. 「Missed you again this morning. Chellok said you were on a job and wouldn’t explain what, but I figured he would know, so I took off. I’m on my way to Arun now, and as luck would have it I met an Undine clearer who’s helping me through the new mobs.」

Not all of that luck had been good. Lisbeth considered mentioning the unpleasant revelation that had followed, but decided that Griselda probably didn’t really need to hear about her romantic problems, considering what the older woman herself had to deal with. 「You should come visit me there sometime, you know. I know I keep saying that, but seriously, it’d do you some good to get out of that frozen anthill they call a city. See someplace that isn’t either dug out of the ground or covered in snow, ya know? We could go to the market there, maybe even score some some World Tree rare mats for upgrades if we’re lucky.」

「Anyway, just wanted to send you a quick note since I hadn’t heard from you. Hope everything’s
going great with your new guild. Take care!

Satisfied, Lisbeth gave the Send button a solid tap.

«Blocked by Environment»

Liz blinked and stared at the error message. She knew what it meant, but that didn’t mean it made sense to get it now—she was fairly sure Griselda had mentioned her farming territory being somewhere overland, last time she’d messaged. *Maybe that’s what Chellok meant by her being on a job. Well, poop. I hope she’s okay—nothing I can do to get through if she’s underground, and no telling when she’ll come back.*

The thought that followed was an unwelcome one, and Lisbeth almost avoided it, but in Alfheim it was a far too plausible possibility to dismiss: *when, or if?*

((((((

“If we ever get out of this dungeon,” Schmitt complained while looking out over the edge of the precipice and into the near-total blackness beyond, “I never want to come back here again.”

Yoruko was prepared to offer their tank half of her personal drops if he’d manage an entire outing without gratuitously complaining about something at least once. She liked Schmitt well enough most of the time, and he was a good tank, but she thought the ex-clearer had some serious unacknowledged PTSD issues, and he didn’t really react gracefully to unexpected or inconvenient events. There was a reason why Griselda led the party—of their two forwards, she kept a much cooler head.

It was probably for the best that the more diplomatic Caynz spoke up first. “I seem to recall hearing you say that yesterday,” he teased with a grin. “Yet here you are.”

“Here I am,” agreed Schmitt unhappily. “About to scale a sheer rock face in plate armor for the umpteenth time today. Nothing at all that sucks about that.” He looked towards Griselda for support.

The Sylph woman, however, declined to feed the drama despite wearing light plate herself. “It’s quite the workout, isn’t it? My arms and legs were aching by the end of yesterday from all the climbing.”

Penny spoke from her perch on Yoruko’s shoulder. “This one runs much deeper than the others,” advised the little Navi-Pixie. “It goes down further than you can see. But these vertical passages are designed to be used by players in order to get around the zone, and the roots growing from the rock will hold everyone’s weight.”

Caynz and Griselda came and stood at the edge by Schmitt, peering down into the darkness as if anyone’s normal vision could penetrate it. In the Frozen Underways there were sometimes patches of dimly-colored light peeking through the glacial ice or the cavern walls—Yoruko thought she could see some from where she stood, though they were dim—but for the most part it seemed players were expected to bring their own light sources. In fact—

Griselda’s thought must have come at about the same time as her own. “Yoruko, could we get some light down there? Penny’s right; I can’t see the bottom of this one, and Searching would only show me cursors.”

“On it,” she said, already lifting the simple flute from where it hung around her neck. Despite being
one of the earliest utility songs she learned, «Firefly Festival» had never been more consistently useful to her than in the past few days. As soon as the initial low E♭ trilled its way into the first bars of the song, the visual effects of Song Magic—colored note symbols in the air that Yoruko personally thought looked rather silly—brightened into hundreds of golden pinpoint light sources, a gathering which grew the longer she played. They floated lazily around Yoruko like leaves adrift in a gentle breeze, emitting a warm golden glow that brightened the immediate surroundings.

Griselda’s smile was almost as bright as the firefly that drifted in front of her face. “I love these shiny little things. They remind me of summer.”

The aimless drifting of the firefly-like motes stopped as soon as Yoruko lowered the flute from her lips; they hung in place expectantly, and when she raised her hand in the air, they followed. A sharp flick of her arm sent the armada of glowing insects fluttering down and away from the rock wall as if she’d flung them, the expanding cloud of magic fireflies spreading out and raising the overall light level for some distance.

“Well, that explains why we couldn’t see a bottom or other side,” said Schmitt, his bushy brown eyebrows furrowing.

“This isn’t just a climb down to another branching tunnel or room like all the others,” Griselda agreed, slowly turning her head to take in as much as possible of the cavern revealed by Yoruko’s song. The fireflies only managed to illuminate an area about the size of a tennis court, and their light grew slowly dimmer the more they spread out—brightening again only when they came near orelight deposits. But even so, Yoruko could tell that what she could see was only a tiny part of a much larger whole. It was still easily the biggest open space they’d encountered yet in the Underways.

Yoruko said as much, prompting a nod from their party leader. “This shaft opens up on a huge new area,” Griselda said, kneeling at the precipice and placing a gloved hand on the edge to steady her balance. Although a few fireflies had remained near Yoruko, driving away some of the surrounding darkness, the Sylph’s eyes glowed bright green as she activated her Searching. “Quite a number of mobs, most aggro and around our levels, but none hanging out near the bottom where we’d climb down. Except—wait. *Futto mezal kehevatoru—* ack.” A little bit of Griselda’s MP disappeared from the blue bar in Yoruko’s party list as her tongue tripped over the incantation. “Let’s try that again. *Futto mezal, kehevatrul dweren.*”

Schmitt groaned as soon as he heard the full incantation. “Not the spiders again, please?”

But Griselda shook her head immediately. “Not that I can see. The only things that are moving have cursors; I just wanted to be sure. Penny?”

“It should be safe to climb down right now,” said the little Navi-Pixie. “Roamers are always a possibility, but I don’t detect any mobs or traps in the immediate vicinity, nor are there any spawn points within fifty meters of the bottom. I believe this is one path for getting to the next level of the Underways.”

Rising to her feet, Griselda blinked once in the deliberate way a player would to dismiss a buff or other Focus element in their UI; the pulsating glow in her eyes faded as both Searching and Detect Movement ended. “Then it seems we have a choice to make. We can mark this spot on our maps for later exploration, and continue mapping these upper levels. On the other hand… Chellok did say that he was especially interested in data from the lower levels, and that the deeper we go, the more the map data is worth.”

“You’re thinking we should see just how far we can get,” Caynz suggested. His tone gave no hint of how he felt about it, but Yoruko was fairly sure he’d be up for it if the others were. She was just
surprised that Griselda herself would suggest a course of action that took her away from her husband for so long.

If the prospect bothered Griselda, her concerns didn’t reach her face or her voice. “I’m thinking we should consider how to best use our time,” the Sylph woman clarified. “And more importantly, that after this climb we could all use a break from the physical exertion needed just to move around in these upper levels.” Her smile twitched. “Once we get down there, mapping out a huge cavern without a lot of climbing up and down narrow tunnels and steep cliffs might almost qualify as relaxing.”

The joke, thin on humor though it was, drew a chuckle from all of her weary party members. Griselda seemed to take this as consensus, and carefully sat herself down on the edge. “I’ll go first. Caynz, Yoruko, can you give me tanking buffs while I’m climbing down, just in case?”

The dead-end tunnel was briefly filled with magic light and a chorus of incantations as Yoruko and Caynz each obliged Griselda’s request. Then, while Caynz chanted up a second buff for Griselda, Yoruko lifted her flute again and called forth another cloud of luminous fireflies; she hadn’t played for long, and the previous summons were starting to slowly fade and disappear one by one.

“You’re doing it again,” Caynz said at the conclusion of his incantation, while she was still playing. “Were, anyway; you stopped.”

Yoruko lowered the instrument and gave her boyfriend a brief glance of confusion before directing the fireflies to surround Griselda and provide her with plenty of light. “Doing what?”

The larger Gnome boy furrowed his brow as he stopped to consider his words. “Doing the song differently, somehow. The arcane light given off by your flute was different—sometimes, right as you played a note, there would be a burst of those colored musical symbols, and those bursts were usually the same colors. That didn’t happen when you played it a few minutes ago. Was your success a critical one?”

It could be so hard, sometimes, to parse through the roundabout way Caynz talked when he was trying to stay in-character… but this time, Yoruko thought she knew what he meant, and she’d learned to trust how observant he could be. “Oh. Maybe? I try to ignore those silly lights—I know if I hit the note and timing right, just like you don’t need to be told if you’ve nailed your lines or the motivations of a character you’ve been rehearsing for a long time.”

Yoruko leaned over the edge of the cliff, watching as Griselda slowly worked her way down. Caynz’s eyes went briefly upwards, and his own expression became more pensive. He drew open his game menu and navigated quickly through it with his fingers dancing in the empty air before him. “Aha! I thought that looked wrong.”

The comment meant nothing to her. “Huh? Wrong what?”

“I gave Griselda a fourth-magnitude Stoneskin in case she fell or got attacked, which should last for four minutes. Yet the ward I cast has a remaining duration of just under five minutes.”

“Maybe you critted?”

Caynz shook his head. “Most certainly not. A crit would amplify the strength of the ward, not its duration.”

At a loss, Yoruko’s attention went to the pixie on her shoulder. “Penny? Do you know what happened? Was there some kind of interaction between my song and his spell?”
She hadn’t expected a useful answer, but Penny surprised her. “Of course, oneechan. Your performance created «Resonance» with his incantation. It’s happened several times before.”

Something in the way Penny said the words gave them the sound of an actual game concept beyond the plain meaning of the word. “What do you mean by Resonance?”

“The sounds of Song Magic resonate with the incantations for Elemental Magic,” Penny explained, lifting off from Yoruko’s shoulder and coming to a hover in front of her and Caynz. “The correct key, tempo, and even individual notes can result in this synergy.”

“So my song and Caynz’s spell really did affect each other? You said I’d done this before… but I didn’t know and wasn’t trying to. Was it just luck?”

Before Penny could respond, Schmitt cleared his throat. “Heads up, Griz is just about to the bottom. Might want to get ready to climb.”

“We’re ready,” Caynz assured him, kneeling beside the edge. “I’m interested in Penny’s answer, though.”

“Wait a sec,” Yoruko said, thinking rapidly. “You said that both the key and individual notes can resonate. Firefly Festival is in B♭ Major, and there’s a few repeating bars with a lot of A naturals. Did that make a difference?”

“Yes,” Penny replied brightly, bobbing her little head. “The key of B♭ Major and its relative minor resonate strongly with Earth Magic, as does any natural A regardless of key.”

Yoruko was quite aware that she was gaping at the little Navi-Pixie, but for several moments she was too shocked to speak. Finally, she blurted out the first clear thought that emerged. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

Penny tilted her head in what almost appeared to be confusion. “You didn’t ask.”

For the first time ever, Yoruko found herself wanting to grab Penny and shake all the knowledge out of her. “Tell me everything, please. Everything. This is stuff I should know!”

“Afraid we don’t have the time for that right now,” Caynz said, nudging Yoruko and pointing to where Schmitt was already gingerly lowering himself over the edge. “We can pick Penny’s brain later.”

“You have no idea, Caynz,” Yoruko complained quietly while she waited for him to begin his own descent—she was the lightest of their group, and didn’t really want to get caught underneath if one of the Gnomes fell. “Seriously, I’m telling you—this is big, okay? Every Puca knows that Song Magic sometimes interacts with spells, but outside of a couple songs everyone knows to pair with specific spells, it’s always been unpredictable, sometimes even bad. Aria said that’s why the NCC clearers don’t use bards in raids.”

“She’s right about that,” echoed Schmitt’s voice from far below, making it clear that her voice had carried further than she thought in the silent caverns. “There are some Puca clearers, but they’re straight-up mages—they’re not allowed to use Song Magic against gateway bosses ‘cause it can fuck up everyone else’s spells.”

It was Yoruko’s turn now to begin the climb, and for all that she’d been annoyed by Schmitt’s complaining, she wasn’t really looking forward to it either. “Exactly,” she said, stretching out a leg to search for a foothold. “So if there’s actually a system behind it, and it’s predictable and learnable for a musician…”
Caynz’s loud yelp came from just below her, interrupting whatever he was about to say as he briefly lost his footing and had to hug the wall. “Oof. I was about to say, that changes everything, my lady. Well, not quite everything, but it would change a lot for the Puca and the NCC clearing groups. You should send word to Aria or Merifelle as soon as we get back.”

Yoruko was still concerned; that could’ve been a nasty fall. “You okay?” When Caynz replied with a quick un, she continued. “Good. Well, anyway, I’m not so sure about going to them myself. It’s like with the mapping: what if they ask how I know?”

“Just tell them you figured it out through trial and error. Who’s going to prove you didn’t?”

Yoruko didn’t like that idea at all. She already felt guilty for how much she had to hide, and for letting Chellok think that it was their skill behind the detailed information they tagged in their map data. The notion of outright lying to their leaders, their clearing groups… it was unthinkable. She focused her attention on the task at hand, carefully working her way down the network of thick roots and frequently glancing down to make sure she wasn’t about to step on her boyfriend’s head.

“I can’t do that, Caynz,” she said at last. “I’m sorry, I want to help, but there’s too much lying already.”

“Better lying than dying,” he quipped.

“Oh, come on.”

“Well, then don’t tell them everything,” Caynz suggested, stopping for a moment and looking up at her. “Maybe don’t even tell them yourself. It’d probably be enough just to put the bug in someone’s ear about the fact that this one key and note resonate with Earth. Not only is that immediately useful to the NCC, given that most of our clearers are Gnomes… it’s the key, if you’ll pardon my phrasing, to figuring out the rest.”

Yoruko couldn’t help it; she giggled. “That’s terrible. But I guess, yeah… maybe just getting our people pointed in the right direction would be enough. There are much better Puca musicians than me, after all; I think Aria even played with the Tokyo Met.”

“Yo!” Schmitt’s voice was much further away this time; Yoruko couldn’t see past Caynz’s bulk, but it sounded like he was already at or near the bottom. “Time for chat later, kids.”

“Oh, he is one to talk,” Yoruko grumped quietly as she resumed her climb. The remainder proceeded in relative silence, and as soon as she looked down and saw Caynz step away from the wall, she gave up and dropped the last five or six meters to the ground, landing in a crouch. Penny flew up and lit upon her shoulder again as soon as she was upright.

“I heard some talk about your music,” Griselda said with open curiosity. “Schmitt said you might’ve figured out something important?”

“Penny told us,” Yoruko clarified. “It has to do with which songs I play, and how they resonate, I guess it’s called, with certain elements. Makes them better or worse.”

“How interesting!” Griselda’s enthusiastic reaction seemed genuine, not put-on, and it made Yoruko smile. “You’ll have to tell me more the next time we break—I’d like to know if there’s certain spells I should or shouldn’t cast while you’re playing.”

“Sure, but I only know the resonance for Earth,” Yoruko pointed out.

“Maybe we can fix that,” Caynz said, turning to face her directly but looking at her shoulder.
“Penny, can you tell us everything you know about how Wind Magic interacts with Song Magic?”

Penny’s response was immediate, and delivered in her “NPC” voice. “Wind Magic has «Key Resonance» with A♭ Major, D Major, and their relative minor keys. It also has «Tonal Resonance» with all natural G notes played. Additionally——”

“Forgive me for interrupting,” Griselda said gently, “but we should probably not get too distracted for now. I’m very interested in knowing more about this, but we just entered an unknown new area, and I’d like us to focus on mapping its extent and finding a rest zone in case we end up spending the night here.”

The beginning of Penny’s explanation had tickled something in Yoruko’s brain. There’s something significant about A♭ and D, she thought, mind racing. Something from music theory classes—argh, I should know this!

But as anxious as Yoruko was to hear more from Penny and sort out these mysteries, Griselda was right—spawns or no spawns, they were not in a safe location at the moment, and this wasn’t the time or place to have this discussion. “Sorry,” she said, symbolically gripping her flute. “I’m ready when you are.”

As the others moved to follow Griselda, who from the glow in her eyes was already Searching again for the nearest mobs, Yoruko whispered quietly to the tiny companion on her shoulder. “Hey, Penny? Scoot a little closer to my ear, and finish what you were saying about Wind Magic.”

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Standing atop a gazebo-roofed tower near the peak of his castle home, rain pattering down upon the roof and draining off the edges in wind-driven sheets, Diavel brooded. He wondered, sometimes, whether or not Kayaba had ever brought on a consultant who understood anything about human psychology—or if the man himself had had interests in that direction.

Did he understand the psychological impact of designing the climate in the Undine lands so that it rains almost as often as not? Was it intentional that we have depression on our list of enemies fighting to keep us from clearing the game? Or was it simply a thematic choice—no deeper or more carefully-considered than thinking it appropriate for the race with an affinity to water?

Diavel wasn’t sure, and sometimes it bothered him—because the problem bore directly on his ability to lead. Over the last few months he’d been noticing a trend of Undines moving out of their home city and relocating to Arun. It wasn’t something that was easy to track; even as a Faction Leader he didn’t have the ability to see his people on a map or anything like that.

But he could infer it from the information he did have. He had access to a list of who was renting rooms and properties in Parasel, as well as high-level data about the economic activity in the city, and in those numbers he could see unmistakable trends over time. Anecdotally, faces that he’d grown accustomed to seeing in the markets were nowhere to be seen, and he’d lost count of the number of times he’d asked after an acquaintance and been told of their relocation to another city.

It doesn’t help that we’re isolated here, Diavel thought. The Imps to the south, playing shadow partners to the Salamanders. Spriggans to the north, with trust a case-by-case gamble for unacceptable stakes. Endless ocean to the east, and the Valley to the west with steadily-escalating mob levels. More than any other faction, we’re hemmed in here by boundaries that are less than comforting, by people who—if not enemies—are at the very least no friends of ours. Is it any wonder
The static background noise of the rainfall had masked the sound of footsteps; Diavel’s first hints that he wasn’t alone were the glow and crackle of a torch emerging from the stairs that led below. Startled, he glanced over his shoulder and then relaxed as he saw one of the city’s NPCs ascending the narrow stone stairwell, light source held aloft with one hand and a bundle of unlit torches carried in a sack on her back. The high-held torch shadowed the nervous look that seemed to be her default appearance, and she glanced around before continuing.

Diavel smiled. This particular NPC was something of a fixture in the castle; it was far from the first time he had seen the young woman making silent rounds at odd hours to keep the fires lit. “Be at ease; I know you have work to do. Please don’t let me stop you.”

“As you wish, milord.” Having given that emotionless stock response, the NPC woman moved to replace one of the nearly-depleted torches that lit the entrance to the tower below, and Diavel leaned against the parapet and regarded the gray vista once more.

“I envy you sometimes,” Diavel said quietly, as if speaking to the wall. “Immortal, fully protected by the rules of this world, incapable of caring about anything beyond your scope. You have nothing to fear, no concerns or worries to plague you. You don’t notice the bleakness of the weather here, and the changing mobs are as irrelevant to you as the price of a movie ticket.”

His head bowed slightly, and he leaned out over the edge of the nearest arrow slit, feeling the rain on his hair as he did so. “You don’t even have the self-awareness necessary to know how fortunate you are,” he said, even more quietly and pointlessly. “Do you?”

“Begging milord’s pardon,” the NPC woman said, startling him even more than her initial appearance had, “but I didn’t understand about half of what you said. That being so, I know just how fortunate I am to live here, in the safety of this city.”

Diavel’s chin had dropped, and he fought to regain a semblance of composure before addressing the unexpected response. “I… I’m sorry, miss,” he said, “but I wasn’t expecting an answer. What’s your name?” He focused on the woman to pop her cursor again, confirming that he hadn’t somehow mistaken a player for an NPC.

The woman’s head fell, eyes down. “Darlenna,” she said after a pause so slight that Diavel wondered if he’d imagined it. As soon as she identified herself, that name appeared above the white cursor she bore. “I’m sorry if I overstepped myself; I’ll leave now.”

“Wait,” Diavel said quickly, snagging the woman’s sleeve with a fingertip. “Please, just for a minute.” When Darlenna entered what seemed to be an idle animation, looking at him wordlessly and expectantly, he relented slightly. “I’m the one who should apologize for interrupting your routine to deal with my brooding. I was just thinking that you’re lucky to be who and what you are—you don’t have to deal with the burdens we do.”

“I’m sure you’re right, milord,” said. “It’s true I don’t have much to concern me. I have a safe place to sleep, and food to eat when I need it. I can’t go out and fight monsters the way so many others can, sure. But I have this.” She hefted the sack of spare torches that she used to make her rounds. “A job and a purpose.”

Diavel’s smile warmed slightly. “Of course you do, Darlenna. Please forgive me if you felt I was questioning your worth. Without you, this castle would be a much darker place.”

He’d meant the comment in a quite literal way, but the NPC woman smiled as if he’d complimented
her. “Thank you, milord,” she said with a bow, eyes downcast. “If you’ve things on your mind, I’ll always have time to hear them.”

Diavel could not recall any NPC—even a quest NPC—conversing in such a natural way during the beta. He wondered if the system was in some way learning over time as it received more player input and observed more interactions of actual human beings. Still feeling as if he’d discovered a rare species of animal, he shook his head, almost reluctant to end the conversation for all its novelty. Just as he was about to speak, he heard booted footsteps on the stairs. “Nothing for now, Darlenna, but thank you. I’ll leave you to finish your work.”

The woman bowed and turned just as an Undine man’s head appeared in the stairwell, halfway up. “Sir? Not intruding, am I? I just finished up with the farmers.”

Diavel shook his head and beckoned with one hand, watching the NPC woman excuse herself and brush past the other man. “Not at all, Laffa. Nothing amiss, I trust?”

Laffa hopped over the last step and onto the smooth stone tile of the battlement floor, brushing his hood back off of his curly indigo hair and glancing over one shoulder at the woman’s retreating back. “I suppose that depends on how you rate ‘amiss’ under the circumstances,” the slender young Undine replied easily, joining Diavel at his side. The two men rested their elbows on the chest-height parapets and gazed out across the mist-shrouded city while they spoke. “Circumstances being that you wanted me to check around and see if these new mobs really are popping everywhere.”

Diavel nodded. “And?”

“And it seems Asuna was right. The reports we’ve been getting over the last few days aren’t just isolated incidents—the spawns have changed everywhere in our territory, from the skylands down to the ocean floor, and based on repops it looks like it’s for good. It’s probably a global change, and we’d all best get used to the new meta.”

Diavel’s expression was grim, but he was not the least bit surprised. Asuna might still be a young girl, but she was also an experienced clearer—one of his best. He’d just needed confirmation, and between Argo’s sources and the firsthand experience of Laffa’s groups, he had more than enough. “We lost several more yesterday.”

“Yeah,” Laffa said after sighing. “One of my farmers was among them. I found out what happened this morning—he took his group across to the mainland, and went down buying them time to get away from a tough mob.”

The hollow feeling inside Diavel never quite went away when getting news like this, but it didn’t hurt quite as much as it once did. “What was his name?”

“Raythe. Good plate tank, level 14. A little overconfident, but that’s not uncommon for teen boys playing melee roles.”

A teenager. That particular detail, on the other hand, never lost its sting, despite the overwhelming majority of the game’s players who seemed to populate that age bracket. “How old?”

“Don’t know. Sixteen, maybe seventeen? He never said.” Laffa shrugged. “He was a good kid. He’ll be missed.”

Someone else I failed. Diavel refused to give voice to that thought, however, fingers pressing tightly against the damp stone. “Tell me, Laffa,” he began slowly, “how often do your patrol groups run into stray Spriggans in our territory?”
Laffa seemed taken aback, his gaunt features looking a bit confused. “Not very often these days,” he admitted. “Last week one of my groups got into a furball with a random Sprig group that was trying to farm the north end of Stormsurge, but we chased them out. Other than that it’s usually just one-offs who seem to be trying to cut through the Valley one way or the other, and we get those probably once every few days—they’re easy to spot if you watch for yellow cursors that aren’t tethered to an area, especially the ones that flee as soon as they notice one of our groups within Searching range. Why?”

“I’m trying to get a sense of what the true threat level is,” Diavel replied. “It’s been brought to my attention that we might not be making the best use of our time and resources. For months the majority of our patrol groups have been allocated to northern border duty. What are we accomplishing there?”

“Keeping the those ash-skinned assholes where they belong,” Laffa said vehemently. “That’s why no one PKs in our territory.”

Diavel grunted acknowledgement, if not agreement. “Do you not see the irony here?”

“Sir?”

“You just said yourself that you don’t really have any problems with Spriggans other than players trying to cut through the Valley of Rainbows and a group of farmers you drove out of the northern Stormsurge Coast—the latter being an area that is arguably as close to Penwether as it is to Parasel.”

Laffa nodded. “That’s so. I credit the diligence of our patrol groups over the last few months for that success. They work hard to keep Undine lands safe for everyone, and the message must be getting out.”

Safe for everyone except Spriggans. It was almost as if Diavel could hear Asuna’s voice there with him. “Do you not see how we are the ones sustaining this conflict? Even now that the Spriggans finally have a new leader?”

The shock on Laffa’s face was plain. “They do? How do you kn—”

Diavel smiled. “Credit me with sources of my own, Laffa. Yoshihara is dead, and the new Spriggan leader has moved to Arun. The number of Spriggans on this side of the world will dwindle further.”

As Laffa digested this news, Diavel went on, turning away from the wet, gray skies and faced the man he addressed. “I am contemplating a major change to the responsibilities and deployment of our patrol groups. I already have Jahala’s input from the clearing group perspective, and now I would be grateful for yours from the homefront. The mob rebalancing that has occurred since the 25th boss was defeated… it’s beginning to Balkanize the cities of Alfheim even more than usual, and I can only see that worsening for the time being.”

Laffa’s expression moved right back towards confusion. “‘Balkanize,’ sir?”

“Historical term. It means we’re fragmenting into isolated, unfriendly pockets of humanity even moreso than before. Our people are afraid to travel, Laffa—as are everyone else’s—and that problem is only growing across the world. Even the NCC is struggling with the isolation of its member states, and the majority of its people are now as cut off from traveling to or from Arun as ours are.”

Laffa glanced out towards the west; the rain made it impossible to see clearly much more than a kilometer. “What would you have me do, sir? It’s bad enough we have to let Imps and Sals through even though they’re at war again. We have to maintain a strong border presence to deter Spriggan incursions.”
“Do we?” Before Laffa could mount a predictable response to that rhetorical question, Diavel held up a hand. “Please, let me finish. I want you to try to set aside emotion and look at this from a rational risk-management perspective. The fact is that the new mob spawns have killed more Undines in 48 hours than any Spriggan has in months. We are fighting yesterday’s war, Laffa, and I believe we are doing so to our detriment. You are out there every day, and I am not, so tell me truly: how many of these patrol engagements are initiated by Spriggan perpetrators, rather than by your groups seeking to enforce my policies?”

When enough seconds had stretched on with no answer other than Laffa’s tight-lipped grimace, Diavel nodded. “That’s about what I thought. I understand that today’s routes and assignments are already set, but starting tomorrow, I would like you to assign half of your groups to not only patrol, but clear the major traffic lanes between here and the far side of the Valley.”

“Clear? But we’re not...”

“Clearers? No, not in the way we typically think of them. But think: your patrol groups are tasked with defending the Undines against threats in our territory. The greatest threat to our people does not come from Spriggan solo players or farmers, or even hypothetical PK attempts from the Imps and Sals despite their state of war with the Sylphs—it comes from the higher-level mobs that now plague Alfheim’s overworld zones. That is our clear and present danger right now, and I want you to meet that threat head-on by aggressively patrolling the route between Parasel and Arun, and eradicating any mobs you encounter.”

Laffa received these new instructions unhappily, his struggle clearly visible on his face. “But what of the Spriggans, sir?”

“Leave them be,” Diavel said firmly. “Keep a few groups on observation-only border patrol, same as with the Imps, and have at least one floater in each overland zone to be able to respond to farmers in trouble. But I want everyone else stomping the path between here and the World Tree clean of mobs, even if you have to relocate some groups to the Arun side of that route. Your mission now is to clear a highway, and keep it clear—not needlessly harass anyone, of any faction, who just happens to be passing through or engaging in purely PvE behavior.”

At Laffa’s reluctant nod, Diavel sighed and reached out to touch the man’s arm. “Listen to me, please. I know that will be a difficult shift in thinking for many, but it is necessary. If we want this world to be a safer place, we need to act in a way that is likely to make it safer, not more dangerous. Creating fights that need not happen serves no one except the man who trapped us all here.”

“I understand, sir,” Laffa said, still sounding a bit doubtful. “I don’t disagree about dealing with the new mobs, I just don’t want this to turn into another well-intentioned disaster like letting the Imps in. I had friends killed by Imp, Sal, and Spriggan privateers.”

The reminder cut Diavel deeper than Laffa probably knew. “I’m not talking about allying with the Spriggans as a whole,” he said. “But let’s be honest: violently driving them from our territory has created far more tears than it has averted. The other factions have found their own ways of handling that problem without resorting to an all-or-nothing ban, and we have bigger problems demanding our attention and energies—wouldn’t you say?”

Laffa nodded, this time radiating far less skepticism. Diavel smiled, satisfied at what amounted to progress at least. “Good. Please draft a patrol route schedule that reflects this change in priorities. I would like to have that on my desk before the end of the day, ready to begin implementation tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir. Will there be anything else?”
There was, but given the resistance Laffa had evidenced towards the mere idea of allowing Spriggans to roam unchallenged, he wondered if this was really the best time to raise it. “Not for the moment. I look forward to seeing your draft.”

This change in policy is one I’ll need to announce sooner rather than later, Diavel thought. Especially if I want to start changing attitudes, and avoid having people take matters into their own hands. But as for actually allowing individual Spriggans to get «Ally» status the way Yuuki has, that’s a question I’m going to have to give a lot more consideration. And much will hinge on just how serious the new Spriggan leader is about changing the way of things.

Thoughtful still, Diavel drew open his menu and navigated to his friends list. Selecting Asuna’s name, he chose «Show on Map» from the context menu and waited a few moments while his view changed, shifting to an unfamiliar region of Alfheim for which he had no map data. Zooming out a bit, he saw that she was somewhere in the Valley of Giants; periodically her icon edged slightly southwards.

He needed the right person for this. Diavel hesitated a few moments longer, then began a new PM. 「Asuna,」 he wrote, 「I couldn’t help noticing that you’re currently enroute to Arun. I have an important task that I believe will help make Alfheim a safer place for everyone, and you are the person I trust the most to handle it with discretion and empathy.」

Diavel closed his eyes for a time, counting the drops of the fading rainstorm as they drummed an intermittent and dwindling beat on the roof of the tower. Once he had settled the last of his concerns and committed himself to his course of action, his poised fingers went into motion again.

「Tell me... are you still traveling with Kirito?」

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If Alfheim Online had been run by a human GM rather than a sophisticated set of computer programs, Argo would have strongly suspected said GM of deliberately trolling them for dramatic effect. They were literally within sight of the city gates of Arun when Thelvin’s wings started to flicker, and since he was the party member most encumbered by excess weight, they knew by now to take that as a sign for a rest break—even if they’d pushed on, the rest of them would be running out soon enough anyway.

“Thirty seconds,” Terquen complained, gesturing broadly in the general direction of the city. “Thirty seconds of flying and we could’ve been in the safe zone.”

“More like at least twice that,” Argo called back to the young Undine man, gauging the remaining distance with a practiced eye from her perch atop a stone overhang which arched most of the way across the well-trodden foot path below. “The entrance is still about a kilometer or so away, it’s just big.”

“I still think we could’ve made it. Hell, we could walk from here!”

Argo’s tail automatically straightened out to counterbalance her as she hopped down the rock spur; she only brought out her wings to glide down once she was close to the ground. “So walk. We can’t go faster than our slowest members—Whiskers and Thelvin are low-level and carrying a bunch of heavy shit, respectively. You wanna keep going, go for it.”

“We’ve made it this far, Terquen,” said Thelvin, stepping over a deep fissure in the hillside to
approach the spot where the two stood. “A few more minutes won’t hurt.” He glanced over at one of the nearby non-aggro mobs; from Argo’s perspective its cursor was a shade of cornsilk yellow so light that it might as well have been white. “That being said, we’ve clearly crossed into the newbie zone. There shouldn’t be any more PvE threats, and little or no PvP happens this close to Arun. At this point anyone who wants to push on individually should be safe to do so.”

“Sounds good to me,” said the Undine warrior, re-equipping his scimitar with a few quick motions at his menu. He seemed to be moving to go, but hesitated for a few beats. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m really grateful for the help. I’m just really ready for this whole adventure to be over and done with, and it’s hard to want to wait around any longer when my wings still have charge and I can see Brightlane Quarter from where I’m standing.”

Thelvin clapped a hand against one of the lightweight metal pauldrons covering Terquen’s shoulder. “Go get your bath and hot meal. Your magic made a huge difference in getting us all through this. Message me if you ever need help with a tough fight.”

Once a grateful Terquen had become a faint dot at the head of a fading blue light trail, Argo skeptically raised an eyebrow towards Thelvin. “You really mean that, about offering him help? Or were you just being polite?”

Thelvin looked surprised at the question, and responded in a tone as quiet as hers. “Of course I meant it, or I wouldn’t have said it. I don’t mind taking a few hours out of my day sometime to help clear some trivial content. Terquen might not have been a healer by choice, but he did the job and kept us alive. That’s all a party can ask.”

“I dunno,” Argo said, “I coulda asked for him to mebbe whine about it a bit less. But whatever, it’s done. What about—?” She glanced over to where the others were sitting on the grassy slope, indicating Whiskers and Veldt with a tip of the head.

Thelvin shrugged, settling himself carefully to a sitting position on a tree trunk that had grown bent from its base almost horizontally out over the rough-edged precipice. It creaked convincingly under his weight, but held. “We’re still a party until we cross into the safe zone, but we’re close enough now that any one of us could easily solo the rest of the way. We’ll be inside the city less than fifteen minutes from now, one way or the other. If they want to head on, that’s their choice, but they both seem happy for the break.”

That suited Argo just fine—a break would give her the chance to catch up on her PMs. She had a pile of tips and reports to sort through, the volume of which always increased when something interesting was happening in the world—and there had been a bit too much “interesting” in recent days. In particular, Kirito had sent her a message much earlier in the day and she’d been meaning to get back to him.

「I’ll be in Arun within the hour,」 Argo typed rapidly. 「Dunno why you can’t just explain the whole thing in PMs like usual, but fine, we’ll do it your way. Meet me at...」 She stopped there for a moment, running her brain through a list of locations that were discreet without being unduly inconvenient. 「Meet me at Three Silver Flagons, 7pm. From the warpgate, follow Barkside Loop south around the trunk towards Little Orchard, left at the five-way, end of the block and fly up to the arboreal shops. Flagons is the sixth building up, with the table and chairs on the balcony. I’ll be inside.」

That would do for privacy purposes. There were dozens of such inns dotting the outside of the World Tree’s bark, or even carved out of it in places. Despite the fact that any player could fly, any establishments that could only be accessed by air were still far less popular than those groundside, and tended to be less crowded. She’d used Flagons before and had only once seen other players
Noise on the foot trail below drew Argo’s gaze from her PM window. As soon as she looked up, she quickly sent the message she’d been in the middle of writing and spoke quietly. “Thelvin.”

“I see them.”

Argo’s keen eyes counted twelve Salamanders coming around the bend in the road, and she would’ve bet a shiny mithril coin that they were clearers. *Two obvious tanks, four less-armored melee types mostly armed with polearms, an archer, and five mages—two of those would be the healers.* She was looking at a pair of DPS groups, probably ranged and melee. The polearms were shouldered and all other weapons were sheathed, but Argo knew how quickly they could be ready to fight—the mages even moreso.

“They’re on their way to the World Tree,” Thelvin said, echoing her thoughts. “Their groups are structured and geared for PvP raiding, not PvP.”

Argo nodded. “Doesn’t make it any more comfortable watching them come our way. What’cha wanna do?”

“That can change *real* fast if someone startles them.”

“You’re mistaken,” Thelvin replied. “They know we’re here. Even if they didn’t have someone Searching, they know now—this tree hangs right over the trail, and we’re in plain sight.” Now he did divert his eyes towards Argo, looking at her meaningfully. “Yet their weapons aren’t readied.”

“Which is why all of us are going to remain where we are and make no sudden moves. If anyone hides, they’re likely to think we’re trying to ambush them.” He glanced over towards the others—had been sitting; Whiskers was still there, but Veldt was nowhere in sight. “Crap.”

Argo reflected that this might well have been the first time she’d heard Thelvin swear in a very long time; she couldn’t recall another occasion where *kuso* had come out of his mouth. “Veldt ghosted. Alright, we work with what we’ve got.” Raising her voice slightly: “Whiskers, c’mon over and park your ass at the foot of this tree. Keep your bow on your back and your hands in sight.”

The small Salamander raid group drew to a halt about twenty meters before passing under the overhang, stilled by an upheld hand from one of their tanks. He was short for a tank, and wide in a way that suggested excesses in the real world, but that meant nothing in terms of stats or abilities in the game world—if anything, a smaller avatar could be an advantage by making a player more difficult to hit. Argo knew not to underestimate him, especially with a raid group at his back.

The Salamander tank raised his visor and approached warily, eyes tracking left and right. “Any particular reason you cats have for camping this spot?”

Argo’s tail drummed an annoyed beat against the tree trunk on which she sat, but she kept her silence. Thelvin carefully shifted his weight to more squarely face the Salamander and spoke up. “We’re not camping, friend. Just resting our wings after a long journey before continuing on into the city, same as you. You’re about a klick out.”

“I know where we are. What I don’t know is where the rest of your party is, or why they’re concealing themselves.”

“You’re mistaken,” Thelvin replied. “We don’t have a full party. We’re just traveling and making do.
We certainly offer no threat to you, so I suggest we bid each other safe journey and leave it at that.”

The Salamander tank did not seem reassured. A lightly-armored woman with a pair of short spears on her back stepped forward and leaned over to whisper in the tank’s ear, drawing a nod. “Look at this from where I’m standing, ‘friend’. Our people just came within a hair’s breadth of fighting yours at the gateway boss. Now I come across a very well-equipped Cait Sith tank with an archer and a scout who just happen to be camped on one of our main routes, with one more hiding in the trees behind you. You smell like bandits. Give me a reason why I shouldn’t treat you as a potential threat.”

“Because we offer none to you. No steel is bared. We are few and you are many. My companions are not the equal of clearers, either in levels or in gear, the latter of which I’m sure you can see for yourself.” Thelvin spread his hands. “There are four reasons. Will that satisfy you?”

“Not quite,” said the man, pointing up and to the side at a spot somewhere behind the three Cait Sith. “You’re three physical toons with no mage or healer, and I don’t buy that you came all this way without either. My scout says you still have someone Hiding, and you’ve carefully talked around them, never mentioning your exact numbers. Bring out the sneak so we know you don’t have someone waiting to disable us with magic as we pass.”

“We came with two mages,” Thelvin replied. “The Undine dropped party and went ahead when we stopped to rest, and our other companion likely hid out of prudent caution when he saw a Salamander raid group approaching. Veldt, please show yourself so that we can put this behind us.”

There was little they could do to make Veldt stop concealing himself if he didn’t want to, and Argo knew it. Nonetheless, the Spriggan mage emerged from behind a tree trunk with obvious reluctance, cursor popping as soon as he dropped his Hiding skill. There was an uneasy stir in the Salamander ranks when he stepped forward into view, frowning and crouching low to the ground at the edge of the hillside to reduce his profile.

“A Spriggan?” The Salamander tank’s words were almost a growl. “I knew you were up to something. There’s no reason to bring along a Spriggan mage and keep them hidden unless you’re planning on ambushing someone. Now why are you really here?”

Argo was already eyeing the area for potential sources of cover; she was pretty sure she could break their LOS before they hit her with any kind of homing attack. Thelvin remained outwardly calm, but she knew he had to be weighing his options as well, considering his exposed position. “What’s your name?” he asked in lieu of answering the loaded question.

The Salamander paused for a beat. “Give me yours, and I’ll give you mine.”

Thelvin shrugged. “As you wish. I’m Thelvin. I lead the Cait Sith clearing groups, and I was present at the Hrungnir raid you mentioned earlier. Were you there?”

“No, but I was,” came a response from someone new, a man in mage robes who stepped out of the group and jogged up to his leader. “He’s legit, Solaris—I recognize him now. Your group just got promoted and wouldn’t know, but he was there leading the Cait Sith. He didn’t threaten or attack us.”

Solaris gave the three Cait Sith an uneasy look, a look which then lingered uncomfortably on Veldt. “But they’ve got a Spriggan along, Rudi. The rest of his group sure as hell aren’t clearers. How can you be so sure it’s not just someone name-dropping this Thelvin guy?”

Rudi pointed directly at the Cait Sith tank. “Because I remember everyone I’ve rezzed.”
Solaris stared back at the mage. “You what.”

“Rezzed him.” Rudi stared right back unflinchingly.

The Salamander tank seemed to be struggling to find words, with his jaw movements getting ahead of his thoughts. “But... why?”

“Because I’m not a complete asshole, Sol. You ever been a Remain Light?”

Solaris scoffed. “My healer keeps me in the green.”

“Good for you,” the Salamander mage said frostily. “I have, and I’ll tell you straight: when you’re sitting there with your life counting down, unable to move or even scream, you are not going to give a flying fuck whether you’re rezzed by a Salamander or a Spriggan. And no healer deserving of the name should ever care what color someone’s Remain Light is.”

“But they’re—”

“Human,” Rudi interjected. “If that’s a problem for you, then you’d better ‘fess up now so I can let Eugene know to find us a better group to partner with—one led by someone who isn’t going to get people killed by making bad decisions. You’re creating an unnecessary conflict here, and I am not going to back you up if you go KOS on these people for no good reason.”

Rudi could have very easily pitched his voice so that only Solaris could hear him; he didn’t, and his words rang out clearly. There was no walking back a dressing-down like that, and everyone present had to know what it meant. Solaris glanced over at Rudi’s tank, who simply raised a thick red pair of eyebrows in return, as if to say: you’re on your own.

Solaris turned back towards Thelvin, shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun as it peeked through the trees. “There seems to have been a misunderstanding here.”

“So it seems,” Thelvin said agreeably. Glancing over at the Salamander healer, he gave as complete a bow as he could from his precarious sitting position. “I didn’t get a chance to thank you at the raid for saving my life, Rudi... so please accept my gratitude.” Straightening again, his eyes went back to Solaris. “Solaris, we’ve all been on the ground long enough to charge our wings about halfway—more than enough, at any rate, to get to Arun. Since the possibility of ambush concerns you, we four will take to the air and fly towards the city, remaining in plain sight. Your groups can follow or go around as you please. No surprises, everyone can see each other, and we all get to the safe zone in a matter of minutes and go our separate ways.”

A succession of glances passed back and forth between the Salamanders present, with Solaris still looking apprehensive.

“Oh screw this,” said the other Salamander tank with a roll of the eyes.

Rudi glanced back that way. “Bartlebee? Don’t tell me you’re with Sol on this.”

Bartlebee shook his head, dropping a hand onto Rudi’s shoulder and patting it. “Nah, just sick of standing around watching everyone use their thumbs as rectal thermometers.” He looked directly at Solaris. “Now quit being such a pussy. We’re not at war with the Caits, and even if we were, a lowbie archer and a middie Spriggan aren’t gonna alpha us when we’re sitting here with two full clearing groups. Our wings’ll be charged by now, so I’m moving my people out. You can do what you want.”

Solaris did not take being dogpiled with good grace, turning away from the other Salamander tank.
“Fine, I get the point! Let’s go.”

There was a chorus of acknowledgements and sounds of agreement from the four Salamander mages behind them, and Argo had to fight not to grin too widely when she saw Bartlebee give Thelvin a two-fingered salute of acknowledgement, which the Cait Sith answered with a nod. Solaris threw one last worried look up at Thelvin and the rest of the party before bringing out his wings, not taking his eyes off of them until the Salamander groups had put some distance and trees between themselves and the Cait Sith.

Argo was inclined to agree with Bartlebee’s assessment of his colleague. “Salamanders must be scraping up all the second-stringers they can get to fill in for their losses.”

Thelvin nodded, still watching until the last of the Salamanders had disappeared. Once they did, he turned towards Veldt.

The Spriggan spoke before Thelvin could, running his fingertips nervously through his short black hair. “Sorry if that was awkward. But Sals like that one guy are exactly the reason I hid; they’ve gone KOS on me before. Didn’t expect them to have someone with a high enough Searching to pop my cursor.”

“It’s over and behind us,” Thelvin said. “What’s before us is our destination. Now that the Salamanders have moved on, I suggest we do the same.”

It was advice that Argo was only too happy to take, and as soon as they took to the air and cleared the treetops, the sense of distance vanished with altitude. Only the rapidly-fading red wingtrails of the Salamander groups hinted at where they’d gone, and Thelvin led his own group in a gently-arcing flight up that avoided any possibility of encountering them again.

Argo could not recall the last time she’d been so relieved to see a Safe Zone notification pop up in her HUD.

Thelvin chose an arbitrary point to come in for a landing, jogging to a stop in the midst of a the clearest spot they could see in the NPC-crowded streets. The four players shared an awkward, anticlimactic moment once their final footsteps came to rest, and Argo wasted no time in pulling up her incoming message queue. While she scanned the latest updates from her sources, Thelvin busied himself in his own menu and dissolved the party, producing a pop-up that momentarily annoyed Argo by interrupting what she was doing.

“And so this journey comes to an end,” Thelvin said unnecessarily. “Whiskers, Veldt, thank you both for all of your efforts. Argo, I presume we’re parting ways here?”

“Yup,” Argo replied, flicking her messages closed. “You gotta get to your group, and I gotta catch up on current events. Mebbe figure out who fed half of Alfheim a nutritional supplement of concentrated stupid.”

Veldt, standing off to the side, bowed to the members of his erstwhile group. “I’m sure we all have business to sort out now that we’re here,” he said. “I think I’m going to start with a real meal, though. Thank you, all of you, for your help.” His gaze lingered on Argo’s for an extra beat, and the slightness of his nod was matched by the one she gave in return before he turned and took his leave.

“I honestly don’t know what to do,” Whiskers admitted when eyes turned to her, slender fingers twisting uneasily at one of her quiver’s belt straps. “Coming here wasn’t what I had in mind when I first left Freelia—I don’t even know anyone in Arun, let alone what the zones around here are like. And I can’t make that trip again.”
“There’s a big community of larpers here,” Argo said helpfully. “Buncha different social groups, ranging from crafters and casuals, to grinders who like a bit of RP in their farming. Bet if you asked around you’d find some.” She thought for a moment, an idea occurring to her. “There’s also a lady who runs an orphanage outta this church not far from here; there’s kids there up through the low teens.”

“I don’t know where any of that is.”

Of course you don’t.

“Send me a PM and I’ll give you some names and directions.”

Thelvin’s eyebrows went up, but he said nothing. Argo pretended not to notice. After a moment, the nervous, dour look on the other girl’s face brightened a bit. “All right. There was a really pretty place I found here on the first day, flowering trees and stuff—”

“The Arboretum. Straight up this road towards the World Tree, up to the next terrace. Once you top the stairs you oughta be able to see it on a hill; you can fly from there if your wings are good for it.”

It took only moments for Whiskers to disappear into the crowd, and when she was gone, Argo caught Thelvin looking at her curiously again. “What?”

“Nothing,” Thelvin said neutrally, a dormant smile rising to his lips for as long as it took her to notice it. “But my task was to escort you safely to Sylvain and back, and although the back part is something of a technicality… you’re safe in Arun, and I have a party waiting for me.”

“Yeah,” Argo agreed, already feeling an overwhelming need to move on. “We both got people to meet and stuff to do. Thanks for getting me here. I doubt I coulda done it myself, what with the changing mobs. Prolly woulda had to hire someone.”

Thelvin gave a deep, respectful bow to Argo. “You only need ask. For now, though, I should get back to my clearing group. Good luck with… the thing that Sakuya mentioned.”

The Cait Sith tank began to turn; on impulse Argo suddenly reached out and grabbed his arm. “Listen, you’re going back into the World Tree, so there’s a few things I wanna say. First off, I got multiple sources in the NCC saying that some of the new mob types can go inviz and ambush—spiders in the woods so far, but there might be others. Like, real inviz, not Wind Magic’s shitty fake-inviz.”

Thelvin’s dark eyebrows went up again. “That’s a troublesome change, if true. No cursor, like Transparency?”

“No cursor when invizzed, but they make noise and show up on some Detect spells, and you can Dispel their cloak if you know they’re there. News is only a day or two old, so that’s all I got so far.”

Thelvin nodded, seeming a bit nonplussed. “Thank you, Argo. Anything else you think I ought to know?”

“Yeah, bit of intel from a clearer. There’s some new rare mob a few clearing groups have run into in the new zone, called a «Norn». It’s got a debuff aura that’s causing some players to take a ton more damage than others, and no one really knows the mechanic behind it yet. Stay sharp, and let me know if you figure out what the deal is.”

“Always,” Thelvin answered. He gave her that look of scrutiny again; it was beginning to make her somewhat uncomfortable. “You’ve changed more than a little, you know.”

Argo had no idea what to make of that. “Guess we all have,” she said noncommittally. “See ya
Thelvin raised a gauntleted hand as he turned, bringing out his triangular amber wings and rising above the crowd to cruise in the general direction of the World Tree. For the first time in several days, Argo found herself free of the need to concern herself with the complications of companions or keeping to anyone else’s timetable, and it was a far more welcome feeling than she’d expected.

Even more welcome was being surrounded by people again, by the organic flow of traffic and conversations in Alfheim’s busy capital city. It wasn’t that she missed having company or friends, or even that she felt any great need for group social interaction, it was that she no longer felt cut off from one of the single most valuable things in her life: the gathering of information. Absently waving off the NPC vendor’s stock dialogue, she purchased a rolled sheaf of dark green leaves and stuck one in her mouth, chewing happily with her eyes half-closed while she walked and listened.

“...Have to raise upgrade prices now with the way the supply of Wolf Fangs dried up…”

“....not even half the usual player traffic, but it’s getting better now that clearers are coming back through…”

“....told you he was going to screw you, his avatar can’t hide the way he automatically smiles when he’s lying…”

Someone had once asked Argo how she managed to track multiple conversations at once, and the main reason she’d placed such a high price on that answer was because she wasn’t completely sure how to explain it. Her memory for words played a part, in that her brain tended to retain things she’d overheard even when she wasn’t actively paying attention. But when pressed for how she managed to sort out overlapping conversations taking place at the same time, the best analogy she’d been able to come up with was listening to music.

People do it all the time with songs. You hear the keyboards, you hear the guitars, you hear the drums, but even though you’re hearing them all at once and they overlap a lot, you can still pick them out and individually identify them, even name the notes and chords if you got an ear for it. Lead guitar splits off and does this one thing while the bass keeps going with another, but each has its own voice—its own separate track.

To Argo, it was much the same with conversations. How could someone not tell the difference between the conversations of, say, the two young girls who’d just passed her and the NCC weaponsmiths across the street? They were coming from two different directions, the speakers were different genders and ages, the cadence and substance of the conversations completely distinct. She could clearly hear both of them; how hard was it to keep them separated and follow them both?

For most people, the answer was, apparently: nearly impossible. Argo didn’t get it, but the upshot of being able to do something a “normal” person couldn’t was that “normal” people generally didn’t expect to be overheard.

And they really liked to talk.

“...getting hard to find Enchant mats in the last few days, the market’s cleaned out…”

“...like it? It dropped from a named banshee in Bitter Hollow last night, and I’d outleveled my old wand…”

In Argo’s observation, the natural instinct of most people was to share information, and they were terrible at keeping secrets. The average person liked to feel smart, important, generous, or some
combination of the above—and giving someone else information they didn’t know gave the speaker that emotional payoff.

The blacksmiths sharing information on market conditions were raising their status with each other by demonstrating that they were in possession of useful information—information which was now Argo’s. The girl with the older voice was reminding the younger that the information she’d previously offered could have saved her trouble if she’d listened—and if Argo had heard the name, she might be able to save someone else the same trouble. The one player didn’t have to tell the other where a rare item dropped, but by doing so he got to feel both helpful and well-informed—and now Argo knew, if asked, where to tell someone to farm a rare wand in the 20-25 level range.

This urge to inform others and feel important was what drove the vast majority of Argo’s secondhand tips and sources, and it was a big part of the reason why she got so much useful data simply from listening to passing conversations. She was possessed of enough self-awareness to also know that the very same motivations played no small part in why she herself did what she did.

Other than that she could, that was.

“...must be why Eugene’s keeping everyone with PvP experience close to home...”

“...think a smith named Lyman might have the Shark Skin you need, his shop’s next to Various Sundries...”

But meddling just because she could wasn’t enough anymore, if indeed it ever had been—and that was a sobering realization that drove her footsteps in ever-expanding circles through the streets of Arun, looking deep within herself for answers that were not forthcoming from her sources of information without. Never before had such a great volume of valuable information been delivered into her hands, begging her to act to fix what was wrong... and the irony was that never before had those hands been so tied by worries arising from the simple follow-up question of: what if I do?

Because no matter which way she looked, or which options she entertained for either action or inaction, the answer to that question always ended up including the words: people die.

“...think Skarrip found a way out of the game, there has to be a backdoor somewhere in...”

“...four more killed in the last few weeks, it’s making me not want to go back to Everdark...”

One of Argo’s ears tracked towards the last trio of players; it sounded like they were talking about the uptick in murders around the Salamander-Imp zones. Strictly speaking, such murders weren’t really all that unusual—between the Salamanders, Imps, and Sylphs, there was more than enough bad blood to make solo travel inadvisable if you were one of the southern factions, and with the renewed state of war between those three, an increase in violent death was almost a foregone conclusion.

Except that the increase predated the resumption of hostilities. It was enough of an outlier that Argo already had some of her southern contacts paying especially close attention to any details that might be relevant. But the comment by the nearby Salamander had apparently been a passing one; the pair had already shifted to another topic as they walked.

Nothing new there, Argo thought, taking a turn to the north while the Salamanders continued on their way. She picked out one of the many benches scattered along the cobblestone streets like Morse dashes, seating herself while she opened her menu to send a reminder PM to one of her Salamander contacts.
“...daft if you actually think we’re ever getting out of here at this rate. I plan on settling in to make the best of whatever time I have left before my body...”

“...manual sucks, it’s like reading a dictionary. Maybe noobs and casuals wouldn’t die so much if there was a real beginner’s guide...”

A tumbler in Argo’s head fell into place. She wasn’t sure exactly what it signified yet, but it drew her out of her thoughts and gave them voice. “Hey,” she called out, sending her in-progress message and raising a hand to wave at the tall Undine player who’d just spoken. “What’s that you were saying about the game manual?”

The Undine man looked understandably taken aback at having a stranger barge into his conversation, coming to an awkward stop and giving Argo an unreadably neutral look. “What, that it sucks? Because it does.”

“Yeah, in what way? Like how, specifically, does it suck?”

The other Undine man nudged his companion. “You know this chick, Blane?”

Blane shook his head of short-cropped blue hair. “Never seen her before in my life. But to answer her question: unless there’s something specific you’re looking for and you already know what it’s called, the manual might as well be in English. As a dry technical reference, it’s great. As a tutorial for anyone who doesn’t already know the material, it’s professionally incompetent.”

Argo’s ears twitched. “Professionally?”

“I’m a tech writer,” Blane explained, long-sleeved arms crossing before him. “Was, anyway. Kayaba’s a software developer, and the manual’s written like every other I’ve seen come from a dev: they think it’s a spec and they have to cram in every detail. They don’t understand end users, and overload newbies with more information than they really need.”

Blane’s companion looked vaguely embarrassed. “Can you not get him started? It’s bad enough I have to listen to this about once a week.”

Argo ignored the other man, bemused by Blane’s take on Kayaba’s writing skill. “You think you could do a better job?”

Blane snorted. “Sweetie, I’ve worked on two different AAA games in my career; my resume is rock-solid. Not that it matters—there’s no work to be had in this death game, and even if we get out of here with our brains intact, I’m done with the gaming industry. Who are you, anyway, and what’s it to you?”

“For starters, the name’s Argo, not Sweetie.” At the looks of recognition the two Undines exchanged, she barreled onward. “And if you know that name, you know I’m serious about making sure people get the information they need. So now that I’ve got your attention, I’ll ask you again: you think you could do a better job of writing a survival guide for newbies than Kayaba did?”

Blane’s shrug conveyed an indifference that did not match the expression on his face. “If I had to, sure. It’s a moot point, though, because I don’t think Kayaba’s hiring, and there’s no such guide in the game anyway.”

The corner of Argo’s mouth quirked upwards. “Yeah, well mebbe there oughta be.”
“Let’s get this out of the way,” Philia said bluntly, leaning forward in what she probably thought was a menacing way. “I’m going to kill you for what you did.”

Coper blinked slowly a few times in response, reaching up and rubbing at his shoulder for a few moments as if it pained him. “Well, thanks for the warning, I think.” He glanced back at the tavern menu, then met her eyes. “You hungry? Something to drink while we sort this out?”

“That’d be great,” Philia shot back. “I’d love something nice and messy to throw at that smug face of yours.”

Peeking past the hand that he’d brought up to cover his face in embarrassment, Kirito caught a glimpse of Coper’s gaze shifting over to regard him. “First the Undine clearer, now Yoshihara’s body double. You got weird taste in girls, dude.”

Taste had nothing to do with it, but that was not a point likely to push the conversation in a useful direction. “That wasn’t how I wanted this to start,” he said with a meaningful glance aside at Philia. “But let’s be fair: you did kill her friend in cold blood. She’s got a right to be upset.”

“Well then you’re an idiot,” Philia said. “She’d never give in to that kind of threat. What happened when she refused?”

“Plan B,” Coper replied. “Which was: we gank the group, leave it up to luck which one of us gets the LA on Yoshihara, and AOE rez once the deed is done.”

“The ganking part happened,” Kirito said, an edge creeping into his own voice. “Seems like you forgot the part where you rez the people you killed.”

Coper was already shaking his head before Kirito finished speaking. “That’s not how it went down, Kirito. The moment I got the gold star on my ribbon, Krensh stabbed me in the back—literally. You know what that asshole’s like; he used to hunt Undines for the fun of it.”
Fists balled at Kirito’s sides. That was a detail that he’d kept from Asuna to avoid upsetting her when Krensh’s name came up before. “Yeah, I know. Remind me again why you thought it was a good idea to bring him?”

“Because I wanted to try to get as many of the candidates on board as I could, okay?” Coper threw up his hands in an exasperated gesture. “If I’d brought my usual group, there’s no telling who might’ve gotten the LA if it came to that, and not all of them are even Spriggans—one of them getting it was a chance I couldn’t take. And even if it was me, all the candidates would hate me and think I ‘stole’ their fair chance or something stupid like that. I figured at least this way I give everyone who wants to replace her an equal shot at it, whether in an open election or the luck of the last attack. I guess Krensh was planning all along on waiting until we were worn down and then ganking whoever won.”

Coper withdrew a few coins from a pouch and put them on the table in front of him to illustrate positions. “This is me; I just got the LA. Krensh put his sword in me, which cost me a lot of HP and sucked like you wouldn’t believe—”

A sympathetic twinge reminded Kirito of his second encounter with Rosalia’s group. “Oh, yes I would.”

“—But didn’t OHK because my armor’s Stoneskin proc was still up. I love that thing. Anyway, Arajin hit me with a heal, but Krensh took his head clean off in one hit from that two-hander of his. Standard PvP tactic in any game: take out the healer.” The boy sighed, looking as if he was either sincerely bothered by the outcome, or putting on a good show of it. “Only two of us survived that fustercluck, and neither of us could rez. There wasn’t a thing I could do to make that play out any differently. I’m sorry.”

“The hell you are.” Philia’s eyes snapped to the side, demanding an answer from Kirito. “Are you buying this story?”

Kirito was conflicted. He wasn’t sure what kind of PvP experience Philia had in ALO, but the scenario Coper described struck him as all too plausible. Arajin was a battlemage with a focus on healing, and Krensh was… Krensh. Kirito had absolutely no difficulty seeing the battle play out exactly as described.

Of course, there were a few details Coper wasn’t sharing.

“So where does Burns come in?” Kirito asked of Coper, delaying the need to answer Philia’s loaded question. “He’s not a Spriggan.”

Coper’s eyes widened, and his brows went up in surprise. “How did you know I brought Burns along for this?”

“Never mind my sources,” Kirito said, deliberately omitting any mention of having personally overheard their preparations. “Burns is an assassin by rep, and we both know it. You don’t hire his magic for your group unless you’re planning on killing someone.”

“Or locking them down,” Coper said testily, straightening his posture and lifting his chin defiantly as he swept the coins off the table and into his open hand. “You know of Burns, Kirito, but you’ve never worked with him and you don’t really know him like I do. You know why everyone thinks he’s an assassin? Because he loves PvP. He’s not interested in killing, it’s about the thrill and challenge of testing his skills against other players. And if you knew anything about his strengths, you’d know he’s not a nuker—his stock in trade is debuffs and crowd control.”
“So?” Philia demanded. “You still—”

“Do I have to spell it out word by word?” Coper finally said, pushing himself angrily to his feet. His voice rose and fell as he punctuated his words with gestures. “The whole point of bringing Burns was to use his skills to disable Yoshihara’s group so that we didn’t have to kill them. That’s what he does best. I wasn’t worried about him getting the LA because he wasn’t DPSing.” He slowly lowered himself back down into the low-backed chair and scooted it in. “Don’t be such a fucking carebear; not everyone who loves PvP is out to kill for lulz.”

Philia barked a loud, contemptuous laugh. “Carebear?” A crude snort came right on the coda of the well-worn pejorative. “Boya, I was ganking Fed and Alliance carebears in SFO when I was still in high school. I bet I’ve been playing PvP games longer than you’ve been potty-trained.”

“And here we go with the ageist insults,” Coper said with a roll of the eyes. “And from a girl who’s maybe what, four years older than me, if that?” He turned to Kirito, patience clearly wearing thin. “Look man, I got nothing against you—in fact, I need you. I don’t even have anything against what’s-her-face here; I totally get why she hates me—I killed her friend, she’s gonna be salty about that. But I’m not going to sit here and let Mimic Girl work out her grief by using me as a verbal punching bag.”

“How about an actual pun—”

Kirito’s patience was running low as well; his voice rose a bit as he looked at Philia. “You’re not helping!”

A few beats of uncomfortable silence followed Kirito’s own outburst. Philia’s eyes burned as she glared at him, but there was hurt and surprise in them as well. “You taking his side now? I thought you were here to get the truth out of this kid?”

“The truth is what I’m interested in here,” Kirito answered. “But I don’t think repeatedly trying to provoke Coper into acting against you by insulting and raging at him is helping do that.”

Watching Philia get control of herself was fascinating. The anger never left her eyes, but the tight set of her jaw slowly relaxed, and she seemed to be forcing herself to breathe. Just when Coper opened his mouth and seemed to be about to speak, she turned back to him, eyes going to his hands.

“Where’s the ring?”

Ring? Kirito had no idea what to make of the sudden shift in topic. Coper seemed just as taken aback, and was clearly getting annoyed. “The hell are you talking about now?”

“Yoshihara’s ring. You know the one I’m talking about. It had to drop when her Remain Light disappeared. Where is it?”

“Up Kayaba’s ass? I don’t know, you tell me.”

“I know she was wearing it,” Philia said, putting her fists on the table before her. “You got her gear when you killed her. I want her ring.”

Coper glared right back at her. “You’ve never actually killed anyone in the game yourself, have you?”

“I have. What does it matter?”

“Must’ve been luck, because if you did, you should damn well know how it works. It’s totally random who gets what from the kill. If Yoshihara was wearing a ring, and if it even dropped at all, it
could’ve dropped for anyone in the party.” His index finger snapped out towards Kirito. “Don’t believe me, ask him. Or hell, ask Argo. Maybe even try looking it up yourself.”

When Philia glanced in Kirito’s direction, he gave her a very slight nod. He had never received a full set of equipment from any of his PvP kills—even solo kills like the first time against Rosalia’s thugs, where he’d had no party members to share in the loot.

“What ring is this?” Kirito asked into the space that followed.

“**Solitary Vigil,**” Philia answered. “We got it as a named drop a while back. It makes it so you can only have one spell effect active on you at a time—whatever the last one was—but it makes that effect permanent as long as you wear the ring and nothing else gets cast on you.” She glanced over at Kirito. “That’s how the one of us going out was able to stay disguised for the whole day. Phantasmal Mimicry doesn’t last forever.”

Kirito had wondered, but it hadn’t seemed a critical detail at the time. He made an appreciative sound. “That sounds pretty OP.”

“Not as much as you might think,” Philia said. “If you want to keep the last effect, no running HOTs, no other buffs of any kind, and you can’t let a mob poison you or hit you with a DOT or debuff, or else that becomes permanent until you take off the ring or cast something else.”

“One Paralysis or Delay and you’re dead,” Kirito said. It was a high-risk, high-reward item.

Coper’s face lit up with understanding. “She was completely unbuffed? That explains a lot.”

Philia wasn’t looking at either of them; she seemed to take a sudden interest in staring at the orelight lamp hanging above the table. “Doesn’t matter anyway. If you don’t have it, then it’s gone now.”

“Look,” Coper said. “We’re going in circles now. Fact is, you hate me and there’s nothing I can ever say that will convince you that I’m telling the truth. It sucks that your friend’s dead, but if I had to do it again, I would. Because now you, me, Kirito here, and every one of us in black actually have a snowball’s chance in hell of getting out of this crapsack fantasy world someday. That’s more than we had yesterday.”

Philia didn’t respond immediately. Slowly and carefully she came to her feet, looking down at Coper. Her voice was calm, but the words were still sharp enough to cut. “Maybe so. But you still did it by killing my best friend, and this isn’t over.” As her footsteps took her past Kirito’s chair, he felt a hand briefly come to rest on the back of his shoulder. “Thanks for trying to help,” she said a bit more gently. “You’re a good kid, but I doubt we’ll meet again.”

“Philia?” His words met her back as she walked towards the door; when she heard, she lifted a hand in farewell without turning or breaking stride.

When the door shut behind her, leaving Kirito and Coper alone in a room full of NPCs, the Spriggan faction leader turned back to him with a roll of the eyes. “What a bitch.”

“Save it, Coper,” Kirito said dismissively; under the circumstances he was uninterested in listening to the other boy trash-talk Philia. “You’ve got no high ground to stand on considering what you did to her. Now what’s this about you ‘needing’ me?”

“I figured it’d be obvious,” Coper said, seeming a little surprised. He looked down and picked absently at a seam in the table as he talked. “Part of what I’ve been doing since last night is reviewing the Spriggan roster, trying to get a feel for what I got to work with. I got a few dozen bites on my mass-mail from known clearers or people who wanna be, which isn’t even half the bare
minimum for a proper raid of our own. There’s my group of course, but there’s just one problem.” He paused there for effect, looking back up at Kirito. “It was one thing to get my group to sneak me to Arun in the middle of the night once, but I’m not Yoshihara—there’s no way I’m dumb enough to lead them out to clear the World Tree.”

An uneasy feeling began to eke its way into Kirito’s gut. “You want me to take over leading your clearing group.”

“Not just my group,” Coper said. “I want you to be my lead clearer.”

Kirito stared at Coper for several long seconds, stunned. “You’re kidding me.”

“How about you, man. You’re one of the top Spriggans by level. You were a tester, and of the ones I know, there’s no one here who knows the system like you do.” Coper had drawn open his menu as he spoke, and from the angle of his gaze he had to be looking through it at Kirito. “And on top of that, you have good relations with all the factions. You’ve got a courier permit for Sylvain, you’re in good standing with the NCC, Diavel doesn’t hate you the way he does the rest of us, and you were an advocate for the Treaty. You have the credibility to negotiate with the other clearing groups for work.”

Kirito was impressed; Coper had clearly done his homework—that, or someone had done it for him. It was difficult to not feel just a little bit flattered at being singled out the way he was here, but Kirito had to remind himself of who and what he was dealing with. “Let’s say all that is true,” he began. “You aren’t exactly a poster child for inter-factional relations. Why would I put my credibility on the line for an ex-privateer who just murdered the last faction leader?”

“Because we both want the same thing,” Coper replied. “We both want to help fight our way out of this game, and we both know we can’t do that by being the butt-monkeys of Alfheim—only idiots like Yoshihara think being hated is some kind of badge of honor. We both want to show the other factions that the Spriggans have something to offer as allies. And we both know that all the other factions are watching us really close right now, to see what we’re gonna do now that Yoshihara’s gone—watching to see whether the problem was with her, or with all of us. That’s an opportunity we only get once.”

“And you think having me as your lead clearer will send the right message to them.”

“Yeah, but it’s not just about politics. When we send our groups out into the World Tree, we’re gonna run into clearers from other factions—factions we’re not working for or allies with. In the past, that’s been dangerous for us, and we both know it. I’ve got other people I can ask, but conflicts with other players are a lot less likely to escalate with you leading a group—and if they do, I know you’re capable of defending yourself and those around you.”

Never before could Kirito recall being given so many very good reasons for doing something that was practically the polar opposite of what he wanted to do. Everything that Coper was saying was reasonable, and in some cases even admirable. If it were anyone else, under any other circumstances… he negated that line of thought quickly. Even if it were anyone else, he still wouldn’t be especially comfortable with the idea of leading not just one group, but a combined force of clearing groups. The fact that it was Coper, with all of his past and current baggage, only made things worse. There was still something about his story that stunk up the whole room; Kirito was sure that there were details Coper was hiding about what happened during Yoshihara’s assassination.

“What’re you planning on doing about the Treaty?” Kirito asked cautiously, the sincerity of Coper’s commitment to it still very doubtful.
“Our clearers and anyone else who’s officially involved with our clearing groups will have to obey it. I’m not budging on that. But let’s face it, Kirito, there’s a whole pile of Spriggans who just want to be left alone. We both know that there’s pretty much jack that I can do to enforce the Treaty unless there’s a believable threat of consequences backing it up—and there’s not.”

Kirito almost mentioned Exile and Banishment before thinking better of pointing out the obvious; Coper’s words that followed were almost an echo of what passed through his own thoughts. “Kicking them out of a city I don’t plan on returning to won’t do shit, either. So I can either leave them to do their thing on their side of the world, and have a chance at making a difference here in Arun where it actually matters… or I can make a stupid stand on principle, be a one-term wonder, and we go back to where we were under Yoshihara. Hope you’ve been speccing for VIT and stealth.”

“I get the point,” Kirito grumbled. “I don’t have to like it.”

“No, and neither do I, but that ain’t here or there, is it?” Coper beckoned to the NPC waitress as she pathed nearby. “Gimme a lemonade.”

The position in which Kirito found himself was not a comfortable one. He was no leader of any kind. He’d never really invested much time in socializing or making friends back in the real world, and if anything his preference for solitude had only intensified after the beta—certainly after launch. He didn’t mind partying up when it was useful to do so, and he was experienced enough at being part of a raid. But leading one?

Kirito thought of the raid leaders he knew. There was Jahala, Diavel’s right-hand man. Eugene for the Salamanders and Imps. The Sylphs and Caits had Sigurd and Thelvin, respectively, and the NCC had a jovial Gnome named Godfrey leading the clearers in their alliance.

Each of them had one critical trait in common: they were all grown men, not boys. Strong-willed adult men capable of inspiring those they led, or at least getting them to follow. Most of them were tanks, which was useful in a raid—tanks often led parties anyway, and you wanted your raid leader to be tough, durable, and close to the action.

_Coper was right about one thing before_ , Kirito thought. _When it all comes down to it, we’re still kids_. _In this world that doesn’t matter quite so much in a fight; we’re as capable as anyone else of equivalent level and stats. The adult players have to accept the fact that we’re here and make use of our skills, because they don’t really have a lot of choice—there aren’t enough of them to clear the game on their own, and we’re just as good as they are._

_But that doesn’t mean they’ll listen to us_.

“How old are the players we’re talking about here?” Kirito asked, uncomfortably aware that by seeking answers like this, he was signaling that he was considering Coper’s request.

Coper seemed to realize it, too. He smiled. “I’m planning on setting you up with my old group to start with. They’re anywhere from our age to around their mid-20s—we’re not talking about forum dads here. Besides, most of us have rolled together for a long time; they don’t care about your age as long as you get shit done. Obviously you can shuffle people around as needed; the clearing groups are yours to manage. But I recommend at least starting with people who’ve worked together before when you can.”

It was sound advice to be sure; a party with players who knew each other’s styles, strengths and weaknesses was stronger and more survivable than any pickup group. Anyone stepping in as a leader for a pre-existing group would have their work cut out for them, and if the group already
worked well together, it was one less obstacle to overcome.

But that pre-existing familiarity was also sometimes, as Kirito had found in other circumstances, an obstacle of its own. Coper’s group would be used to Coper’s way of doing things—they could, for the most part, be expected to share his values and attitudes. And while he and the other boy probably had more in common than not, the differences they did have were stark—their respective attitudes towards the value of human life came to mind as immediately relevant.

Kirito struggled over the choice before him, so conflicted that he was certain it showed on his face. Young though he was, he knew that there were times in a person’s life when they were given an opportunity to make things better in some way—to effect some positive change on the world, in ways big or small. His mother—his aunt, really, but that scarcely mattered now—she’d told him more than once to watch for those moments, and seize them when they appear, because there was no guarantee they’d ever come again.

He knew, without even needing it pointed out to him, that this was such a moment.

“I have conditions,” Kirito began, placing his palms on the table and locking gazes with Coper.

The other boy’s eyes betrayed wariness. “Go on.”

“First of all: our clearers will, without exception, adhere to the Treaty. Anyone who doesn’t is out, and if you don’t back me up on that, then so am I.”

After a beat, Coper nodded. “All right.”

Kirito wasn’t finished. “Second condition: you delegate to me the faclead permissions I need in order to do my job. At a minimum that means full roster access, law enforcement powers, and the ability to promote and re-permission any ranks below mine.”

Coper looked as if he’d bitten into something extremely foul; he squirmed a bit in his seat. “Why do you need enforcement perms?”

Fortunately, these were details Kirito remembered extremely well; he’d studied the relevant parts of the manual in detail prior to his jail confrontation with Prophet, so as to know just what measures were within Yoshihara’s ability. “I don’t want anyone moonlighting as bandits, privateers, assassins, or mercenaries. If I’m going to be leading our clearers in the field, I need the ability to deal with anyone who goes rogue—I need to be able to set and enforce codes of conduct using faction law.”

“No,” said Coper with a firm shake of the head. “You can do that without the coded legal system. And it won’t do you any good anyway—you can’t imprison anyone outside of Penwether, I’m not levying a drop tax, and Exile or Banishment mean nothing to a clearer who doesn’t set foot in the home city anyway.”

It had been worth a shot, but this was the one point on which Kirito was willing to give. “Fine, I’ll leave that to you for now—but like I said, if you don’t back me up, I walk. The other two aren’t negotiable, though—if you don’t understand why your lead clearer needs roster access or the ability to manage ranks and permissions, I’ve been giving you too much credit.”

“No,” said Coper with a firm shake of the head. “You can do that without the coded legal system. And it won’t do you any good anyway—you can’t imprison anyone outside of Penwether, I’m not levying a drop tax, and Exile or Banishment mean nothing to a clearer who doesn’t set foot in the home city anyway.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Coper said, waving a hand at the air. He glanced over as the NPC waitstaff brought his drink, and sighed after taking a long draw from the pale yellow liquid. “Sorry, I really do get it. Just not too keen on spreading around powers that can violate the privacy of other Spriggans, or make the don’t-tread-on-me crowd think I’m going Kibaou on them.”

“If you can’t even trust me not to abuse these powers,” Kirito said, “you’re gonna have a tough time
finding someone you can.”

“I know. Like you said earlier, knowing doesn’t mean I have to like it.” Coper raised his free hand before him and drew open his menu. He hesitated, outstretched finger wavering between different points in the air. “Where is—”

“Roster, long press on my name, Manage Roles from the context menu. There might already be a preset for a Raid Leader rank, but if there’s not, make one.”

“Nope, no preset—guess Yoshihara never felt the need to set one up.” It took him a minute to fumble his way through the unfamiliar new parts of the Faction Leader UI, but eventually a notification icon appeared in Kirito’s HUD, informing him of the role change and new permissions.

It struck Kirito, then, that there was no going back now. He’d hadn’t explicitly agreed to take on the job Coper was offering him… but he hadn’t said no either, and Coper had accepted the conditions he set. The job was his now—as was the responsibility that came with that job.

The prospect was almost terrifying enough to make Kirito’s hands shake. Only keeping them firmly pressed against the table saved him from that embarrassing tell.

“I’ll forward you some PMs I got from applicants,” Coper said eyes going upwards to his HUD. He tipped back the remainder of his lemonade, and rose to his feet. “I gotta go meet with an NCC supplier who might be willing to do business with us—we don’t have farming infrastructure like the bigger factions, so we’re gonna have to pay for our own gear progression.” He paused, again meeting Kirito’s eyes. “Thanks, man. I really mean it. I know you and I have had our differences, but we both want the Spriggans to climb outta the hole that Yoshihara dug for us, and you’re willing to do what’s necessary to make it happen. That counts for something in my book.”

Kirito nodded, head still whirling from the dizzying weight of what had transpired so quickly. “Let’s hope it counts for enough. A lot of that will depend on what kind of people you’re giving me to work with.”

Coper smiled back at him. “I’ve got faith in them, Kirito—and in you. I know you won’t let me down.”

No, he thought as the door shut behind Coper, leaving Kirito alone in a room full of NPCs. The question is whether I can avoid letting down everyone else. It was not a weight that he felt in any way ready to bear, and a part of him was already regretting the choice.

He wondered if Coper would come to regret it as well. Kirito had been absolutely truthful when he explained the reasons for his requests, but they hadn’t been all of the reasons going through his mind. Now that Coper was gone, Kirito opened his game menu and quickly selected the new «Administration» option at the top. The only option available to him was «Roster», which he tapped with one trembling forefinger.

The window that expanded in front of him was huge; it was easily as large as the maximum possible size he could make his map window, and grew to fill the middle third of his field of view. Kirito almost jerked his head back in surprise. Trying to recall the steps he’d read in the manual and using his general familiarity with ALO’s UI conventions, he sorted the list by level descending, then carefully scrolled down until he found the entry he wanted.

PoH :: M :: Clvl 39

A hot, radiant joy filled Kirito then, so intensely that he felt like it would sear straight through the
skin of his avatar and fill the room. He leaned back in his chair, light-headed, and stared at the roster. There were gray names in the list, and PoH’s was not among them; he was alive. He was a real player, not a mob or NPC, and not some sick creation of Kayaba’s. A person, a human being just like anyone else: powerful, to be sure, and quite insane—but mortal.

If what PoH wanted was to stop the game from being cleared, then it stood to reason that the best way to thwart him was to do exactly that: focus all their efforts on clearing the game. Doing so should eventually force him out of hiding in order to take on the clearing groups directly, and that was a losing battle for him and his group—especially now that Kirito was going to have his own clearing groups backing him up.

“Run and hide as long as you want,” Kirito said to himself quietly, flicking the Spriggan roster closed and rising from his chair. “Sooner or later, you’re going to have to come crawling out of your hole if you want to stop us from beating the game.”

And when you do, I’ll be there waiting.

Chapter End Notes

Good grief, almost seven months since the last chapter—longer still if you only read on AO3 and missed the last chapter, which I forgot to post here when I first released it. I'm not dead and neither is the fic, but this time has been something of a hiatus for me for a variety of reasons: job, health, and life in general. It gets frustrating feeling like I need to offer an explanation and apology every time I post in the last year or so, and I'm sure it's no less frustrating for readers who've been dying to know what happens. I'll try to do better.

There are a lot of important things happening in this chapter, though not all of them may be immediately obvious. At last we're finally getting to see some of the actual mechanics of a Puca's Song Magic, and Kirito's unlikely and reluctant alliance with Coper, although well-intentioned, is going to push the boundaries of what he's capable of doing—or willing to do.

So what've Sasha and Klein been up to all this time? Well, for one thing, it's easy to overlook the fact that the chapters in this act so far span only a few days. But we'll be checking in on both of them very soon.

Thank you for reading, and as always, let me know what you think!
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“«Reputation» is a type of currency used to represent a player’s standing or favor with an organization or NPC entity in Alfheim. As with other currencies such as «Yuld», it is weightless while in a player’s inventory, but if unbound can be manifested as a world item for purposes such as trade, convenience, or roleplay. While so manifested, the item acquires weight and other physical properties until returned to a container or inventory, typically taking the form of coin-sized marks or tokens. Unlike Yuld, however, reputation marks have no intrinsic value within Alfheim’s economy— their sole value lies in what an NPC or other player will offer in exchange for them, whether that be items, services, knowledge, or unlocking further quest progression...”

—Alfheim Online manual, «Reputation»

9 May 2023
Day 185 - Evening

Kirito jumped slightly in his seat when the front door to the Barkcrest Inn opened, spoon stopping halfway to his mouth and dribbling a bit onto the table. He’d been alone in the inn with a handful of NPCs ever since Coper left, and the bell above the door kept ringing jarringly as a mixed-race collection of players entered—five in all, led by an athletic Spriggan youth in light plate armor that had the gleam of fresh maintenance. The older boy—or young man; from the wispy scruff of a goatee it was hard to be sure—was cradling a long-bladed polearm loosely across his shoulder with the ease of long comfort, and before the rest had even finished filing through the doorway, he turned a lopsided smile towards the only other player in the inn’s main room. “You must be Kirito.”

Being at a disadvantage in that way did nothing to soothe Kirito’s nerves, which had already been fraying since his encounter with Coper—something he’d been hoping a good meal and a few minutes off his feet would help ameliorate. Cautiously he set down the spoon and gave the other boy his full attention, assessing his visible gear. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Nah, but we have now. Name’s Kramer. Been Coper’s on-again off-again tank for a while.” He tipped his head of buzz-cut black hair at the others behind him.

Kirito correctly interpreted the gesture before Kramer could explain. He pushed back his nearly-empty plate and bowl, straightening. “You’re Coper’s clearing group. Sorry, he didn’t tell me you were coming.”

“No worry, bro,” Kramer said, pulling out a chair opposite Kirito. “Coper had to go to a thing, but he sent me a message about ten-fifteen minutes ago. Said to grab everyone who was partied up and see if you were still here.”

Against all reason, Kirito suddenly found himself very frustrated at just how little time Coper was wasting in making his moves. To be sure, having a faction leader who seemed to be making a genuine effort at taking the role seriously was like a breath of fresh air after having wasted so many months stifling under Yoshihara’s non-rule, and it arguably did bode well for the future in a way that he had to admit was motivational.

But Kirito would have appreciated just a bit more time to prepare before having to meet with Coper’s friends—a collection of players whom his new leader was proposing that Kirito take over and turn into the Spriggan lead clearing group. Kirito’s stomach had dictated a meal after the day’s travel, and
since Coper had left him alone in the inn’s main room, it had been a perfect opportunity to catch up on PMs with Argo and Asuna. Among other things, Argo had already once offered to sell him expanded info on Coper’s group, and he now had a very good reason to take her up on that offer the next time they spoke.

An uncomfortable stir from the other players seized Kirito’s attention back to the moment, reminding him that he was probably being rude. There was a surplus of seats at the table; he waved his hand at the group in a clear invitation. “Nice to meet you,” he said, though he wasn’t yet sure if that was true. Kramer at least struck him as friendly enough so far, and he’d already been trying to remind himself to give Coper’s team the benefit of the doubt.

But Argo had as much as said that most of them were mercenaries or former privateers, and he wasn’t sure which was which—he could be dealing with actual killers here. Unfair though it was, the blend of races in the group did nothing to discourage that seeming: two Spriggans, two Salamanders, an Imp—

Kirito froze. He recognized a few of the others by sight from seeing them with Coper before, but when his eyes fell on the Imp in the party, the memory was an uncomfortable one. He’d seen the long-limbed, long-haired boy once as well, and the context was not one he’d be bringing up in the present company. “You’re Burns.”

“A pleasure,” Burns said with what sounded like sincerity, leaning across the table and extending his hand in a very Western-style gesture. After a moment’s hesitation, Kirito accepted it; Burns smiled while the two shook firmly. “I’m surprised you recognized me. I’ve heard a lot about you, but I’m pretty sure we’ve never met.”

“Same,” Kirito said neutrally, taking care to avoid any mention of the night he’d seen Burns with Coper. “You’ve got something of a reputation.”

“As do you,” Burns said, rubbing at his chin for a moment as he gave Kirito a piercing look of evaluation. “Plenty of clearers that don’t know your name, but if nothing else they probably know the Black Swordsman by sight from seeing you skulk around the front lines solo—and that takes balls and skill in equal measure. Props, by the by.” His smile twitched briefly. “Scuttlebutt has it you’re damn good at PvP, but I never faced you during the beta, and I don’t know of many who have since.”

*That’s because a lot of them are dead.* Kirito struggled to return the smile when he replied; as off-guard as this sudden visit had made him, he was doing his best not to let his tumultuous feelings show on his face. “I’ve fought other players after launch, and won. I’m still alive. I suppose that speaks for itself.” An unspoken thought lay behind those confident, understated words: *please don’t make me explain further.*

Thankfully, Burns seemed to understand just fine. “Too right, man,” he answered, nodding. Then, his expression brightened, eyes sparkling with clear interest. “Wanna go?”

The seemingly non-sequitur question confused Kirito for just long enough to open his mouth. “Go where?”

Burns laughed a bit harder at the misunderstanding than was probably necessary, as did a few of the others; Kirito’s ears burned a bit. “Go a round. Duel, I mean. I’d like to see how you fight if we’re going to party together.” The boy’s sharp violet eyes studied his surroundings as if evaluating the inn’s fitness for use as an arena. “Though maybe not right here. I like this place, and I don’t wanna get kicked out.”
Kirito gave the others a baffled look, turning to the tank of the group as the presumed leader. “Is this your idea of an interview for a new party leader? Or some kind of fight club?”

“What do you mean?” asked Kramer, who leaned back precariously in his chair with his polearm over his shoulder to prop him up. “It’s a PvP game, bro. This is what we do for fun. Burns took out both me and Coper the last time we had a two-on-two.”

“You should’ve swapped in some status gear for that duel, Kramer,” Burns said nonchalantly. “But that was an epic fight all the same. If I hadn’t stopped your charge with that Wall—” He looked over at Kirito, who realized he was currently staring with his lips slightly parted.

“You duel for fun?” Kirito repeated, aware that he was awkwardly and stupidly stumbling through the blatantly obvious in order to have anything at all to say.

“Well, yeah,” Burns said. “Only to half-HP now, of course.”

“Crits can OHK from above half,” Kirito pointed out. “Dueling was great fun in the beta, Burns, but permadeath is real in this game. If you have something to settle, isn’t First Strike safer?”

Kramer wore his scorn in the twist of his upper lip. “For the noob carebears dueling in their home plaza, sure.”

“Base crit severity is 200% for techs and 150% for spells,” Burns replied with assurance, seemingly paying no mind to Kramer’s acerbic comment. “That sets an upper limit on potential spike damage. I’ve got house rules, so to speak: I don’t duel with sev gear on, or use attacks that can crit for more than half if I know someone’s rough HP range. Especially if we’re not in a safe zone.” He glanced over at one of the party members—a twenty-something Salamander wearing sanguine mage robes with golden-orange accents—and threw the man a knowing grin. “Worst-case scenario, that’s what Mentat’s there for, amirite? Maybe we learn something from it.”

Mentat gave Burns a lazy shrug, shoving his long-sleeved arms casually into a pair of his blood-red robe’s many pockets as he leaned against one of the inn’s structural supports with a gnarled arcane staff resting on one shoulder. “You want to feed me skill points for casting a successful rez, you go right on ahead, my friend. I’m not the one eating the DP.”

“That’s Mentat’s way of expressing enthusiastic approval of our dueling hobby,” said the other Spriggan clearer present, a younger mage with a leather chestplate under his robes. He crowded up to the table between Kramer and Burns, but didn’t sit; Kirito could clearly see both a wand and a short sword hanging at his sides. “Hi, I’m Xorren, resident Red Mage.”

Kirito had no trouble understanding what Xorren likely meant by that; he relaxed a bit and tried on a grin. “Little bit of everything, huh?”

Xorren gave him a white-gloved thumbs-up; the gloves matched the snow-white trim on his voluminous black robes. “You name it, it’s what I do,” he said. “Light heals, buffs, debuffs, utility, melee and magic DPS—”

“I take exception to calling what you do ‘DPS’, Xorren,” put in a Salamander youth who appeared somewhere around Kirito’s age beneath the peaked hood of his own mage’s robes. “Doesn’t that involve consistently dealing damage?”

Xorren’s thumbs-up rotated robotically into an entirely different gesture with an accompanying verbal sound effect. “Let me know when we’ve got a DPS parser in this game, Yar. Proof’s in the Last Attack Bonus, and I get it almost as often as you do.”
Yar did not seem to react charitably to this choice of response. “That’s because you’re a fucking ninja.” He turned to Kirito. “Word to the wise, dude. Xorren’s fun to have around, and good at keeping everyone buffed, but he ninjas the Last Attack a lot. Get used to it whenever he’s in the party.”

“Give it a rest, Yar;” said Mentat, with the weary voice of someone shutting down a long-tired subject. “Even I DPS when the mob’s about to go down. Otherwise healers and utility roles never get the LA.”

Kirito was no social adept, but as a matter of pure survival and longtime MMO experience, he knew how to recognize the signs of fault lines in a party—personality or agenda conflicts that could pose a problem sooner or later. More than once he’d bailed from parties for exactly that reason, and he was already getting red flags from this group.

Granted, he’d only known them for a matter of minutes, and he was already predisposed to be suspicious of them, so Kirito was aware that his snap judgment might not have been entirely fair. For all he knew, this was just harmless competitive banter between teammates—and for some of them, that might even have been true.

But there was tension there, too. There were divides in this group, and while Coper might have been able to hold them together despite those differences, Kirito had neither Coper’s personality nor his history of friendship with them. And that could be a serious problem if it came to a situation where they relied on each other for survival.

“So how long have you all been partying together?” Kirito asked carefully, feeling the awkwardness in the air but not really knowing how to address it other than by trying to ask what he hoped were the right questions. *This whole «making friends and small talk» skill is not what I’m specced for,* he grumbled internally while the other players glanced at each other.

“Bout two-three months for me,” Kramer said, speaking first. “But I’ve got other friends I party with too. Couple of the guys have known Coper since the first month.”

The first month. It might have just been Kirito’s imagination, but that sounded like a carefully roundabout way of referring to a very dark time in the game—a time during which some of the players in front of him might well have been privateers working for the Salamanders to terrorize the neighboring factions with impunity.

The comments also seemed to confirm his impression that Coper had been the “glue” holding together this group. “I get the sense that not all of you are constant members.”

“Not exactly,” said Xorren. “Me, I met Coper all the way back on launch day, but I didn’t do a lot of partying with him until after Mortimer took over. By then he’d met Yar and Mentat, and the four of us teamed up with the Sal clearing groups for the first gateway boss—what was that, like early December? Something like that.” He shrugged as he concluded. “Anyway, I’m off soloing for map data a lot, but this is my group when I clear.”

Xorren wasn’t the only group member who seemed to be chatty. Kramer spoke again as soon as his teammate stopped talking long enough for someone else to get a word in. “We’ve all got at least a few friends, so the last couple party spots just get filled in depending on whoever’s LFG,” their tank said, gesturing to the side. “Burns here is an old buddy of Mentat’s who duels with us whenever we meet up; we’ve parted a few times. I’ve been tanking for Coper a lot lately, so he asked if I wanted in on this new clearing group thing.” He shrugged. “There’re others who aren’t here now, but I guess you could say we’re the current ‘core’ group.”
As the timeline of events that formed this group started adding up, something belatedly clicked in Kirito’s head, something Xorren had said: after Mortimer took over. The words rung uncomfortably in his memory, making it difficult to concentrate on anything else once he’d focused in on them. To Kirito, the meaning buried beneath them could not have been clearer, and it cemented his certainty that he was going to have to talk to Argo at length—probably with money as much as with words—before going any further down this road, or any other, with this group.

“Look,” Kirito began, pushing back his chair and starting to rise; the others who had seated themselves did the same almost immediately. ‘I’m really sorry to do this, but this is bad timing—I already had plans to meet with some friends soon, and I was going to get going as soon as I finished eating.”

“Let’s be fair, guys,” Mentat pointed out reasonably to the others, tapping the butt of his staff against the inn’s thick wooden floor for attention. Once the rest of the mage’s group had turned to him, he went on. “It’s not like Kirito here was expecting a bunch of strangers to just show up like this and crash his dinner. Let’s give him some peace.” He tipped his head. “Nice to meet you, though. Looking forward to seeing what you’ve got.”

Burns half-turned in his seat just long enough to nod at the Salamander healer behind him. “Say no more, man,” he added, gaze quickly going back to Kirito. “We can all catch up tomorrow morning. Maybe start the day with a nice fight to get to know each other and warm us up for clearing.”

The last thing that Kirito wanted to do, based on his experiences thus far, was go into the World Tree with an untested group—especially this group. Although the duel offer Burns kept extending seemed to be meant in good fun, and tugged powerfully at Kirito’s competitive nature and nostalgia for the lower-stakes PvP he’d enjoyed so much in beta, something just felt off. Kirito’s instincts had kept him alive this long; he wasn’t keen on taking unnecessary chances without good reason.

For the moment, however, he tabled his reservations, trying very hard to keep his true feelings from coming to the fore. These players had done nothing to him, so far, other than interrupt a meal with a seemingly well-intentioned gesture of friendship. “Sorry to be a pain,” Kirito said, genuinely meaning it. “I’ll send everyone messages first thing in the morning.”

One by one the members of Kirito’s new clearing group said their goodbyes, leaving him once again alone in the company of NPCs. It was company that he sometimes found a lot easier to deal with, more predictable to manage, than the company of his fellow players. Fleetingly, as he seated himself again and poked at his food, he almost wished that Asuna had been there with him—she was an experienced member of a structured clearing group herself, and she was definitely more outgoing than he was. What was more, he thought she had pretty good judgment most of the time, and it would’ve helped to know if she saw the same things he did.

But then Kirito realized that he’d be potentially throwing her into a social situation with privateers who might well have preyed on her people—for all he knew, with someone who had actually, personally, attacked her or someone she knew. And that just brought him back to his inescapable need to know who he was dealing with before he went any further.

In the morning, Kirito repeated to himself. I don’t have to worry about it until tomorrow morning. By then, hopefully I’ll have more information about what kind of people these friends of Coper’s really are. Not to mention a better idea of whether or not I can even risk trusting them enough to party with them.

It wasn’t just his own safety that worried Kirito now, though. The line of thought had reminded him that he had to also concern himself with what was good for the Spriggans, as a whole—and for the fragile chance he now had to rebuild their reputation and end their ostracization with a credible,
honorable, and Treaty-abiding clearing group. Isn’t that what Asuna’s been telling me to do? Change the politics? Well, the politics have changed. And now I’ve been given a chance to show that we’re not all like Yoshihara—worse, that we’re not all sociopaths and PKs like everyone seems to assume we are.

But what if some of them are?

That was the worry that plagued him now—not just for his own sake, but for what was possibly his one and only chance to fix Spriggan relations. What if some of Coper’s group really were privateers? I know Coper was, and it sure sounds like at least a few of the others were. Where do I draw the line and say, no, you can’t be part of this clearing group because you’ll make us look bad? How much do I really need to know about someone before I can say that? And what about the Salamanders of this group, Yar and Mentat? Or for that matter, Burns? At what point does this stop being a Spriggan clearing group—what’s supposed to be our lead group at that—and become just another pickup group of clearers?

As much as he wished otherwise, Kirito wasn’t prepared to answer those critical questions—he just didn’t have enough information to make any kind of clear judgment about people who were already starting out with a deficit of trust from where he was sitting. But the stakes were too high to simply walk away. That was the easy path, the safe path; it was what his instincts were screaming at him to do before this farce went any further and got him—or someone else—killed.

But it wasn’t the right thing to do, and Kirito knew it. He couldn’t let himself run from this, no matter how fiercely he wanted to.

Apparently he’d been idle long enough to attract the attention of the NPC waitstaff; a homely Sylph woman in an apron and dress bowed as she appeared at his side. “Would you like to order anything else, okyaku-sama?

Kirito’s plate was mostly empty and he’d lost what remained of his appetite. Briefly he was tempted to just ignore the NPC, but that felt rude, somehow—even despite knowing that she was nothing more than a scripted entity with dialogue trees. Recalling his experience with the elderly NPC in Penwether, however, he decided to indulge his curiosity after glancing around to ensure the room was clear of players. “No, thank you. I have a question, though. What can you tell me about the people who were just here? Especially Burns.”

The humble smile on the NPC woman’s face remained fixed; after a moment she tilted her head slightly. “I’m sorry, but I’m not sure what you’re trying to ask. Would you care to try our special? It’s the sauteed—”

That wasn’t working; on reflection, Kirito thought he might’ve worded the question poorly. “Let me try again,” he said quickly. “The people who were just here at my table, have they been here before?” Struck by inspiration, he lowered his voice. He doubted the ploy he was about to try would do anything but grievously offend someone in real-life Japan, but it might well just in the kind of fantasy world that Alfheim was meant to be. “If you can tell me anything about them, I’ll leave you a really good tip.”

The NPC’s expression seemed to freeze again; there was a noticeable pause before the Sylph woman adopted a furtive look, glancing over her shoulder and making as if to show him the menu. “I wouldn’t say they’re regulars, but I’ve seen them in here before a few times. Usually with others.”

“Others?” Kirito repeated, excited and intrigued. He decided to go for as much as he could get while he had the chance. “Do you remember anything else about them, like their races?”
“Well, let’s see,” the NPC woman said, tapping a fingertip at her lip in what Kirito thought was a pretty good choice of emote for her dialogue. “I remember a couple of Spriggans and a Salamander. Maybe a another Salamander? I don’t know; I try to avoid them.” She stopped and looked around once more, and then returned her empty gaze to Kirito. “That’s about all I can remember,” said the Sylph waitress. “Would you like to look at the menu some more?”

It was the second time he’d managed to get somewhat useful, if generic, information about a player from an NPC by asking them the right question. Kirito was amazed. As much as he felt like he belonged in this world, and enjoyed immersing himself in its good parts, he’d never really taken the time to try talking to NPCs—not in a real conversation as if they were a person, anyway; he was no larper. In the beta, only important quest NPCs had that kind of capability, and even they tended to get derailed and revert to stock responses if you wandered off of topics unrelated to their quest. He recalled a popular pinned thread on the FullDive forums aimed at crowdsourcing all the most effective ways to phrase questions to NPCs in order to avoid confusing them… and to have the best chance at unlocking quests and progression.

Apparently, Kirito thought, the mob spawns aren’t the only part of the game that’s evolving over time. I’ll have to keep this in mind. “No thanks,” he said, aware that the virtual woman was still waiting on an answer. Having received a valid response, she bowed again and took her leave. As fascinated as he was by these changes, it was a topic for another day—or at least, for later. Kirito glanced at his HUD; there was about half an hour before Asuna and Lisbeth were expected to arrive at the latter’s shop. Time enough to hit the market and pick up what he still needed, but not if he goofed around or got lost in thought.

The NPC waitress was nowhere in sight when he looked around again; Kirito wondered where she’d gone off to. For that matter, he didn’t see anyone other than the bartender and a few generic-looking NPCs—the kind that seemed to exist to add flavor in any inhabited area. Time to go, he reminded himself, coming to his feet.

But instead of dashing right out the front door, Kirito stopped for a moment after rising, torn by a sudden thought. He glanced back at the closed door behind the bar that led to the inn’s kitchen, then down at the table with his incomplete meal.

From his inventory Kirito manifested ten coins in a 100-Yuld denomination, placing them on the table and covering them with his napkin. Only then did he turn and jog to the inn’s exit, hurrying onward to the main marketplace for player crafters.

As usual, it was Lisbeth’s wings that began to run low first. For their final rest stop, she and Asuna selected a nearby skyland that looked thin on mobs, both of them coming in for a landing near the sloped northeastern edge and trotting to a stop.

“Watch your step,” Asuna said, indicating the mossy stone along the edge with a tip of her head. Lisbeth nodded and gave the slippery surface a wide berth, looking around once it was safe to take her eyes off her footing. They both began trudging southwards up the sparsely-grassed slope, searching for a decent place to sit down.

“What about that?” Lisbeth asked, calling out a sizable egg-shaped boulder that appeared to have rolled from somewhere further up the hill and come to a stop pinned between two trees—or at least, had been placed to give that impression. The boulder was worn flat on the top, and it looked like they could each lean against a tree trunk while they rested their wings and their feet.
Once they got there, it turned out to have the bonus of being a much better vantage point than where they’d first landed. The two tree trunks formed a crooked frame for the two girls’ view of Alfheim’s largest city, which by this point was close enough that Lisbeth even thought she might be able to identify their destination. Her eyes tracked down the length of Yggdrasil’s trunk, following along its roots until they met the city streets. “It’s right there,” she said out of the blue, pointing off into the distance to where she could just barely see the side road holding the shop where she made her home. “My smithy, that is.”

Asuna squinted off into the distance. “You can see it from here?”

The surprise in Asuna’s voice was understandable. They were a bit closer than she liked to the edge of the boulder, but Liz stood up anyway and squeezed one eye shut while she pointed. As far away as they still were from the city, she was fairly sure it was only their altitude that made it possible to recognize the location, but she was certain of it—enough of the evening sun still peeked through the cloudy sky and brought light to Yggdrasil’s west side. “Yup. Right there. I’m sure of it.”

Asuna seemed less so, perhaps because she had never been there and couldn’t simply sight along Lisbeth’s arm to know what she was pointing at. “We’re at least a good couple kilometers away,” she said after giving up again. “I can’t even see windows from here; I’m not sure how you can pick out your this shop of yours.”

Lisbeth was just as happy to sit back down for the moment. Flying was all well and good, but it was a long way to the ground from where they were. “Well for one thing, it’s real close to the warpgate, and that’s easy to spot. But even from here I can see how that street twists as it goes around one of the roots. Anyway, it’s not far now—maybe five-six minutes at top speed? Assuming nothing aggros us.”

Asuna nodded in answer, the wind playing with her long blue hair and streaming it out in front of her face. She turned to look at Lisbeth, giving her a smile. “Well, thank you for letting us use the place to rendezvous,” she said. “Kirito said he was planning on stopping off there anyway if you were back in town; he’s been gathering mats for an upgrade. If we have time, I’ll want to prep my gear for clearing too—that is, if you don’t mind.”

“I know,” Lisbeth said. “It’s no problem.” It wasn’t an entirely truthful answer—she did know to expect Kirito, but she was still coming to terms with the reality that there was clearly something going on between him and Asuna. She still felt uncomfortable when she thought about the two of them together, and she wasn’t sure how she’d react if either of them engaged in any displays of affection in front of her.

But Kirito was her friend, and she wasn’t about to refuse him when he needed her help. Asuna had been a good traveling companion once they’d both gotten past the initial misunderstanding, and from a practical, professional perspective, Lisbeth wasn’t going to turn away another clearer’s business either. There really hadn’t been any plausible reason for her to say no, other than feelings that she had been doing her best to bottle up.

There was, however, something that she did have to get off her chest.

“Ne, Asuna,” Lisbeth began.

Asuna turned in response to her name. “Hm?”

“You care about Kirito.”

The other girl smiled. “Of course I do.”
“And you’re one of the Undine clearers.”

“I am.”

“So you probably know Diavel, right?”

From the light crease in her brow, Asuna seemed a little puzzled at the path the discussion was taking. “Well… I do, but not so much because I’m a clearer. We met early in the game, and I guess he trusts me. Why?”

“Why?” Lisbeth echoed, crossing her arms in front of her. “That’s what I was going to ask. Why don’t you tell him to stop being such a jerk to Spriggans? Kirito deserves better than that!”

Asuna’s mouth made a little O shape. At first, Lisbeth thought she might’ve gone a bit too far with her blunt question. But after a few moments, the Undine girl actually smiled, if a bit sadly. “You think I haven’t? That’s a conversation I’ve had with my leader more than once.” She let her legs dangle a bit from the solid rock at the edge of the skyland and kicked them alternately—something Lisbeth simply could not bring herself to do. “Diavel isn’t like you seem to think he is—he’s a good man. I think he and Kirito are actually more similar than not.”

That struck Liz as something of a stretch. She was aware that she was making a embarrassingly childish pouty face, but at the moment she couldn’t really help it. “If that’s so, then why are things still the way they are? He’s the leader—can’t he do something?”

The very last thing Lisbeth had expected Asuna to do was laugh. Yet that was exactly what she did: for a moment she looked as if she was trying to control her expression, and then Asuna seemed to just give up and giggle. “I’m sorry,” she said, hand upheld before Liz could finish opening her mouth. “It’s just that… remember I had to answer some messages when we stopped for lunch? One of the PMs I got was from Diavel, asking me to ask Kirito for help getting in touch with the new Spriggan faction leader.” Her smile faltered for a moment before recovering. “So it’s funny you should ask.”

Lisbeth was stunned. “For real?” At Asuna’s nod, she couldn’t help but grin. “New faction leader, huh? Well, that’s great news for everyone. Guess they finally got sick of Yoshi-whatevers. And Diavel’s really gonna try and make friends?”

“Something like that,” Asuna said vaguely, briefly bringing out her wings and wiggling them as she looked over her shoulder. “He’s ending the ban on Spriggans in Undine territory, and our patrol groups are going to start clearing the mobs between Parasel and Arun so that people can travel. More than that, I can’t really say.”

Clearing the trade routes was an excellent idea; Lisbeth recalled from the proxy meeting that the NCC was planning a similar effort for the path between Nissengrof and Arun. “That’s good. We’re doing something like that for our territory too, come to think of it. Maybe someone can talk to the Caits and the Sals, get them to clear those their sides. Or… aren’t there underground zones linking the corners of the map, too?”

“Two that I know of,” Asuna said. “Lugru goes between Yggdrasil Basin and the Sylphs. I’ve never been to Sekhal, but that’s in Spriggan territory.”

“Well, someone needs to do the same thing down south and in those passages. Almost no trade caravans have been coming in; everything we’ve got is from our own zones.” The wind picked up for a moment, and Lisbeth scooted back from the edge a bit further. “And even there, it’s been rough for the farming groups. We’ve lost some good people, and I bet we’re not the only ones. At least in
the NCC, we’ve got the cooperation of three factions and all their territory. There are some shortages, but we’ll be fine. What about your people? Or the Caits? Or the Sylphs, now that the Sals and Imps went aggro on them again?”

“I’m not sure where you’re going.”

Lisbeth wasn’t exactly sure, either, but talking was helping pass the time while her wings recharged. She leaned back against the thick tree trunk and stretched, fingers laced high above her head. “I guess I’m just thinking about the business side of this death game. Clearers depend on crafters for maintenance and gear progression, because they can’t afford to waste so many skill slots on crafting, right? And the crafters depend on farmers and traders for mats, because most of them aren’t specced or leveled to go out and get their own. But now…” She paused there, certain she was blabbing.

When Liz didn’t say anything further after a moment, Asuna nodded. “The mobs are harder everywhere, and different mobs are popping, so groups that used to be able to safely clear, can’t. Isn’t that obvious, though?”

“Yeah, but it’s more than just that,” Lisbeth said suddenly, pounding a fist into her palm as she formed the thought. “Farmers need to know where to hunt for the mats they need, but all that’s changed now—because different mobs drop different mats. That hits traders too, because they also need to know what’s needed where, and where they can get it. And even if they know that, they depend on escort groups to get them, and their stuff, from A to B.”

Asuna lips parted and her eyes widened slightly. “Of course. And both they and those escort groups are now underleveled. For now, anyway.”

“Right. Which means independent traders aren’t getting through, so every faction’s gonna have shortages of some things and surplus of others. And that’s gonna mess with a whole bunch of complicated stuff I don’t really know well, except that it’s tied into the game economy—NPC stocks, that sort of thing.” She shrugged, gazing off in the direction of home again. “It’s a big ol’ mess, and there’s not much we can do about it for now. But it’s gonna be a bigger problem if the leaders don’t get their acts together.”

Lisbeth felt a light touch on her hair, then another. A tiny dark spot appeared on Asuna’s sleeve, and the other girl gave a subdued laugh. “I guess I brought a little rain with me from Parasel. How are your wings?”

“Probably good enough,” Lisbeth answered, bringing them out and testing them just as Asuna did her own. “It’s only a few kilometers anyway, right? We can coast some of the way, and there shouldn’t be any tough mobs to slow us down.”

But when they came gliding in to land in front of Lisbeth’s shop, they found Kirito already there waiting for them—or to be more precise, huddling under her awning to avoid the misty drizzle that the wind had begun to carry eastward beneath Yggdrasil’s sprawling canopy. He resisted any attempts to question him until Lisbeth had unlocked the door and ushered them all inside.

Kirito drew back the damp hood of his overcoat and shook his head to dry his bangs. “Thanks. I ended up waiting there for a while. You mind if I turn on the heat?”

“I’ll get the forge going as soon as I unload,” Lisbeth said, indicating her workroom with one thumb and heading towards the storage chest she had hidden behind the front counter. “It’ll be plenty warm in here in a few minutes.”

“Why were you waiting so long, Kirito?” Asuna asked, giving him a befuddled look. “I told you
we’d be about another hour if nothing aggroed us. I thought you had to go shopping for the last of
the mats you needed?”

“I did.” Kirito gave his head another sharp shake, then swept his hand across his brow. “Couldn’t get
any.”

Lisbeth paused in the middle of dragging stacks of items directly from her inventory to the chest,
glancing down just long enough to make sure the item transferred. “What rares are you short?”

Kirito and Asuna both turned to the sound of her voice, glancing across the counter. “None,” he said.
“I need Blue Slime Essences.”

Lisbeth made a raspberry-like sound and waved one hand dismissively. “Do you even vendor,
Kirito? Since when is the market ever out of any kind of Sli—” And then the obvious struck her right
between the eyes. “Oh, crap.”

“Yeah,” Kirito said with a grim set of his lips. “The third player I talked to said the supply dried up,
and the few sellers who had any were charging ridiculous prices for them—more than I was willing
to pay for what I needed. If I had to guess, I’d say that Slimes haven’t been popping in the Upper
Sewers for at least a few days now.”

“And someone figured that out and emptied the player market.” Lisbeth’s voice matched Kirito’s
expression, although a part of her was impressed—that had been a shrewd move. “I’m pretty sure
I’ve got some in the back, but I need to check how many. Blues are less common, and these might be
the only ones I have until someone finds where they’re spawning now.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Kirito protested.

“Shut up,” Lisbeth said with a smile, closing the chest in front of her and stepping into the back
room. The forge was dormant, but after adding a half-stack of low-tier fuel and using the context
menu that appeared when she tapped the cold stone, the room quickly began to fill with a ruddy light
and heat. That welcome warmth began to spread throughout the shop as she went delving into her
stocks. *It’s not just Longsword-type weapons*, she thought while she scanned the container inventory
lists, recipes coming to mind automatically as she saw the names of items. *All sorts of upgrades need
at least a stack of them in one color or another.*

Unfortunately, she did not end up having enough of the mats Kirito needed to make a difference. As
soon as she saw the quantity of «Blue Slime Essence» mats in the container’s menu, the memory of
the otherwise forgettable job where she’d last used them immediately came back. She could tell that
Kirito was disappointed when she informed him of the shortage, and there was an edge to her own
feelings as well—had she failed to grasp some potential opportunity to sway Kirito’s favor back in
her direction?

Kirito, however, did not seem upset; he’d already resigned himself to waiting. “Thank you for
looking, though,” Asuna added right on the heels of his thanks.

Lisbeth put on a smile and waved it off, pushing away the stray filament of self-doubt. “My fault for
not keeping closer track of my own inventory, or seeing this coming. I don’t usually keep large
quantities of stuff in stock if it’s easy to get when I need it.” She hurried to change the subject. “Still
want me to top off your gear before you head back into the World Tree?”

“Please,” Asuna said as Kirito nodded, both of them bringing out their main weapons and handing
them over—along with the rarer mats needed to buff their condition well above their usual
maximum. Those mats, at least, the two clearers apparently kept a stock of on hand, and when the
work was done, both blades gleamed.

“Better than when it was forged,” Lisbeth quipped as she returned Kirito’s weapon to him with both hands.

“Thanks, Liz,” Kirito said, giving her a bow before returning the sword to its sheath.

At least he managed to remember not to twirl it indoors this time, she thought with amusement. “No prob. Want me to do the rest of your gear, too?”

The two of them looked at each other before back at Lisbeth, which gave her a pang of discomfort. “We’re actually running low on time,” Kirito said. “Maybe later, or tomorrow?”

“Sure, doesn’t have to be right now.” Liz hesitated, not sure if she wanted to ask the next question. “I guess you two are headed out to clear?”

“No prob. Want me to do the rest of your gear, too?”

“The Rat? He’s meeting with the info broker in person? With an Undine clearer? Kirito was definitely up to something; she was sure of it.

“My clearing group is back in Arun for the night anyway,” Asuna added before Lisbeth could poke him for more information. “We’ll be starting out again in the morning, I think. But speaking of that meeting, we should probably be on our way if we want to find this place in time.” She bowed as well. “Thank you for all your help, Liz. Your company made the long trip go by a lot more quickly, and now I know who to come to when I need work done in Arun.”

Lisbeth abruptly felt a little guilty for the thoughts she’d been having. In the short time since they’d met, Asuna had never treated her as anything other than a good friend who could be trusted to watch her back. She returned both of their bows, her smile matching Asuna’s. “You’re always welcome here, just like Kirito. Now go on,” she said, straightening and making a shooing motion. “You’ve got somewhere to be, right?”

Asuna giggled; Kirito grinned, clearly relieved at not having to answer questions about whatever the hell he’d gotten himself into. “Yep,” he said. “I’m just not looking forward to going back out in the rain. I got enough of that on the east coast.”

“It’s not that bad,” Asuna said, poking Kirito in the arm. “This isn’t even really rain.”

“It’s water falling from the sky,” Kirito said, rubbing the poked spot as if it offended him. “Pretty sure it qualifies by definition.”

Asuna made a quiet noise of exasperation, and took Kirito’s wrist in her hand, tugging as she turned towards the door. “Come on,” she said. “We still have to find this Silver Flagons place.”

When the wind pulled the door shut behind them, Kirito was still wearing a surprised look while allowing himself to be gently towed along. Liz kept waving for a moment or two afterwards, and then let her hand fall to her side, expression relaxing as she looked down at the floor.

It had been a very long day—one of the longest since the early parts of the game when she’d been grinding her Smithing day and night to get ahead. Which wasn’t to say that it had been a bad day, at least not entirely. But it had been exhausting: physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Lisbeth hadn’t really had a moment to herself since she and Asuna had set out that morning;
travelling in a party was like that. Usually that wasn’t a problem for her. But today, at least, there had been more than a few times when she’d wished for a few minutes alone, away from her travelling companion—and in this game world, she couldn’t even beg the excuse of a bathroom break.

“Tadaima,” she said softly aloud, answered only by the muted, irregular dripping of water outside. She was home, now, and she had the place all to herself. Things were back to normal.

Only then, sitting on the wooden stool behind the counter of her empty store, did Liz allow herself to cry.

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As one, Kirito and Asuna touched down on the fenced balcony outside the Three Silver Flagons inn just as the sun was beginning to reassert itself through the clouds above the Valley of Butterflies. He was surprised they’d made it a few minutes early; without Argo’s directions, Kirito thought he might’ve had actual trouble finding the inn. Unlike many others of its kind, it didn’t have any clear signage with its name—instead, the only external sign was a stylized painting on the front door that was clearly intended to represent an image of the inn’s namesake, but which could’ve just as easily stood for Three Gray Teapots as far as Kirito was concerned.

Being early for their meeting with Argo, Kirito stopped there at the balcony on a whim instead of going directly inside, drawing a sound of query from Asuna. Rather than answering right away, he took a moment to lean against the railing, closing his eyes and letting the simulated feel of the direct sunlight warm and rejuvenate him. The late spring rain had been brief, but chilly, and he hadn’t had a whole lot of downtime in the last few days.

When he opened his eyes again, he caught sight of Asuna out of the corner of his gaze. She seemed to have been watching him, head slightly tilted and a smile on her face. Suddenly self-conscious for no reason he could pinpoint, Kirito straightened and made a show of adjusting the collar of his coat, which only made things worse by drawing a soft laugh from her.

“It’s okay,” Asuna said. “The sun does feel nice.”

Relaxing again, Kirito nodded. A little emboldened, he tried to explain the analogy that was going through his head. “I guess I just needed to charge my «courage meter» before going inside and having this big talk with Argo.” He grinned. “All recharged and ready to go.”

Asuna laughed, but this time it didn’t make him feel self-conscious. Just as he was reaching out to open the inn’s front door, she stepped forward and took his hand in hers, closing her fingers softly around his. While he was still stopped in place, trying figure out what she expected him to do or how to respond, Asuna closed her eyes and lifted her chin slightly. She pointedly drew in a deep breath as she held his hand in hers, stayed like that for a few beats, and then let it out, letting go of his hand a moment later.

“Recharged,” Asuna said with a smile. “Ready to go.”

It was not the first time that Asuna had done something impulsive like that, and Kirito was aware that it probably had more significance than he yet understood. But he was already having to work himself up to this conversation with Argo; now was not the time to think too deeply about what had just happened. He settled on a smile, touched the door handle, and went inside.

Per Argo’s latest PM, they found her waiting for them at one of the upstairs tables, lounging in a corner with a view of the city. She’d appropriated a trio of chairs and had her feet up on one of them; her hands were poised in an obvious typing posture. As soon as she caught sight of Kirito’s head
coming up from the spiral staircase, she tapped out a few more things and then made a flicking motion with one hand. “Right on time, Ki-bou.” Her eyes went to Asuna next, and she grinned. “And the noob from launch day,” she said.

“We talked about this,” Kirito said quickly, sensing danger. “Asuna has been with me through this whole thing, and I told you I was bringing her.”

But Argo wasn’t finished. Looking Asuna up and down, the corners of her grin softened a bit. “Hell of a long way you’ve come since then. Grats.”

Asuna, to Kirito’s surprise, bowed in response to Argo’s words. “I actually never got a chance to thank you. I learned a lot of what I did because I took your advice and read the manual.”

“I know.” Argo looked at Kirito. “I like her. She can stay.”

Asuna’s expression was controlled, but Kirito could tell she was trying not to laugh, and he himself barely managed to suppress a snort. The Cait Sith girl tossed a brief look past them at the NPC waitress who was hovering at a respectful distance. “Hungry? The chicken meatballs here are good. Just ignore what they call the sauce.”

A meal wasn’t the worst idea, but Kirito wasn’t sure if he could really eat at the moment. His stomach kept wanting to do an acrobatics routine without the appropriate skill equipped, and reminding himself that the sensation of nausea was fake only went so far. In truth, it was hard to really argue that the sensation was fake in the first place—he felt nauseated, and if his brain believed that he was, and he felt as if he was, then he was, whether it was his real body sending those signals or not.

Thinking about being nauseated wasn’t helping him not be, either. Kirito collected himself quickly, and manage to smile when he answered. “I’ll pass. Asuna?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” Asuna said, finally managing to stifle her internal struggle and compose herself as well.

“No, no,” Argo said, sitting up a little straighter and letting one foot drop to the floor. Her tail uncurled itself from around her and began drifting aimlessly. “I mean it, really. We’re prolly gonna be here a while once I start telling you my story, so at least have a snack. I rented the whole upstairs for the night.”

“I kind of just want to get this over with, Argo,” Kirito said, immediately realizing that it came out more harshly than he intended.

Argo, however, seemed unperturbed by the bluntness. “Fair. Alright, have a seat.” When Kirito and Asuna had both pulled chairs up to the small corner table Argo was occupying, the Cait Sith info broker scooted herself closer and put her palms flat on the table, gaze uncomfortably direct. “So when were you planning on asking me for help with Prophet?”

It was just as well that Kirito had demurred on Argo’s invitation to order something; if he’d been eating or drinking just then, he probably would’ve choked on it. He didn’t dare risk a side glance at Asuna. Instead he met Argo’s gaze, well aware that neither of them needed to blink. “I’ve been a bit busy,” he began to say.

“Bullshit,” Argo said candidly before he could go any further. “That’s a bullshit excuse and we both know it. You’ve been PMing me multiple times daily the entire time you’ve been chasing him, from the time you left the Sewers until forty-seven minutes ago. You just never asked or even mentioned
this multi-day pursuit, even though you had every opportunity and knew I could’ve helped—and
would’ve, especially after what he’s done. Why?”

In a rare moment of insight, Kirito realized then that Argo wasn’t just upset that he hadn’t asked for
her help—she was hurt. Not being quite sure how to fix what he didn’t even understand, he tried the
one thing Argo seemed to respect: direct honesty. “Because every way I thought of that you could
help had risks that I couldn’t accept. If I had you tell your network what Prophet did, or put out a
bounty of some kind on him, it would just drive him and his gang further into hiding. And once that
information’s out there, there’s no taking it back, or predicting what might happen if someone does
something stupid. That’s even more true now that we know what he wants, and who he’s working
for.”

Argo sat up a little straighter, both ears tilted forward. “Really. And you didn’t think I could tell you
anything about this guy instead? You must have a lot on him already.”

She was clearly fishing, but Kirito knew how Argo’s game was played by now, and he was glad that
Asuna seemed to be waiting to see how he handled the info broker rather than blurting out
information or gut reactions. He’d tell her what she wanted—but he wanted something, too. “You’ve
told me yourself, Argo: the fact that someone even asks a question is salable information. If I’d asked
you for info on him, at best that would’ve just invited awkward questions—and answering them
would lead back to the first problem.”

“And now?”

Kirito sighed his resignation. “I think we’re past that now. You obviously already know who
Prophet is and what he did—and why I was asking for information about places with recent PK
attacks. I’m not sure why I thought you wouldn’t. The fact that all of Alfheim doesn’t already know
means you’re sitting on that information instead of broadcasting it to your network, which at least for
now is reassuring. But Asuna and I learned a few things about him and his agenda over the last few
days, and we need to talk about that.”

“And since you’ve hinted at it twice but only vaguely,” Argo said, beginning to unwrap a small hard
candy of some sort while she talked, “I’m guessing you want to trade this info instead of just give it
to me.”

“Well, what can you tell us about Prophet, anyway?” Asuna said, breaking her silence and
momentarily startling Kirito with the unexpected question.

Sudden though it was, the question did have the result Kirito was aiming to achieve: it put Argo back
in the position of answering, rather than questioning. The info broker’s eyes flickered briefly over to
his companion, then began alternating between the two as she seemed to include Asuna in the
conversation more fully. “I’ll start with basic background,” Argo said finally. “Won’t surprise you
that he was one of Kibaou’s privateers; he’s connected to both Undine and Sylph attacks.
Supposedly he joined ALO with friends from the outside, but even as a privateer he worked alone or
in small groups, so there’s not much on him or who he knows. Rumor is he’s half-Japanese, but
there’s nothing to support it.”

“He has an accent,” Kirito said. “It’s faint, and I don’t know what it is, but it still comes out
sometimes.”

“That’s a nice detail,” Argo said with a smile. “Noted.”

“And you’re right that he came in with friends. But most of them are dead now, and weren’t
involved in what he did.”
Argo’s brown eyebrows went up. “You,” she said slowly, “are surprisingly well-informed about this guy’s personal details. So which friend did you talk to?”

Kirito mentally stumbled there. “Huh?”

“You talked to one of his friends,” Argo said. “Can you tell me anything about them?”

“Why do you say that?” Asuna asked, puzzled at whatever mental leap Argo was making.

Argo sighed. “Can we not play this game? Look, you know details about Prophet’s friends that only he or someone who knows him would know. He prolly didn’t tell you. That tells me you found one of his friends and talked to them, mebbe while you were in Penwether arguing with Yoshihara—” Her expression stiffened momentarily, and she went silent, the only sign of her thoughts being the rapid movements of her eyes. Their lack of focus or fixation was unnerving.

Kirito suspected that Argo had managed to put some pieces together, but she didn’t seem willing to share just yet. After a few beats, she looked back at Kirito and spoke again. “Look, I got reasons of my own for wanting to track down anyone connected to Prophet. This is bigger than some seal-clubbing murderer who needs to be shut down.”

“Yes, it is,” Kirito said, carefully avoiding having to answer questions about Philia or how she fit into the picture. “Bigger than you think. Prophet isn’t just out to kill for jollies, Argo. He’s trying to stop the game from being cleared so that he can live forever in Alfheim.”

“Yeah,” Argo said. “Sounds familiar. Now explain to me why I shouldn’t make sure every clearing group, if not everyone in the world, knows to either watch their backs or stomp this guy out of existence?”

“Because finding him and taking him down isn’t that simple,” said Asuna, echoing some of the same concerns she’d written in her PMs to Kirito—and, uncomfortably, some of Prophet’s own smug predictions. “Alfheim is a whole world of its own, and Prophet could be anywhere in that world.”

“Diverting clearers to hunt for Prophet stops us from clearing,” Kirito added. “That’s what he wants—to distract the clearers from what we’re supposed to be doing, to get us to run around Alfheim getting no EXP or progress while we chase down every rumor that he showed up somewhere.”

“We can work around that,” Argo said. “Form hunting groups from backup clearers, mercenaries, whatever—we don’t have to take the clearers away from clearing to take him down.”

“Yes, we do,” Kirito said reluctantly, playing one of his new cards. “Because Prophet is level 39, and an expert at close-range PvP. Anyone who isn’t a clearer with PvP experience will get slaughtered, and just feed him more «Favor».”

Argo’s recognition of the term’s significance was immediate and visible. “Favor? What favor?”

Now it was Kirito’s turn to go thoughtfully silent. He’d intended going in that he was going to tell Argo about his encounter with Prophet’s so-called “Mistress”—if nothing else, to get whatever help the info broker could offer on the subject from her expansive knowledge of quest content. It was a big part of what he and Asuna were here to do, after all. But now, coming to the moment, he found himself struggling with the possibility of unintended consequences. Argo was a good friend, and he knew she truly meant well, but this was a literally game-changing revelation that could impact everyone in Alfheim.

“Hel,” Kirito said at last.
He’d expected the word to be a bombshell, a jaw-dropping eureka! moment that would rock Argo back on her heels. Her actual reaction of confusion was almost a disappointment. “Heru? That could mean like half a dozen things by itself, Ki-bou. I need a less ambig—”

“The Norse goddess Hel,” Kirito said. “Goddess of death and the underworld. She is an NPC in this game, and she is giving out some kind of Deity Quest that rewards players with a thing called «Favor» if they kill other players in her name, or along those lines anyway. Probably some kind of rep mark, since Prophet can apparently spend it on powers. That isn’t his real character name, either; he actually thinks of himself as Hel’s prophet. And she’s still recruiting.”

Now Kirito was rewarded with the stunned wordlessness he’d been expecting. No one even fidgeted; the only sounds came from the inn room downstairs as the NPC staff went about their idle activities and pre-programmed paths. The relative silence was broken suddenly by a loud crunching sound when Argo pulverized the candy she’d been sucking on. “You met her. It.”

There didn’t seem to be any point in being coy about that fact. “Yes. And she was a lot more complex than most NPCs—definitely a major quest NPC, conversational, with all the resources of the NLP system in play. She even tried to recruit me, which obviously failed.” The corner of his mouth took on a sharp twist for just a moment. “But Prophet thinks that she’ll reward him with some kind of immortality. And while that’s nonsense, the fact that he believes it—and has Hel’s backing—makes him incredibly dangerous.”

This new knowledge seemed to change something profoundly in Argo, or at least in her demeanor. She stopped slouching in her chair, swallowed the last of what she’d been chewing, and pinned both Kirito and Asuna with piercing gazes that alternated sharply. “Here’s the deal, you two. I’m gonna tell you about some really dangerous things now. Some of them are the kind that could get people killed. Some are the kind that will get people killed if they’re not handled right. And some already have gotten people killed.” When Kirito glanced over at Asuna, her face was ashen, and she looked as queasy as he had felt. Argo’s eyes then fell on her again as well. “And you need to understand there’s some things I still can’t tell you anyway.”

“That’s fine,” said Asuna, a hint of warning in her quick response.

“Argo,” Kirito said pointedly.

“Sorry. I’m not trying to bust your ass here, Ki-bou—or yours,” she said, glancing again at Asuna. “But you need to understand what we’re dealing with, and you’re already in it deeper than you know.”

Kirito spoke up again. “Any fees involved I should know about?”

Argo’s smile ticked upwards on one side. “Not tonight. Not for this.”

More than anything else, more than any of the cautionary language in Argo’s far-too-dramatic warnings, that one response made Kirito wonder just how radioactive this secret was that she was sitting on. At least we’re about to find out, he thought as he and Asuna gave Argo their full attention. Whatever it is, it can’t be any crazier than an NPC goddess giving out quests that reward players for murder.

Within minutes, Kirito realized just how incredibly foolish an assumption that had been.

“Stop me if you’ve heard this one, guys,” Issin said as they finished burning down the pair of wights
that had pathed into them while they waited. Once the area was confirmed clear of mobs, the Cait
Sith hoarsened his voice to something that was obviously intended to sound like Klein. “Hey, how
about we shortcut through this unexplored area so we can get back faster? We know there’s a locked
door on the other side near the warpgate, and I bet it opens on this side.” He spun an arrow through
his fingers, glancing around at the group with his tail undulating in a slow pattern behind him.
“Anyone? This sound familiar?”

“Ringing some bells here,” Kunimittz said, just then drifting in for a landing after scouting ahead. He
dismissed his wings and sighed. “So I checked out that door. It’s locked from this side, too. No sign
of a switch or lever or anything else up there. Just a dark side hallway that heads off into an
unmapped area, and I didn’t touch that.”

Klein glanced at Harry One. The Leprechaun held up both hands, palms-out. “Look, if you want me
to climb up there, or have Kunimittz try carrying me, I’m game, but I doubt the Can Opener can hack
a door in a World Tree dungeon. It’s mostly useful for chests and stuff like that.”

“Worth a shot, right?” Klein jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, in the direction they’d come. “It’s
that or we backtrack the long way around the Halls, probably miss the rendezvous with the Caits,
and end up having dinner in the World Tree.”

That drew a groan from everyone. Travel rations were something used to silence the distraction of
being hungry while out clearing; they were far from satisfying as a meal. When Harry hesitated,
Klein cleared his throat. “Dude, just try it. I’d rather not swap out a skill for Lockpicking and try
testing it up here and now.” He rummaged through his pack and brought out a thick coil of rope,
which he tossed to Kunimittz. “Should be something you can secure this to. They wouldn’t put a
door up there if the only way to get to it was to fly.”

“You say that,” Kunimittz said, threading his arm through the rope until it was on his shoulder.

Klein wasn’t really 100% sure of it himself, but it stood to reason—this was a video game; it wasn’t
as if the rock just formed that way. Or eroded, or whatever it was that rocks did; geology wasn’t his
thing. In any event, a minute later down came one end of the rope, and up went Harry.

The Can Opener had a proper name, which Klein could never remember. But ever since Harry One
had found a rare recipe for the tiny lockpicking Construct and demonstrated it for the group,
everyone had unanimously decided that it was called the Can Opener, and that had been that. About
the size of a shoebox, its modules adorned with ridiculously ornate engravings and filigrees, the thing
wasn’t useful for much. But it was very good at what it did do, and it wasn’t as if Harry was carrying
around a lot of weight anyway. Klein supposed a few extra kilos on a DPS spec wasn’t a bad trade
for something that occasionally unlocked rare loot they wouldn’t have gotten otherwise.

“Any luck?” Klein called up shortly after Harry had made his way up the rope.

Kunimittz came flying back down not long afterwards. “No dice. We get to go around.”

There was another chorus of discontent from Klein’s group. He stilled it by making a “time out”
symbol with his hands. “It sucks, but let’s grump about it later—we need to hoof it and cover as
much ground as we can before we hit repops. Kunimittz, can you go grab Harry and the rope?”

“I’m pretty sure I couldn’t maintain altitude carrying him even if I dumped everything.”

“You don’t have to,” Klein said. “Just don’t fall like a rock as you’re gliding down.” He clapped his
hands. “Let’s go, man. We gotta move.”
To Klein’s relief—and, he was certain, everyone else’s—the numerous Umbral Caretakers they passed still didn’t aggro them, and they managed to skip some of the tougher trash they’d cleared not too long prior. What was nothing short of a blessing was that the named Barrow Slime blocking their progress hadn’t respawned—it had occupied the entire corridor and had been literally impossible to bypass. It was some time before Dynamm, eyes glowing, gave a short, sharp whistle that brought their breakneck run to a halt before a right angle in the mausoleum’s passages. “Movement ahead and to the right, multiple shapes. I think we’ve got Graveworms.”

“Expected that sooner or later,” Klein said. “Thanks for the warning. Issin?”

The Cait Sith’s eyes suddenly shone with a different shade of green than their Sylph companion’s. “Five cursors in the open. Conning a little below my level. Probably a linked encounter.” He suddenly tapped a finger at the air, poking at his now-visible map. “I think it’s the urn room coming up.”

“Alright, you know what to do,” Klein announced, glancing over at their mages. “Kunimittz, Dynamm, time for some AOE goodness—I know you guys wanted an excuse to unload on this room earlier. Just be ready to switch to single-target if we get Caretaker adds.”

As with many of the trash mobs in this area of the World Tree, the fight was relatively trivial with their levels and the new gear from the last raid, even considering the dozens of storage urns creating obstacles to movement in the cramped burial chamber. Kunimittz and Dynamm took great glee in unloading big area nukes on the «Greater Graveworms» once they were locked down, which had the spectacular—and probably intentional—effect of destroying all the urns in a frenetic spray of dust and pottery shards.

The abrupt barrage was intense; it even almost managed to pull aggro from Harry before Klein switched back in with a long-cooldown taunt technique. They burned through the mobs so quickly that the last Graveworm died while that ability was still on cooldown. “Clear,” he said, vigorously waving his free hand at the dusty air and practically coughing the end of the word. “Of mobs, anyway. And urns. Need to point that out.”

The first word was echoed by a few others, but it was Issin with his Searching whose agreement let them relax. Klein brought up his sword and triggered a Wind-based katana technique that created a short-lived whirlwind around him, dispersing the dust.

That move drew a laugh from Harry and Dale, but Dynamm looked around at his share of the handiwork with obvious disappointment hanging on his face. “Not a single drop from breaking all that pottery. Way to live up to the legacy of a lifetime’s worth of RPGs, Kayaba.”

Kunimittz agreed disgustedly. “Fail.”

Klein snickered and glanced at his Result window. “You do this in every game with destructible scenery. Anyway, I like these Graveworms. No skills, not too tough, but the EXP’s not bad, considering. They just seem to come in large groups.”

“But they drop garbage,” Dynamm said, tapping at what was presumably his own Result window. “I have like a stack of these «Graveworm Digestive Sac» things now.” He made a face. “Gross. I hope I don’t have to manifest them from my inventory to turn them in.”

“At least the mats don’t weigh a lot,” Harry One said, hand poised as if reviewing his own inventory. “Are they even used for anything other than this quest? They don’t vendor for much from what I remember, and no one I know is buying them.”
“Dunno,” Klein said. “Probably for Alchemy or something funky like that.” Something occurred to him. “Kunimittz, didn’t you say you were going to try out Alchemy?”

“Yeah,” said the Imp mage. “But it’s not leveled up or anything, so I couldn’t tell you.”

“Caretakers,” Harry said, sudden urgency in his voice.

All eyes followed his, gazes snapping onto the pair of roamers in tattered robes as they shambled their way in through the arched doorways—one of them from the direction the group had just come. “Where the hell did they come from?” Dynamm demanded of the walls. “We didn’t pass any recently.”

“Who cares?” Klein said. “Just leave them alone.”

They might have been non-aggro mobs, but as far as Klein was concerned, the «Umbral Caretakers» were still creepy as hell. What’s more, he hated the way the hunched creatures with their gnarled, eyeless faces and loose, splotchy skin didn’t act like most humanoid mobs. They didn’t follow some of the rules that made mobs predictable, like having a specific area where they spawned and hung out—Klein actually couldn’t remember ever seeing one spawn. They just seemed to wander around the entire zone... and sometimes they wandered into AOE range at inconvenient times.

Then you had to deal with a Norn. At least those field bosses had been a lot easier than the other clearers had made them out to be—the things were an HP sponge that spewed debuffs, but they didn’t hit very hard if you had a healer who was on the ball.

Which didn’t mean anyone present wanted to end up fighting one—there were chances that just weren’t worth taking. So they all froze in place and simply watched the Caretakers, waiting to see what would happen.

“Guys,” Klein said after a few moments, as the Caretakers continued to draw closer with slithering footsteps. “Let’s back up a bit.”

No one needed any encouragement. Still the Caretakers meandered their way uncomfortably closer to the group; it wasn’t as if the chamber they were in was particularly large. The two mobs stopped roughly in the middle of the room, looking blindly around and sniffing the air.

“This is new,” Harry said neutrally.

“I don’t like new,” Dale said, considerably less neutrally. He pulled off his headwrap just long enough to rub his forehead before replacing it. “New gets you killed. Boring and predictable is better.”

“Zip it, everyone,” Klein said. His friends all fell silent at once; it was a trick he sometimes wished he could pull off when they weren’t clearing. “I’d rather not risk having mommy show up.”

The two Caretakers faced each other, hunched backs bowed and hooded foreheads close to one another. A colorless lambent glow began illuminating the floor immediately around the mobs, and each glow gradually coalesced into some kind of magic circle—two of them, one beneath the feet of each Caretaker.

“Okay,” Klein said, becoming more anxious by the moment, “I don’t feel like waiting to see what they’re casting or what it does to us.” He glanced back at the group and started to raise his hand. “Kunimittz—”

“It’s stopping,” Harry One said quickly.
And when Klein looked back, so it was—as unexpectedly as the ritual had begun, it was finished. Klein looked up at his HUD; based on his cooldowns it had been less than two minutes since the fight ended. “The Caretakers couldn’t have been doing their thing for more than what, thirty seconds, tops? What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted, still watching the mobs as they dispersed through different exits, as peacefully as they’d come. “I didn’t see anything special when you looked away. They just… well, stopped.”

Klein frowned. This zone got stranger every day, and not in an especially enjoyable way. “Issin, you’ve got that aura perk unlocked for your Searching, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m still getting used to it.” Issin blinked, and his eyes glowed again—this time with an iridescent sheen. “Nothing looks off, though. Anyone who’s buffed is glowing the right colors. Nothing else in the room is except our enchanted gear, including where the Caretakers were. And I don’t see their cursors.”

“Good enough for me,” Klein said. The Caretakers suddenly disappearing without a trace was not a new behavior, and it meant they could probably relax. “Speaking of buffs, let’s get those back up. Then I say we continue on our way, and leave the weird-ass Caretakers to their own weird-ass ways.”

Issin traced a finger through the air. “After the next corridor we’ve got that big wooden drawbridge coming up. If we don’t want to clear our way up to the overlook where the switch is, someone’s gotta fly.”

“Woot,” said Kunimittz. “Sounds like I’m up. Matto mezal kevayezul dweren.”

When the Transparency effect had finished spreading across Kunimittz’s entire avatar, Issin gave an exaggerated shudder that rippled all the way down from his feline ears. “I’ll never get used to the way that spell eats away your texture, man. It looks like you just got hit with a phaser set to vaporize.”

“Bzzz,” came Kunimittz’s voice from a faint, translucent silhouette that Klein could barely see in the dim light. “Anyway, I’m wasting duration.”

“Go,” Klein said, waving at the grave-lined passage before them since he couldn’t quite tell where Kunimittz was. “Issin, you too. I remember there being a spike trap after we crossed the bridge, and the release is on this side of it now.”

“Joy is me,” the Cait Sith said with a toothy grin, shouldering his bow and activating his Hiding skill. “Wish me luck.”

Luck was something that seemed to be with them for the remainder of their return trip; for the most part they were past any kind of puzzles or other environmental hindrances and back into the better-mapped sections of the zone. The respawns were on the thin side, and—to everyone’s relief—the Umbral Caretakers didn’t do anything else weird or unexpected when Klein and his group encountered others. At most, if the party couldn’t avoid passing closely enough to alert them, they simply shuffled away until they disappeared around one corner or another—and as far as he could tell, that was the last that they would see of that particular Caretaker.

This, at least, was predictable, boring, and above all safe behavior. Klein was all for environmental flavor, as long as it didn’t come with a gameplay downside. If the Caretakers—most of them, anyway—were scripted to avoid players even when you walked right up to them, he was ever-so-
happy to play along.

When they finally encountered the Cait Sith group, the five of them had cleared space in a long, corridor-like room with high stone ceilings that vaulted to a blunt point. A series of thick pillars ran down the center of the room for support, and the other clearing group appeared to be catching their breath on top of a mound of rubble in a corner where the ceiling had collapsed.

Their off-tank, a lithe orange-haired Cait Sith named Drem, waved at Klein’s group as soon as they came into sight. “Figured that was you coming,” he said.

Klein grinned. “Friendly Bias setting?”

Drem nodded with an answering grin, hopping down from the boulder he’d appropriated. “Yup. All of us. Having any non-Caits we have friended show as green cursors instead of yellow is handy. So what happened?”

“Sorry we’re late,” Klein said, clasping Drem’s forearm when it was offered. “My fault. I tried to take us on a shortcut back through an unmapped area, and it didn’t work out.”

“It’s all good,” Drem said, one of his triangular ears twitching. “Map data is map data. When you didn’t show up at the warpgate after a while, we decided to go look for you. Figured we’d camp this room, since you’d have to come through here.”

Klein looked around at what he could see; the line of pillars in the center of the room blocked his view of most of it. Drem had brought his tanking pet; he caught sight of the «Forest Loper» shuffling its way around the perimeter of the room. He recalled that their archer had brought her tamed Gazer, but he didn’t see it anywhere. “Guess you’ve got all the pets on sentry duty. Aren’t you worried about Caretakers?”

Teel shook her head, jewelry at the end of each blonde braid tinkling. “I have Mochi set to «Passive» mode. Drem’s the same with Popeye. They’ll fight back if Graveworms pop, but ignore non-aggro mobs like the Caretakers.”

“We’ve done this before,” said a white-haired clearer in mage robes who was lounging against a canted block of stone, tail curled around himself. He grinned, too. “It’s a Cait Sith thing. No rest area? Just make our own, and have a pet stand watch.”

“Galleon’s right. Caretakers just run away if anything gets too close, anyway,” Drem said. “So how’d it go? Any progress on the next zone quest?”

Klein nodded, watching as the rest of his group took advantage of the breather by getting off their feet. “We finished «Legacy of Interment» yesterday, so today we turned in to «Undertaker Gheln» and picked up «Disturbing Rumors».”

“Same one we were on,” Drem said. “How—hang on.” He paused for a second, distracted, and sat down cross-legged on the ground with his eyes closed. Teel did the same thing shortly thereafter, and within moments both reopened their eyes and acted as if nothing unusual had happened.

“Sorry about that,” Drem said. “Popeye got in a fight and I needed to make sure it was just Graveworm trash. Carry on.”

Klein at least knew enough about Cait Sith by now to know that they’d just used some skill that let them see through the eyes of their pets. “You were the one talking, man.”

“Oh, right,” Drem said with a laugh, hopping back up from the ground and stretching. “Was gonna
ask, how many Sacs you got?"

Kunimittz snickered. "You wanna maybe think about rephrasing that one."

Drem looked at the Imp for a moment, confused, and then joined the juvenile snickers that were spreading across both groups. "The Graveworm drops," he clarified. "Ass."

Snickering turned to laughter. Klein pulled open his menu, checking his inventory. "Almost a full stack," he said.

"Oh, that’s more than enough," Teel said from her own perch, looking up from counting her remaining arrows. "You only need what, a couple hundred «Undertaker’s Marks» to unlock the next step, Drem?" Their acting tank nodded, and the Cait Sith archer went on. "You’ll get one for each Graveworm drop you show to Gheln. Just turn them all in—since marks count as currency, you won’t be carrying around the extra weight anymore. Gets ’em out of your inventory quick."

"Thanks for the tip," Klein said, although he had a high enough STR that this wasn’t a concern for him.

"We’re meeting up with Thelvin tonight," said Drem. "So tomorrow we’ll raid up and head out at full strength, hit Gheln to turn in for rep marks, and then make quick work of rushing you to the NPC where you exchange those for the key you need."

"What does the key do?"

Drem gestured lazily in the general presumed direction of the zone entrance. "There’s this one locked door back in the first puzzle room. Nothing special, it just leads to a new area branching off the main barrow."

Klein suddenly had a very uncomfortable feeling about this. "Can you show me on the map?"

Drem did. Klein palmed his face.

Dynamm gave him a narrow-eyed look, likely suspecting what Klein had already figured out. "What?"

"That’s the door we were trying to unlock. We were able to get up to the ledge where it leads, but couldn’t get through the door."

There was a long, pregnant pause as Drem and Klein looked at each other.

"In other words," Issin said, trying very hard not to laugh, "Klein took us exactly where we needed to go… just not the way we were intended to get there."

"Hey, don’t feel like you’ve wasted your time too much," Drem said, bringing his hand to his own forehead and shaking his head slowly. "You just told us that the quest we spent most of the day doing was optional for anyone who clears the long way around."

"Thelvin’s going to laugh his ass off," Klein said.

"Nah," replied Drem. "More like, Thelvin’s going to chuckle in a subdued way and turn it into a learning experience." Everyone in the Cait Sith group grinned at that one, even the quiet teen boy with the spear.

Then, in an instant, Teel’s expression of mirth turned to anguished dismay. "What! No!"
All eyes turned to the amber-haired archer with confusion. Jaw trembling, she seemed to need a moment to get control. “Something just killed Mochi,” she said quickly, voice cracking at the end.

“I’m pulling Popeye back,” Drem said instantly, eyes alert. “Sasamaru!”

“Just one cursor other than Popeye,” said the spear boy with the chin-length brown hair and matching ears. “Yellow, coming this way.”

“Solo clearer who thought the pet was a mob?” wondered Dale, as the Cait Sith’s Loper pet bounded around a pillar on all fours and stopped obediently in front of Drem, blade-tipped tail slowly undulating in an idle animation.

“Talk to me, guys,” Klein said to his own group, drawing his own weapon again and slowly turning in place. “Those damn pillars are blocking LOS.”

“I see the same thing,” Issin said, bow in hand and arrow nocked. “Yellow cursor, just the one. About fifty meters and closing.”

“Nothing else moving,” Dynamm added after casting his own spell.

“Prep buffs,” Klein said to him, and then nodded at Dale. “Ward me.”

Beyond the nearest pillar, still at least a good thirty meters away, torchlight cast the shadow of a floating figure in motion. The «Norn Custodian» drifted into view moments after its shadow did, and came to a stop as it turned its head towards both groups. Its legs ended in mist below the knees, and although clad in ethereal-looking metal armor under a flowing translucent robe, it made no sound whatsoever as it moved. The only noise was from the sparks of energy that occasionally twinkled in the air around it, which hinted at the boundaries of its close-range damage shield.

Drem hissed quietly. “Nobody move. It is not aggro to us right now.” Obedience to this advice was total across the two groups.

Now that it was facing them directly, Klein could see the pale skin and shadowed eyes of the woman beneath the Norn’s hood. Slowly, expressionlessly, the Norn raised one of its robed sleeves. A long-clawed gauntlet emerged from it, fingers dangling as if tired.

“Don’t do it, lady,” Klein warned, tensing, although he doubted the thing was scripted to listen. “Stay yellow.”

The Norn turned the hand over before it, palm up as if feeling the weight of a small stone there. “Noruna domuru, uthan.”

As soon as the mob’s cursor turned red, everyone knew a fight was inevitable. Klein didn’t take the time to read the icon for the «Judgment of the Norns» debuff—whatever the hell it actually did; no one had figured that out yet—but he knew it was there, and he was already dashing towards the Norn. “Incoming!”

No sooner than it had finished, the Norn looked directly at Klein and spoke again. “Yabrath tokachi —”

The rest of the words were lost in the noise as several of the clearing group mages started casting their own spells, but Klein saw a new debuff icon appear as his MP—and everyone else’s—started to steadily trickle downwards. “There goes its first MP drain!” he yelled, raising his katana into the charge position for his first taunt as he skidded to a halt several meters from the mob. Just as the crimson light finished building up along the length of his blade, black tendrils lashed out from the
floor and afflicted the mob with Root status.

“You know the patterns!” Drem called out to his own group from just behind Klein. “AOE Silence is coming next; Andry, get that drain dispelled!”

With the mob rooted in place for a short time, the tanks could focus on building hate without having to worry about the squishies in the back ranks quite as much. Every time the Norn lashed out at Klein with its clawed gauntlets, he parried as best as he could with his katana—it wasn’t an ideal weapon for this kind of opponent, but it at least reduced the bleedthrough from blocking, and his buffs kept the loss from the mob’s melee-range damage shield to a level where Dale’s HOTs could comfortably keep up.

Drem, on the other hand, was completely in his element—as an avoidance-type tank, he wasn’t nearly as well-armored as Thelvin or even Klein, but his style meant he could still get right up in the mob’s face and go claw-to-claw with it, evading the counterattacks as he switched out instead of blocking or parrying them. Every now and then the Norn would try to knock everyone away with a huge Wind blast centered on itself, but the Bracing buff on both of the tanks kept their feet planted in the face of the PBAOE, and the Melee DPS team members returned to the fight as soon as they were healed.

Klein knew from experience that a Norn could be a challenging fight for a lone party—especially with only a single healer to keep on top of all the debuffs. But despite the rumors of huge spike damage from the Sylph and Sal clearers, the fight before them went as smoothly as any other. For the combined power of a pair of clearing groups who knew the Norn’s patterns, victory was simply a matter of keeping the status effects cured or dispelled and burning down both of its HP bars as quickly as possible. Even the potent Haste buff the Norn gained after the first bar broke wasn’t enough to turn the battle against the small raid group of eleven, and by the time the creature disappeared in a satisfying blossom of twinkling blue motes, everyone was still above half-HP.

It was an anticlimactic outcome, but not an unwelcome one under the circumstances. Once the word “clear” had relayed itself through both groups, Klein gave another look around and sheathed his sword. “What the hell, man.”


“I don’t know,” said the Cait Sith archer, emotion clouding her words. “Mochi wasn’t in combat, and he wouldn’t have attacked a Caretaker or even the Norn—they’d have yellow cursors.”

“I’m sorry,” Drem said, putting a hand on her arm. “Maybe we can still get a Pneuma Flower.”

Teel reached up and patted his hand for a moment, and then turned away, biting her lip. “Maybe. I’ll be fine. Let’s just go get his Heart and head back to the warpgate.”

Klein didn’t really understand what Teel was going through, at least not personally. A pet was just a mob to him. But he knew a lot of the Caits got attached to theirs, so he kept his mouth shut on the topic. “Hey Drem,” he said after taking a look around at his own group. “Why don’t I have my guys take point? It’s not much further anyway, and it’ll give your people a breather.”

Drem glanced over at Teel’s retreating back, and then nodded once his eyes returned to Klein. “Thanks. I want to do some thinking anyway—see if I can figure out what just happened so I have something to tell Thelvin later.” He slapped Klein’s armored back as he passed.

“We got it,” Klein assured him. “Issin—”
“Yup,” Issin said with a nod, once again concealing his cursor. “Going.”

It wasn’t just the meal—Klein had really been looking forward to getting out of the World Tree so that he could finally PM Alicia. There was no way he was going to admit that in front of the other guys, though, especially after the way they’d had been cracking wise for the last few days. He was never going to hear the end of the whole “mount” thing; his friends would take an inside joke or running gag and beat it to death for months.

At least in here Kunimittz can’t spam me with dank memes and weaponized GIFs, Klein thought.

Even that half-rueful levity vanished as he and his group passed by Teel on their way out of the room. She was sitting on a patch of ground in somber silence with some small glowing object held in her hands, and her companions were obviously giving her space. The weight of Klein’s gaze seemed to fall on the Cait Sith woman; she looked up and gave him a fragile and momentary smile before quickly sending the glowing blue thing to her inventory and rejoining the other Caits.

All of the mount-related jokes aside, there were times when Klein really did have the urge to see what it would be like to have a pet he could ride. He knew there were Cait Sith who had pets that were large enough and trained for it, and he’d even overheard Alicia talking about putting together some kind of mounted clearing group. And he was sure that if he asked her, she’d be happy to find someone to train up a rideable pet for him—although then he really wouldn’t ever hear the end of it from the guys.

But then he looked back at Teel. The woman was obviously putting on a brave face and keeping her eyes on her surroundings, which was good—but even to him, it was obvious that she was still rocked by the loss of her pet. Was that something he really wanted to deal with? Hell, what happened if he got attached to the thing, and then they beat the game? It wasn’t as it’d be a person, like his riaru friends—it sure wasn’t coming with him as anything other than a memory.

Unlike a lot of Alicia’s people, he didn’t really see the point in larping, especially with NPCs or mobs.

To Klein, it just felt like a pointless investment of time and energy that was better spent on real people, and real friendships. He glanced around at the party members with him as the thought passed, and memories leapt immediately to mind, unbidden by anything other than the sight of these longtime companions. The fact that their fae avatars were blended with their real-life features didn’t even strike him as all that odd, anymore—if anything, it just made it easier to connect their faces with who they were in the real world, now that he was used to the differences.

A change in Klein’s peripheral vision drew his attention to his party list; Issin’s HP and MP were nearly full, but the Cait Sith scout had lost a small amount of both. Neither were continuing to go down, which meant that he was neither taking damage nor actively using skills, so Klein reasoned that it probably wasn’t a crisis—yet.

All the same, it wasn’t worth taking unnecessary chances out in the contested zones of the World Tree—especially with no way to directly communicate with each other remotely. “Heads up,” he said aloud, raising one hand.

“I saw,” Kunimittz said almost immediately, stepping forward. “Want me to stealth up and go find him?”

Klein shook his head, glancing over one pauldron at the Cait Sith clearing group to see how far back they were. “I’m not feeling too good about splitting us up any more, but we should still double-time it and check on him.” He cupped a hand and called over his shoulder. “Drem! Scout’s got
Harry One was already slipping his shield back down onto his arm. “Lead the way, man.”

As always, his friends were on the ball. He knew they took their roles as seriously as he did, and at this point he barely had to direct them for routine stuff like this. No scripted pet could do that. No matter how long you had one, or how much rep you grinded with it, it was still just a program—it wouldn’t understand the reasons behind your habits, and it couldn’t anticipate your orders out of long familiarity. It couldn’t tell you jokes, break the monotony of grinding with conversation, or give you shit about your girlfriend.

You could play with it, but it wasn’t a person. The more he thought about it, the less appealing the whole idea of pet gameplay began to sound.

“Let’s go get our friend, guys,” Klein said, drawing his new katana and leading the way.

Yuuki still didn’t have a clear picture in her head of just how this adults-only business worked—and in truth, she’d been deliberately trying not to think too hard about it. But given that she and Asuna had never heard a clearer mention any such thing, or anything even close to it, she reasoned that there had to be a certain amount of secrecy involved—or at the very least that it was something that grown-ups tried to keep from kids, even in this world.

“Not far from the truth in either case,” said Rei once Yuuki gave voice to her thoughts, wind buffeting her short hair around her face. “I was being a bit judgey when I called it a ‘brothel’—truth is, it’s just some players who found a way to make money doing something they like. Services at The Escort Quest are… exclusive, I guess, priced way out of the average player’s reach. No advertising, just word of mouth from one rich client to the next—and I’m guessing most of ‘em probably prefer not to share more than they have to.”

Something didn’t quite add up to Yuuki. “How can Gitou afford this? He didn’t seem like the brightest guy.”

“Well, from my intel, he’s got a gig as PC overseer for the faction jail in Gattan; that was part of the reason his name came up so quick.”

That made even less sense to Yuuki, at least from what little she knew of how things worked. “How is that even a job? The game runs the jails, doesn’t it?”

She glanced over at Rei just in time to catch the other girl’s nod. “ Mostly, yeah. But even using the coded legal system, keeping someone prisoner is actually a lot harder than you’d think. And Fianna says he’s got a lot of coin to throw around—far more than you’d think for a pointless administrative job like that; it’s not like a lot of people get sent to jail, or that there’d be much for him to do even then.”

New information kept coming faster than Yuuki could ask to clarify what she didn’t understand, and it was starting to make her anxious—especially since Rei herself sounded a bit unsure of the whole story. “Fianna? One of your friends?”

“No, just my contact at Quest. According to her, Gitou comes in alone about once every week or two and— mob.”

Both girls drew up sharply from their cautious flight; by this point they had fought enough battles together that clearing low-level trash like the «Parched Gazer Sentinel» ahead of them was an almost
automatic process. Rei’s tonfas were already in her hands, and Yuuki’s body twisted slightly as she surged towards the mob, longsword coming clear of the sheath at her side. No warning was necessary before she flew forward and drew aggro, but she gave one anyway, her voice conversational. “Incoming.”

“So as I was saying,” Rei continued while she joined in, delivering a flurry of blows amidst the angry orange tracers of her weapon tech, “Gitou comes in about once every other Tuesday to see one girl or another, sometimes but rarely two weeks in a row. *Switch.*”

As Rei surged backwards to avoid a retaliatory lash from the Gazer’s tail, Yuuki filled the void with her own weapon, diverting the tail with a single-strike parry and following up with a glowing red slash across the mob’s flank. Chaining that blow into a combo attack, she drove the creature backwards through the air. “I don’t get it. If he brings in that much money, why would they—it sounds like there’s more than one girl, right?”

“Yeah?”

Yuuki’s final sword blow inflicted a brief «Stun» status on the mob; she waited to speak until she was frozen in place by the end frame of her «Pain Driver» technique. “So why would they betray him by tipping you off?”

Rei smiled thinly, looping under the stunned Gazer to approach it from below. “Because not everything’s about money. *Yakke juminu min.*” A moment later, a weapon technique rapidly battered the mob’s underbelly, and black fire briefly appeared in its eyes. “Yours.”

It wasn’t the first time Rei had followed up with that combo attack, and as usual it was devastatingly effective—the few seconds of Blindness status were more than enough for Yuuki to unload a hard-hitting finishing move with a long charge-up, which sufficed to deplete the last of the mob’s HP and turn it into an expanding cloud of glittering particles.

Stowing her weapons and flicking away the underwhelming post-battle Result window, Rei turned towards Yuuki. “Bit of a long story involving personal drama. Short version is, Fianna’s had a change of heart and doesn’t want Gitou around anymore. When I told her what he tried to do to you, she… well, half this plan was her idea. The others don’t know.”

Yuuki didn’t much like the sound of that—she’d been under the impression that the people at this so-called “brothel” were allies in this plan, but working with only one person under the noses of the others seemed like it was asking for trouble. She followed as Rei resumed her flight. “What if they find out?”

“They won’t,” Rei said confidently, once more raising her voice so that the wind wouldn’t carry it away. “But worst-case scenario, we just walk. These aren’t combat players, Yuuki. They can’t hurt us, and they can’t keep us there—or catch up to us if we fly away. Just stick to the plan and we’ll be golden.”

Said plan began with not attracting attention to themselves; Rei and Yuuki both cut their flight about half a kilometer out from the town, descending the rest of the way in a silent, unpowered glide that left no flight trails behind them in the reddening sky. From the air, the building looked no different than any other of its kind in Salamander territory: a single-story structure of pale sandstone, squat and squarish below an unadorned flat roof with waist-height crenellated walls, from which jutted a partial story with a door to a stairwell leading inside and down. Like many NPC residential buildings, it had a small rooftop garden that looked well-tended, but from things that Kirito had said before, Yuuki knew very well that could simply have been part of the level design for this area.
Besides, Yuuki thought, looking like any other building is probably the point.

Their touchdown on the rooftop garden was feather-light, and in response to a PM that Rei had sent to her contact during the descent, an Undine woman of indeterminate age was waiting for them with her hands clasped before her. While Rei and Yuuki dismissed their wings, the woman Yuuki presumed to be Fianna pushed back the hood of her cloak and bowed, revealing rows of elaborate blue braids which ran along the length of her head. They dangled heavily from where they were gathered in the back, the braided ponytail catching the light like chains on a flail made of ice.

“You did well on the timing,” Fianna said in a soft, quiet voice that a light breeze threatened to steal. “Tennyo and Yasumi just left for dinner, so we’ve got the building to ourselves for at least twenty more minutes.”

“Plenty of time to get into position and set up the room,” Rei said cheerfully. “Thanks for going out on a limb for me like this. Gitou’s still showing up tonight, right?”

A slightly uncomfortable look passed across the woman’s sharply-defined features. “He didn’t pay a visit last week, so as far as I know, yes. Is it really true that he tried to…” She trailed off, as if unwilling to voice the rest of her thoughts.

Rei gestured to Yuuki wordlessly.

Fianna looked as if she was going to be ill, her already-pale features blanching. “You mean this is Yuuki? And she’s how old?”

“Not old enough. Sorry, I know the guy was your first client, but that’s just the kind of shit he is. You already had your doubts.”

“I know, but I didn’t think…” She frowned. “Rei, she shouldn’t be here. She shouldn’t even know about this place. We’ve been very careful in limiting our clientele.”

“But she is and she does, and it’s her was wronged. It’s only fair she be here if she can.”

“How much have you told her?”

Rei gave an indifferent shrug. “What she needs to know in order to get this done.”

Fianna gave a heavy sigh, looking at Yuuki with clear sadness and pity. “Yuuki has yet to say anything for herself. Before I let you in, I’d like to hear from the young lady in her own words.”

Yuuki lifted her head to look Fianna in the eyes, since that seemed to be expected. “I don’t want to be here any more than you probably want me here,” she said with perfect honesty. The words that followed were… not quite dishonest, but certainly more aspirational than heartfelt. She tried to put confidence into her voice, tried to sound like an adult. “But it’s something I have to do. I need to face Gitou. I need to make him see the pain he’s caused. And I need to be there for it, no matter what happens.”

She’d intended the words to settle Fianna’s misgivings, but if anything the woman seemed even more bothered than before. Something seemed to occur to her; her head whipped around as she suddenly fixed Rei with a very sharp gaze. “Don’t you dare tell me you’re planning on using this little girl as bait, Rei. If that’s why you brought her, you can turn right around, because we are done here.”

Rei faced the confrontation head-on, refusing to be bowed despite the significant difference in their respective heights. “Chill, Fianna. I’m the bait, just like we originally planned. Yuuki’s going to be
hiding in the closet until I get him to turn off his Ethics Code. You just take him aside, let him think I’m a new girl he’s getting to break in, then find somewhere else to be so no one gets suspicious. It’ll be over in a matter of minutes, and when it is, I’ll send you a PM letting you know it’s safe.”

A worried corner of Yuuki’s mind nagged at her about the direction this conversation was taking; in contrast to her confident words before, she was becoming less and less comfortable the more she heard about this plan of Rei’s. At least Rei has a plan, though—a plan that sounds like it’s going forward whether I’m here or not. Time is running out until whatever happens, happens, and I still don’t know what to do about Gitou. Please, God, there has to be some sort of justice we can have here, some way to make him take responsibility for what he did. Once Rei has him disabled, I’ll tell him who I am, remind him of what happened, and see how he reacts. That’s a start… right?

It was a start, but not a solution, and Yuuki’s head was starting to ache from the internal conflict. She busied herself looking over the rooftop garden while the two women negotiated, trying to divert her thoughts from the uncomfortable dead-ends she kept running into. The plot had looked well-tended from the air; up close it appeared almost artificially so. Each row of plants was perfectly aligned, and although she didn’t really know anything about gardening, everything looked like it bore some kind of edible fruit or vegetable in similar patterns. “Is this your garden, Fianna?”

Fianna tabled whatever she’d been about to say to Rei, eyes briefly darting over to Yuuki, then the garden itself. “No, that’s Yasumi’s; she has Cooking. But she didn’t plant it either—the whole thing was already there when we moved in, and whatever we harvest seems to just respawn on a regular cycle.”

“We done out here?” Rei interjected, fidgeting and looking around as if worried someone might see them on the roof. “We’re losing time before your friends come back.”

Answering only with a wordless sigh, Fianna gave Yuuki one more skeptical glance, and then beckoned them both inside.

Chapter End Notes

I'm late. Sorry about that.

Usually I post a new chapter on the fic's anniversary, which coincides with the in-universe release date of the game. That was yesterday, Sunday 6 November. I wish I could say there was a good reason, but the fact is, I just wasn't happy with the what felt to me like a weak ending for the chapter, and it's weak in large part because writing this particular part of Yuuki's plot is not very pleasant—it's incredibly uncomfortable for me, moreso even than Prophet's segments. The above would've been find for the end of a mid-chapter segment or segue. I ended up needing to split Yuuki's (very long) scene and move the one that followed to the next chapter.

Spent far too long last night thrashing over with it, and ultimately decided that I'd rather not make anyone wait any longer—it's good enough and I'm being picky. Fortunately I am much happier with the remainder of the chapter, which contains some scenes I've been looking forward to quite a bit, particularly Kirito's first meeting with Coper's group.

I have about eight thousand words on the next chapter, and although I'm going to be extremely busy this month, I'm going to try to get out another chapter before the end of
the year, if not November. No promises, but we'll see what I can make happen.

Gratitude and best wishes to all of you. As always, let me know what you think.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"The «Options» menu is the starting point for players who wish to customize various aspects of Alfheim Online. The menu itself is further divided into sub-menus such as «Player Options», «Interface Options», and «Gameplay Options»—each of which contains a categorized list of flags and settings for how the player interacts with and perceives the game. Here players can personalize their HUD (q.v. «UI Elements: HUD»), change the way the cursors of other players appear (q.v. «Cursors»), define who can send them private messages or social invites (q.v. «Messaging»), toggle whether friends and party members can see their location (q.v. «Map Settings»), set their preferred punishment for harassment violations (q.v. «Anti-Harassment System»), as well as many other options that affect a player's gameplay experience in ways large and small..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Options Menu»

9 May 2023
Day 185 - Late Evening

Although she was outwardly calm by force of effort, Argo's state of mind could almost have been termed rapturous. And as Raptures went, the one going off in her brain could very well have lifted her to the sky if there hadn't been a roof over her head—as well as people watching who might've judged her in awkward ways for being that silly. As she sometimes did when extremely excited, she rocked back and forth slightly as she spoke and her tail quivered behind her.

It's all connected, her brain practically screamed in the background, over and over again in various ways as the bits and pieces continued to fall into place in their respective patterns. And then, because she'd come to a point in her explanation where it fit, she said as much out loud. "All of it, somehow. Hel is Loki's daughter in Norse mythology, and I got an eyewitness account of Loki trying to get GM powers to change something vague about 'mortality' for his 'daughter', who he said was getting fidgety waiting for it to happen. Meanwhile, Loki wants us all stuck in Alfheim to be his playthings, and he thinks Sasha's work on majutsugo would give the players too much of an advantage—so he gets Prophet to try to take her out and hooks him up with Hel, or vice-versa something-something. It all aligns."

"Which also explains why Prophet is so eager to see clearers distracted from their work," Asuna put in after the outburst rant ran out of steam, with Kirito nodding along.

"Right," Argo agreed, sitting up a little straighter. "Loki, Hel, or both of them have sold him some line to make him think he can stay in here forever as long as the game isn't cleared. Doesn't matter if it's true or not—it's enough to get him to kill for it."

"And that's all the more reason for us to get back to clearing as soon as possible," Asuna said. "The only way he can actually slow or stop the clearing efforts is if we let him—either by getting distracted hunting for him, or by letting ourselves get ambushed. If we just stick together and keep doing what we're supposed to be doing, he's going to have no choice but to come to us on our terms."

"She's right, Argo," Kirito added immediately. "This is all good information to bear in mind for later, but I don't know that there's much we can actually do about it right now. These are major quest NPCs from Norse legends—they're not just gods in lore, they're actual gods in terms of the role they're playing in a video game. The game isn't going to make us fight them head-on right now."
They're tools to advance the plot and narrative that Kayaba wants, *when* he designed them to."

Both of Argo's ears had their full attention on Kirito now; she knew his understanding of game development and even Kayaba himself was far deeper than hers, and she'd been wanting to get his input. "You think the best thing we can do, with multiple independent NPC gods interfering with players the way they are, is **nothing**?"

"Not exactly nothing," Kirito allowed, voice slowing as he seemed to think through every sentence carefully before committing it. "For one thing, we don't know just how independent these NPCs really are. Being able to make flexible conversation is one thing—that's a function of the language system. Any NPC could probably do that, with enough resources allocated to them. But we don't know if they're actually fully autonomous."

"Explain."

"They could still be doing exactly what Kayaba scripted them to do, even triggered manually by him if he's out there watching and waiting for the right time. It would make a lot more sense for him to do that, than to simply give NPCs a free hand to use GM permissions whenever they want to mess with the players and game mechanics."

The memory of watching Skarrip heatedly argue with the *Heimdall* entity leapt immediately to Argo's mind, though of course she couldn't tell Kirito and Asuna that it had been Skarrip having that argument at the time. And they still didn't know—couldn't know—about Loki replacing Skarrip, to whatever extent that had actually happened. "I think they've got a fair bit of leash, but prolly not total autonomy. Remember what I said about overhearing Loki arguing with someone named Heimdall, trying to persuade him to do the thing?"

"Yes, and I remember who you said that was supposed to be: some kind of watchman of the gods, right?" At Argo's nod, Kirito went on. "Which just back up what I was saying, as well as something that I've suspected all along: Kayaba still has a hand in his game. Everything you said about Heimdall makes me think back to all the articles I read about ALO's back end. There's supposed to be a master daemon process of some sort that runs all the others, and the public descriptions of what it was designed to do fit your description of Heimdall to a tee."

Kirito wasn't done; he tapped his finger firmly on the table in front of him suddenly as a thought seemed to occur to him. "That's where all the GM powers have to be concentrated—locked behind Kayaba's elevated permissions in this 'watchman' process, and handed out to these 'gods' on an as-needed basis if they meet whatever requirements he set up. It makes sense: he wouldn't have to spend all his time GMing things himself or administering these NPCs, approving every request to use their major powers."

"He could just get on with playing the game," Asuna said.

"I dunno about playing it," Argo said doubtfully. "He'd never have time to do that if he was really keeping an eye on everything. He could watch a lot of video feeds at once if he was somewhere private, mebbe. But he can't do that if he's in a party, and he can only actually be in one place at a time anyway."

"Isn't that probably why he has these god-NPCs, then?" Asuna replied. "If he's got them to go out and play these major roles, and this watchman to keep an eye on them, wouldn't that free him up to go be a player himself?"

In their brief initial meeting so many months ago, Asuna had not given Argo any particular impression of intelligence. She hadn't really seemed necessarily *dumb*, either—just a noob. But
although Argo had been skeptical of Kirito's insistence on including Asuna, she had to admit that she'd underestimated the Undine girl—who was very much living up to both her own reputation of competence and Kirito's window-transparent interest in her. *No, you never woulda fallen for some dumbass larper or filthy casual, would'ja Ki-bou?*

Still, there was one detail that nagged at her during Kirito's otherwise-decent theorizing. "But if he's worried about an AI god using GM powers, I don't see why it matters which AI god is making the final call. Either way you're still giving too much power to a program, with no human oversight."

"Not necessarily," Kirito said. "The *Heimdall* process probably has a lot more resources assigned to it—put simply, it can crunch a lot more numbers a lot faster than even a god-tier NPC because it's allowed to use more memory and CPU time."

Asuna's face was blank. "That's putting it simply? I mean, I'm not dumb, I get the general idea, but…"

"Don't get hung up on the how and why," Kirito said a little too hastily. "What it means is that Kayaba can put more trust in the decisions of a top-level process like Heimdall because it's able to account for more variables and... for lack of a better word, think a lot harder than Loki or Hel are allowed to. That's why ordinary NPCs have simple scripts—they only seem to get more complex if the game thinks their role or the situation justifies it, because that requires allowing them to use up more resources. I've seen even ordinary throwaway NPCs adjust like this more and more."

Before Argo could speak, Kirito added, "And I'm sure there's still human oversight. Those requests have to be logged somehow, and I'd bet that Kayaba has a feed from that log he can see anytime—if he wanted to code it that way, he could've just had them show up as notifications in his HUD. I'm sure you've seen Alicia's faclead UI, Argo—you know what kind of crazy windows she can open to dig into obscure faction data. You think Kayaba has any less visibility?"

A few beats passed with only thoughtful nods exchanged among the three of them. What Argo was hearing didn't do much to reassure her, but having those insights was better than being ignorant of them. Kirito seemed to have a head of steam now, and he resumed speaking while she mulled over the implications. "All of this is telling me that we're right to get back to our clearing and leave Loki to do whatever he wants for now."

*Whatever he wants?* Argo substituted a neutral sound of query for the protest that first came to mind; Kirito went on. "Look, behind all of this, in one way or another, is Kayaba. Maybe he's not making their decisions for them, but there's just too much game structure built around these gods to think that he didn't intend them to exist. They're a part of the system, and a part of his plan in some way. And Kayaba's plan is ultimately for players to try to clear the game, or else why bother with all of this in the first place?"

Argo's tail thumped against the back of the chair as she rocked in place; she tried to make it still itself and had little success. "You think that Loki isn't actually going to try to *stop* us from doing that?"

"No, no, no," Kirito said, shaking his head quickly. "I think he'll do whatever he can—*within his constraints*—to stop us. I think he'll *try*, just like a mob or a boss will try to stop us from progressing. That's what Loki and Hel and their schemes are, from a game design standpoint—they're a barrier to progression, a challenge for players to overcome. Which means that there *will* be a rational, knowable solution to whatever their puzzle or challenge is."

"Right now that challenge seems to be trying to get us to destroy ourselves," Asuna commented, cutting into her long silence with words that betrayed a slight edge. "Maybe we should start by not giving him so much help with that."
"You're not wrong there," Argo said. "I think what this whole thing really comes down to is that Alfheim was just getting too damn peaceful and stable for Kayaba's liking, and he wanted to shake things up a bit. The Treaty was mostly keeping things under control, leaderships hadn't changed much in months, and we were starting to make some major breakthroughs in progression. It's his hand I'm seeing in all of this, directly or indirectly."

Argo hopped out of her chair for a moment and started pacing; she caught the gazes of her companions following her awkwardly as she did. "Think about it, he's been screwing with us for months—trying to stir up shit between the Sylphs and Sals, especially, since that's the low-hanging fruit, but one'll get you ten he's been up to a lot more than that." When she turned to look, the expressions on Kirito's and Asuna's faces were hard. "What, you think it's a coincidence all this came to a head around the same time as the mob respawn changes and the clearing of a major boss? 'Cause I sure don't."

"Alfheim Online is and always has been a PvP game," Kirito said, leaning back until his shoulders touched the arched wood of the chair. "Kayaba wants us to compete. As much as I hate how he's doing it, it makes a kind of sense that he'd respond to a lengthy period of relative peace by trying to instigate conflict between players—even offer incentives for it."

"What about the other clearing groups, though?" When Argo and Kirito both turned to Asuna's voice, she elaborated. "We need to tell them something. At the very least I'm going to need to brief Jahala and Diavel on the existence of two major quest NPCs and their capabilities. And I have to warn them about what Prophet wants to do, even if only so that we know to be on our guard. We owe it to the other clearers to warn them, too."

At Argo's raised eyebrow, Asuna looked up at her with a stubborn expression. "I hope you're not thinking of trying to sell that information to them, Argo. What was it you both just got done saying about how Kayaba's basically trying to divide us? The right way to respond to that is for us all to pull together as much as possible and share what we know."

Argo sighed. She'd been intending on distributing a certain very basic amount of information to all the clearing group leaders for exactly the reasons argued, but surely there was room for offering an additional premium level of detail. "Nah, don't worry, I'm gonna make sure they all know the essentials, and it's not like I can stop you from telling your group whatever you know. And like I said up front, there's things I've held back to protect some of my sources anyway."

A subject change seemed in order, and fortunately Argo had one already in the forefront of her mind. There was more than one reason she'd needed to meet with Kirito face-to-face, and she was now fairly certain she'd gotten everything she would from him about Prophet and Hel—for now, at least. She sunk back into her chair and faced both ears towards Kirito. "And speaking of sources, I got some fresh rumors coming my way about what you've been up to in the last 24 hours, Ki-bou."

Kirito stiffened almost immediately in his seat. "Of course you know. I was going to bring that up."

Asuna, however, reacted with confusion, turning to him. "Know what? Bring up what?"

Face reddening slightly, Kirito launched into an impressive display of stammering that contrasted awkwardly with the confident, forceful argument he'd been making just a minute prior. "I—I meant to tell you too, there just hadn't been time, and I was going to talk to both of you here…" He glared at Argo as if he was her fault for raising the matter before he was ready.

Argo shrugged, easing back in her seat and slipping a piece of candy into her mouth. She actually knew almost nothing about this little detail other than the fact of it…and given who had been involved in Coper's ascension to the leadership, and how, it was something she really needed to get
straight from Kirito himself. "Alright, this oughta be good. Spill it your way, then."

Kirito sighed heavily, fanning a hand gently in Asuna's direction in appeasement and speaking directly to her. "I guess by this point I really shouldn't be surprised that Argo's heard at least something. I'd been meaning to bring this up once we were all done with everything else, because it sort of affects everyone in a way, and I could really use advice from both of you."

That seemed to have been the right thing to say; Asuna's expression softened a bit and she cocked her head curiously. "What's going on, Kirito?"

His face was almost frozen in stone as he replied. "Coper is trying to put together a proper Spriggan clearing group—one that'll make other factions want to work together with us. He says they'll be required to uphold the Treaty…and because of that, he asked me to be his lead clearer."

Well, well. That sure answers a few things. Like why the hell you'd come within bowshot of even thinking about working for someone like Coper. Argo's thoughts raced into high gear. But it raises a whole pile more questions in the process.

Asuna seemed too stunned to react, and Argo could take some pretty good guesses as to why. Bet that's not the best news you've heard all day, she thought. Can't imagine you'd be too keen on your boyfriend working for some of the same people who used to hunt yours, no matter how good his reasons.

A similar thought seemed to be on Kirito's mind, he held Asuna's gaze as he continued. "I agreed because I think this is the best chance I'm ever going to get to be able to make things better for the Spriggans—for all of us. You've been telling me for months to change Spriggan politics, and now I've been offered a chance to do exactly that."

When Asuna didn't respond immediately, Kirito went on; Argo's ears twitched forward as she leaned in. "That doesn't mean I'm blind to what kind of people I might be working with. Coper's given me his old group to build from, along with a list of potential recruits. I've met his group, and… I don't really know who I can trust, but I'm pretty sure there's some I shouldn't. I'm not going out in a party with them until I know more about them—and what they might've done."

When Kirito's eyes turned to Argo, she was ready. "Thought you might be asking, Ki-bou. I gave you the nutshell before—they're all mercs, former privateers, that sort of crowd—but for what you're doing, you need to know which are which, and more about them. So why don'cha start by telling me who, exactly, you've been saddled with… and I'll give you whatever I got on them."

"What's your price?" Kirito asked straight away. "Remember, you offered to sell me info on them before."

"I did," Argo admitted. "And I do have a price. But it's one that you're gonna be happy to pay."

"You seem pretty sure about that."

Argo snorted. "That's 'cause I'm pretty sure you don't want the Spriggans joining forces with the Sals and Imps…and that's what's eventually gonna happen unless we work together to stop it."

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As much as Asuna wished she didn't believe what she was hearing, it didn't surprise her one bit. Kirito, however, was gaping. "The Salamanders had Yoshihara killed? You're saying Corvatz is responsible?"
"No, and that's important to understand. Someone in the Salamanders did. Someone who wants to work with them, but not yet."

Confusion reigned in Asuna's mind. "That doesn't make much sense, Argo."

Argo sighed, tail thumping repeatedly against the back of her chair. "Look, again, there's things I can't tell you—names of sources and stuff. What I can tell you is that a Sal helped Coper pull off his coup. They want the Sals to pull the Spriggans into their little empire, but they don't want Corvatz getting the credit for it—they don't like the way he's running things any more than we do. So that means—"

Kirito interrupted her. "That means whatever alliance they want to happen has to wait until someone other than Corvatz gets elected."

Argo nodded, fangs peeking over the edge of a slight smile. "And until then, Coper's on his own. Which means you got some time."

"And now," Kirito said, "a position that might let me use that time to stop him from teaming up with the Sals... somehow." An uncomfortable cloud fell over his face, and he looked down at the table. Asuna could well imagine the additional weight that had just settled on his shoulders; she felt a twinge of resentment towards Argo for helping put it there.

Let's be fair though, Asuna reminded herself quickly. You were going to put some of that weight there, too, after Diavel—

The recollection of exactly what Diavel had asked of her stopped Asuna dead in her tracks. She had to have made some kind of noise; both of the others turned to her as her lips parted slightly.

"Asuna?" Kirito asked, concern in his voice.

Asuna giggled softly. She knew as she did that it was a completely inappropriate moment to do so, and that she was going to have to explain herself... but she just couldn't help it. She covered her mouth with one hand, trying not to find the ridiculous irony of the situation as funny as it was.

And it really was far funnier to her than it ought to have been.

"I think you broke her," Argo said unhelpfully. "Can you undo that?"

"No," Asuna said, waving her free hand vigorously as she began to lift the other from her face to reveal a thin smile. "No, no, please, I'm so sorry... it's just..."

Thankfully, both Kirito and Argo gave her a moment to gather herself without making it worse with their wits. Asuna used that moment well, straightening her back and composing her face. "I'm sorry," she said again, this time speaking directly to Kirito. "We were in such a hurry that I didn't get the chance to tell you this, either. While I was on my way here from Nissengrof, Diavel sent me a message and asked me to talk to you, Kirito, by name. He knows we've been traveling together, and he wanted me to ask you to put him in contact with the new Spriggan leader in the hopes of mending fences. Asuna's smile returned in full now, and cocked to one side. "Don't you think it's even a little bit funny how that worked out?"

She could tell that a part of Kirito was still trying really hard to be weighed down by all the responsibility that had suddenly fallen upon him. He was fighting the smile, but she could tell it was there—and eventually it began to win. "It is a little bit," he admitted, to her relief.

Argo snorted. "Hilarious like a tanuki train wreck," she said. "But okay, okay, this actually kinda
works. How serious is Diavel about this fence-mending thing? What's he trying to do, specifically?"

"Well," Asuna began a bit more sharply than she intended, "for a start I think he'd probably like to
have people try not attacking each other. Our patrols won't be trying to drive off Spriggans anymore,
and he'd like to lift the ban completely... but first he wants to know more about what to expect from
Coper, and he can't simply message him directly."

"In other words," Argo said, "he wants Undines to be friendly with the Spriggans, but needs
assurances your people are gonna be safe, so he asked you to help because he knows you're traveling
with a well-known Spriggan he trusts."

"That more or less sums it up," Asuna agreed.

"And that's where things get complicated," Kirito said. "Even if he didn't have his own plans with
the Salamanders, Coper's the leader of a divided faction. The way he figures it, the only people he
can tell what to do are the ones who agree to follow his rules. And he's not even really wrong about
that."

"I've seen a copy of his little speech," Argo put in. "Nice way of splitting the baby—clearers and
other people who work for him obey the Treaty, everyone else is on their own. I'll tell you right now
it's probably not gonna fly with most of the leaders."

"Maybe not," Kirito said. "But it's what we have to work with, and Diavel asking Asuna to reach out
can only help with that." He gave her a smile, causing her heart to beat a little faster and her avatar's
face to grow warm. It was just as well that he turned his attention back to Argo right away; she was
sure she was blushing for no good reason. "Anyway, I need a clearing group in the first place before
it even matters. And speaking of which, you were about to give me details about Coper's people
before we got distracted. Let's start with the Spriggans in his party. What can you tell me about
Kramer?"

Asuna's spirits had been lifted somewhat by the brief intermission of humor and good news, but the
reminder of what kind of people Kirito was going to be working with had the opposite effect. Her
lips returned to a thin line as she listened to Argo.

The Cait Sith girl, however, chewed at her lip with one fang out for a moment before answering,
looking as if she hadn't expected the name. "Why him? He's kinda... well, he's nobody, to be honest.
He's grouped with Coper, but isn't a regular part of the legacy group, so to speak. All I really have on
him other than that are some ads he's posted on the LFG walls. The usual stuff—tank clearer for hire.
Lots of competition for those spots, but he's obviously doing well enough to keep up."

Nothing really sounded amiss there—Asuna had never needed to advertise for a party herself, but
doing so was a completely ordinary thing for most players who weren't part of a regular group or
circle of friends. "He wasn't a privateer, was he?"

Argo shrugged. "Can't swear to you that he wasn't, but it's pretty unlikely."

"Why?" Kirito asked, mirroring the word that immediately shot through Asuna's mind.

"Because the Sals never paid him. His name isn't similar to any others I know, and it doesn't come up
anywhere in their records from that time."

Asuna was sure that her voice was filled with the skepticism she felt. "Records which for some
reason you have?"

"In a manner of speaking," Argo said with frustrating vagueness. "I don't have hardcopies, but I've
seen some of them, and I know who has them now." Asuna started to open her mouth, and Argo waved it off. "It's not important. Point is, I'm pretty sure I'd know if he'd been officially employed by them, and he wasn't. That doesn't mean that he never partied up with anyone who was."

"Then maybe I'm asking you the wrong question, Argo," Kirito said with unusual directness. "Who, in his circle of friends, was?"

Argo hesitated for a moment, and in that brief pause Asuna became certain they weren't going to get the whole truth out of the info broker. The question Kirito was asking was incredibly broad, but it was absolutely fair—and it cut to the heart of what they needed to know. She thought she could almost see the other girl deciding what to tell them and what to hold back, or even what to charge for it. "Argo," Asuna said, investing the name with a hint of warning.

Surprisingly, that prod got results. "Look, Coper has a pretty wide circle of friends, but if you weed out everyone he just happened to duel or be seen with, what you end up with is about half a dozen names."

Kirito nodded. "There were five party members I met—they're the group that I'm 'inheriting' from Coper. Their names were Kramer, Xorren, Burns, Yar, and Mentat." He carefully spelled out the Latin-alphabet letters in the names; the spellings of some sounded odd to Asuna. "Were any of them privateers?"

Argo paused for a moment again; this time Asuna wasn't sure what to make of it. "Other than Coper himself? Yar and Mentat."

Kirito frowned. "The two Salamanders?"

Asuna's reaction was a bit less restrained. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Because you don't really like Salamanders in general," Argo replied, giving Asuna's rhetorical sarcasm a straight answer. "Understandable, but people oughta be aware of their own biases."

"Excuse me?"

To Asuna's chagrin, Argo moved right on from that comment, seeming either heedless or unaware of the surprise engendered by its rawbluntness. "In this case, it's kinda justified though. Yar's a known quantity—and not in a good way. More than a few Sylphs who want him dead. If you're looking for places to trim the rancid fat from Coper's group, he's where I'd start."

"What about Mentat?" Kirito pressed. "He actually seemed kind of decent. I didn't meet him for long, but I was thinking of him as someone I might want to keep."

Asuna was having none of it. "Kirito! You heard what she said. He was a privateer. Isn't that enough to send him packing?"

"No," said Kirito, stunning her with not only the word but how quickly it came. But then he backed down a bit from that absolute. "Well, maybe. But maybe not, too. Argo, what exactly does it mean that his name comes up? Can you tell me anything else about him?"

"It means that the Sals paid him coin for services rendered, on the books. It doesn't say what those services were exactly, but he's named in a doc used to keep track of privateer hires. Farming and clearing groups were tracked separately." Argo sighed. "Look, when the Sals took Everdark they conscripted anyone who had useful real-world skills. Some of those folks were put to work at menial jobs like record-keeping, and a few of them were super-OCD about it."
"So you've got some insight," Kirito summed up, "but it's not necessarily the whole picture."

"Pin pon, Ki-bou. That's why there's some weirdly good records to work with for some things, and nothing for others." Another pause, this one clearly calculated. "I said I'd give you whatever I had. I didn't promise you'd like it."

"Those aren't your only sources, though. I know you and your contacts get a lot of info from LFGs."

"Which only helps for someone who actually needs to go Looking For a Group. If you already got a regular party, a big friends list, or usually run solo, you're not gonna be doing that very often."

"Mentat's also a healer," Kirito said with a glance at Asuna. "They don't usually have trouble finding parties."

Asuna was torn. It wasn't just the uncertainty of not knowing for sure. After all, Kirito didn't have to party with anyone he decided not to—and he had to know that, no matter what promises he'd made. Argo's information didn't have to be sufficient for a murder conviction… just enough to decide whether or not someone could be trusted to watch his back and not cause problems. That trust was the key element—something that both Diavel and Jahala had impressed upon her early on, the former with welcome advice and the latter by example.

That example hasn't always been a good one, Asuna admitted to herself. Jahala has never treated me or Yuuki with anything other than respect and camaraderie; it was a different story when Kirito joined the party and Kuradeel kept needling him. But bad examples can teach good lessons, too—the lack of trust between Kirito and the others was a huge weakness in our clearing group that day, and it could've gotten someone killed.

It hadn't all been Kuradeel's fault, though he'd started it, nor entirely Jahala's in failing to shut it down—Asuna had seen Kirito get really passive-aggressive in situations where he felt obligated to go along with something he didn't like, and some of the needling had gone both ways. It was something he'd really have to keep in check if he was going to try to lead his own clearing group, and Asuna wondered if he was even aware of the tendency.

There's a lot I'm worried he doesn't know about what he's gotten himself into. Kirito's just not a people person, and now he's volunteered himself for a job where you pretty much have to be. He'll do his best at it, like he does with everything else—but what happens if his "best" isn't enough?

Abruptly Asuna realized she'd let her thoughts get away from her; she'd missed Kirito's next question and the beginning of Argo's reply. "—a bit of a character, from what I hear. Likes to larp but nothing serious; word is he's dependable when it counts. Interesting thing about Xorren is that I'm pretty sure he's an avid hot-swapper. On paper he literally calls himself—and I'm not even kidding about this—"

"Let me guess," Kirito. "Red Mage."

Argo snorted. "He told ya, huh? Yeah, that's a thing. Anyway, what I'm saying is he openly lists the utility skills he knows on his LFGs, and to run them all it'd take at least twice as many slots as he oughta have at his level."

Now that's interesting, Asuna thought to herself. She and Yuuki had both tried keeping a few utility skills on the side before, like «Detect Traps»—swapping them in place of an active utility skill that leveled quickly, and leveling up the new skill to a multiple of 100 so that it wouldn't decay any further while unequipped for a long time. But it was a practice that Jahala quietly discouraged, primarily because as skills rose higher they leveled much more slowly, and it became increasingly impractical to risk losing even a single point in a skill while it was swapped out, and low-level skills
became less useful against leveled content in the World Tree.

Still, some roles don't need as many skill slots as others in order to be effective. Tanks need every slot they can get, but if he's melee DPS, he probably has at least one to spare. And if he's a mage, I guess it depends on how many elements he prefers to use.

Kirito seemed to be thinking along the same lines, he nodded as if he saw no issue at all. Then, to Asuna's surprise, he grinned. "Xorren actually reminds me a bit of myself in the early beta. I was never much for crafting or gathering, but anything for survivability or dungeon hacking? I probably equipped it at least once. At least, until I figured out that was hurting my build."

Argo laughed and bared fangs. "I was just thinking that, Ki-bou. Remember when you decided to try out «Lockpicking» by breaking into that NPC's home?"

"That was bogus," Kirito asserted with startling suddenness. "I figured it was going to be the usual kind of minigame—turn the pick until you find the sweet spot, pop the lock. I've been doing those for years in games; I could do it blindfolded."

"Well it was the dumbest thing I've ever seen you do," Argo said through aborted snickers. "The NPC guards were right there."

"It shouldn't have mattered! I was Hiding, and that lock should've been open in seconds."

"Shoulda, shoulda. Look on the bright side: you got to submit a bug report about getting teleported to jail with an active DOT on you in a safe zone."

Kirito looked over at Asuna, who was having a very difficult time keeping from laughing herself despite the gravity of what they'd just been discussing. Composing herself, she glanced down at her hands and cleared her throat. "But Xorren wasn't a privateer, right?"

Argo shook her head, getting right back to business. "Nah. Don't think so, anyway. He goes way back with Coper and Mentat, though, so keep that in mind.

Asuna's eyes brow creased in disappointment at that particular detail. "I haven't forgotten for a moment," Kirito said. "But in case you didn't know, they supposedly didn't start working together until the Sal raid on the first gateway boss. I'm not ready to write someone off just because they know or partied with Coper—if I was, this whole discussion would be pointless."

"Fair enough," Argo said. "No, far as I know, Xorren never signed up as a privateer. He's actually pretty off-the-grid for the most part other than group seeking, which usually means someone who solos a lot."

"Then that just leaves one name," Kirito said. "Burns."

Argo's lips thinned slightly. "Burns is… complicated."

"That sounds like you have a lot to say about him," Kirito observed, sounding curiously prepared for the answer.

"I do," Argo admitted. "But I'm trying to decide how much of it you need to know."

"How about I save you the trouble?" Kirito said, leaning forward.

The Cait Sith's girl's blink of surprise was slow and profound, all the more striking for the careful neutrality of the rest of her expression. "Go on."
"Of all the people Coper took with him to confront Yoshihara, the only one who didn't fit was Burns —the rest were all Spriggans, and fellow candidates at that. I know his rep as an assassin, but when I told Coper as much, he said Burns only came along to lock Yoshihara down with debuffs."

"So?"

"So why? That requires Coper to put an unbelievable amount of trust in an Imp. Why would Coper take that risk for someone who isn't part of his faction—for that matter, isn't even a regular part of his group, someone he only knows through another party member? It didn't really make sense to me until you told me that a Salamander set up the hit on Yoshihara. Burns used to be a clearer, didn't he?"

Argo was saying nothing whatsoever in response to Kirito's words, which strongly suggested to Asuna that he was on to something. "We both know Coper is lying about what happened when Yoshihara was killed. I think whoever this Salamander is, the one who wanted her dead—probably someone connected with the Sal clearing groups, if I had to guess—Burns is their catspaw."

"All right, all right," Argo said, holding up a hand. "I was just gonna tell you to cut Burns loose and leave it at that. Because you're right—he's smack in the middle of everything that's going on with Coper and their mutual Salamander friend—and he doesn't need a weapon to be dangerous. He's obsessed with PvP, does it for money and fun, and those are both about as goddamn confirmed as you're gonna get on anything in this world." She blew out a breath between pursed lips. "Whatever Coper's scheming, Burns is key to it, and I wouldn't trust him any further than I could throw the World Tree."

Kirito nodded slowly, expression quickly fading towards grim. "I see."

"But he wasn't a privateer either?" Asuna asked. She was beginning to feel like a broken record, but... at the same time, that was a question that carried a deep and painful weight for her. She and Yuuki had nearly been killed more than once by raiding parties during their early soloing, and the names of those Undines lost to privateering were recounted often by those who sought never to forget their fallen friends.

"Not as far as I know. Again, take that for what it's worth. He's in this up to his hood."

"All right." Kirito's responses were getting noticeably more terse; Asuna could tell that he was trying to juggle conversation and pensive thoughts at the same time. He repeated himself; this time taking a deep breath. "I'm going to need some time to think about what to do. Now, there are a bunch of names I want to run by you—basically, I'll forward you the PMs Coper sent me with Spriggans who volunteered to either join the new clearing group or help out somehow."

"Can't give that one to you for free either," Argo cautioned. "It might take me a while to run down whatever there is to find on them."

"I'm sure," Kirito said. "That's fine, but I need as much as you can give me, as soon as you can get it. There's a lot I don't know about running a clearing group, let alone a raid—and the more experienced people I have to work with, or alternatives to Coper's hand-picked people, the better."

"In that case, lemme get back to you—chances are I'll need to reach out and get primary sources on some of these players, especially if they're randoms who just tossed their names in a hat. This time tomorrow I should—"

"Sooner," Kirito said firmly. "One way or another, I need to be back to clearing tomorrow. If I don't get that info by midmorning, I won't get it until later when I'm out of the World Tree."
Argo made a flatulent noise with her lips. "Ki-bou, you want intel that's three things: quick, thorough, and for a big list of people. Pick any two of those things, and I'll say yes."

"But—"

"I'm awesome, not superhuman," Argo said with finality. "Hashtag-deal-with-it."

Kirito blinked. "Did you just verbally hashtag me?"

Asuna managed to suppress all but the lightest snicker. Argo's expression, on the other hand, might well have been handcrafted by ALO's level designers and set as an Immortal Object, save for a quick twitch of her large triangular ears.

Jokes notwithstanding, it was clear enough to Asuna that they weren't going to get anything else out of Argo immediately, and Kirito seemed to realize the same thing; he didn't push any further. The info broker stood unceremoniously and beat her fingers at the air as if quickly navigating a menu, and Kirito took the hint and did the same. "I'm forwarding you those PMs now. Soon as you have anything—"

"I'll let you know," Argo finished. She gave Asuna a quick glance aside, then addressed Kirito again. "In the meantime, you oughta mebbe make use of the resources you have. You've got more of 'em than you think."

When Argo was gone, Kirito turned to Asuna with a look of mild befuddlement. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Although there had been no collusion between herself and the Cait Sith info broker, Argo had—knowingly or not—given Asuna the perfect opening. She smiled, and scooted her chair closer to Kirito's. "I think I have an idea," she ventured. "Let's talk."

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It was time for Yuuki to hide.

Just before shutting the closet door, Rei stopped and peeked at her around the edge of it. "Look, Fianna says Gitou isn't one for wasting much time, but it still might take me a minute or two to talk him into disabling his Ethics Code."

"Wait," Yuuki said urgently, sticking her foot in the door. "I still don't understand why that's necessary."

Rei gave the intruding foot an annoyed glance before replying. "Well, he'll be expecting it for one, and he'll probably get suspicious real fast if mine's not already off. But more importantly, it puts him in a vulnerable position where I can tie him up without risking a harassment violation. Now, I can't really tell you not to listen, because you need to be ready for my signal… but, well…"

It was hard to be certain with the young woman's head of hair backlit into a pink halo by one of the room's wall sconces, but Yuuki thought Rei's expression turned momentarily uncomfortable; she tilted her head curiously and opened her mouth to inquire what the other girl was thinking.

Rei, however, sighed and seemed to find her words first. "Just try not to listen too hard, if you know what I mean. I'll disable him as quickly as I can."

It seemed to Yuuki that there was going to be no mistaking an ambush for small talk. "He's probably going to make a lot of noise about that anyway. Do you need me out there before then?"
"Give me a sec to cover him up first," Rei said quickly. "How long Paralysis lasts will depend on his Poison Resist, but I'll hit him with Silence too, at least long enough to get him secured. I suppose casting'll stand out, so yeah, let's call that our signal."

Cover him up? It didn't take Yuuki more than a moment to realize what Rei meant by that, and she wasn't having any of it. "Wait, you didn't say anything about him being naked. I'm not okay with this, even if you're just doing it to make it so you can tie him up."

"Yuuki, it's too dangerous to leave him—"

"We're clearer, Rei—at least, I am, and you can easily keep up with me. Whatever we're here to do, we can do it just as well by holding him at swordpoint."

Rei looked increasingly exasperated with Yuuki's last-minute misgivings, but put up only a token resistance after a nervous glance at the door of the room. "Fine, forget it, we don't have time to argue about this. Let's just bait the hook. You'd better hope he plays this smart, because I won't hesitate to put him down if he doesn't."

Once the door was closed, the darkness that surrounded Yuuki was not absolute for someone with an Imp's eyesight—but in that enclosed space, it made little difference. It's a good thing I'm not scared of small spaces, Yuuki thought to herself as she leaned against the back wall, trying to get comfortable. A dim light seeped in through the chest-height panel of slats in the door and cast alternating bars of shadow upon her shinguards, but the louvers were fixed in place and angled in such a way that Yuuki couldn't see anything in the room through them from above. Even when she knelt and peered up through the half-centimeter gap between the wooden slats, all she saw were the tapestries that partially covered the sandstone ceiling and lent a visual warmth to the room.

She could hear Rei's footsteps receding in the direction of the room's oversized bed for a few moments, then stop. In their stead came the faint sounds of light movement; Yuuki's eyes went to her HUD and counted around ten seconds of this before she heard the metallic creak of springs, then the rustling fabric of the bedsheets.

There followed a time of silence that was long enough for Yuuki to give up on watching the clock; more than a minute had passed before her thoughts turned uncomfortably inward. Gitou is going to be here soon. What's my plan?

It was no idle question. Any minute now, Gitou would walk through that door and expect Rei to start doing... adult things with him. It wasn't going to go the way he thought it was—but Yuuki wasn't so sure she herself knew what to expect either, despite the plan's simplicity.

So Rei disables him. Then what? Do we just let him go when we're done? If we do, what about the other people here? He's going to know that someone betrayed him. How does that work out for them?

When she thought it through that far, the answer was obvious. What the women in this building were doing with the Ethics Code clearly wasn't any kind of intended profession in the game, like being a mage or blacksmith—there were no game mechanics to support it, and the transaction was entirely built upon a foundation of mutual trust. Fianna had betrayed that trust by bringing Rei and Yuuki here... and no matter what they did now, Gitou was going to know that she had.

Yuuki bowed her head for just a moment. Please, God, a little help here. Help me see what I need to do so that things turn out okay. The other people who live here don't deserve to get hurt.

Help me work this out so that nobody has to die tonight.
But if God had guidance for her, He wasn't sharing it in any obvious way, and despite thrashing the thoughts around in her head in search of a solution, Yuuki still didn't know what to do. Anxious from the uncertainty, she thought about voicing her concerns aloud again before Gitou arrived. She got as far as parting her lips, then stopped herself from making any sound by clapping a hand over her mouth. *Dummy! He could walk through that door at any second, for all we know.*

In the real world they might've been able to hear his footsteps coming, or even his voice—but only very loud sounds would pass through a sealed door in the game world. If either she or Rei were speaking when that door opened, it could blow everything. Yuuki kept her silence and tried to be patient—tried to work on calming her nerves.

Without eyes on her clock it was hard to tell exactly how long, but to Yuuki it felt like only a few heartbeats before her discretion was vindicated by a sharp double-rap at the door. The sound sent ice down her back, breaking up her thoughts with a rush of equal parts fear and excitement. *This is it,* she thought.

A moment later that door squeaked open, immediately admitting the sounds of outside conversation: "...thing I've always liked about you girls; you take care of people who take care of you. I get that. Loyalty is everything, whether it's business or personal—someone does right by me, I give it right back, know what I'm saying?"

Up until that moment, Yuuki had still harbored a seed of doubt that anyone could've really found Gitou as quickly as Rei's sources had. It had just seemed a bit too easy, and while she certainly didn't think that Kumiko or Rei were lying or trying to trick her… nothing said that they couldn't have simply been wrong.

But the voice. It was his voice she was hearing now, exchanging a few last words with a nervous-sounding Fianna from the direction of the doorway. Yuuki felt imbalanced, dizzy; her brain was sounding alarms telling her that she was falling backwards, despite the feeling of her shoulders resting firmly against the back of the closet. It was too much.

"You little bitch!"

Her eyes flew open; she was in darkness, not Everdark. As vivid as they'd seemed, those words hadn't been spoken just now, and the memory was not a recent one; she recognized the signs. Even if she hadn't had a panic attack before then, the time she'd spent talking with Kumiko had given her plenty of ideas for how to see one coming, identify the triggers, and try to ride it out when something set them off. *Don't hide from it!* Yuuki told herself fervently amidst the maelstrom of her panicked thoughts and resurgent memories, echoing Kumiko's advice. *It will bury you if you let it. Admit that you're scared and freaking out—it's normal to be scared, and the more you fight or run from it, the more trying to fight will freak you out even more.*

Yuuki focused on her breathing instead of the memories, forcing her avatar to go through the voluntary animations of drawing air into her chest, concentrating on the task of holding it and then letting it smoothly out. Though Gitou's voice was conversational, every word he spoke felt like a dagger in her brain, delivering emotional poison in a spike of fear that shot down the back of her skull until the sound ceased. She refused to cry out or curl up into a twitching ball, refused to let the memories control her. It was still better than it had been when it first started hitting her, and better still than it had been the last time, when Kumiko had saved her from an unexpected public meltdown.

*I need to focus on what I'm here to do,* Yuuki thought fiercely. *Listen to what he's saying. It's scaring you because it reminds you of when you were too weak to stop him from doing whatever he wanted. But that's not true now: you're stronger than him. Way, way stronger if all he's been doing is sitting in his home city running a jail—like you'd have any trouble stopping him now!*
And stopping him is what you're here to do. But to do that, you have to know when it's time to come out. And that means that you have to listen to him now, even if it's scary.

The door to the outer room shut and locked with a pair of clicks, and Yuuki realized she'd had her eyes squeezed tightly shut again as well. She forced herself to open them, then let her trembling hands fall slowly to her sides in a relaxed way instead of clenching them to try to make them stop shaking. A man's footsteps fell heavy but muffled as they crossed what she guessed to be the plush rug that had lain in front of the bed. "Well, aren't you a cute little thing," said Gitou's voice after a beat, sounding satisfied about the observation. "Fianna says your name's Mei?"

"That's right," said Rei, who sounded to Yuuki as if she was pitching her voice a little higher and softer than usual. "Meiku, actually, but I go by Mei."

"Pretty name for a pretty girl," Gitou answered. "Fianna definitely wasn't lying. And she says I'm your first client?" The excitement and anticipation in his voice turned Yuuki's stomach and threatened her ability to cope, but she kept forcing herself to go through the motions of breathing, continuously reminding herself that she and Rei were the ones in control of this situation, not him. This wasn't the past; she had the upper hand this time. And it was getting easier to deal with by the moment, as no immediate danger presented itself. This will pass, she told herself, putting her attention back on Gitou and making herself listen to what he was saying. Focus on what you have to do. Wait for the signal.

"—Fianna said, but I wanted to make sure. I'm sure she told you I can easily afford what you're asking for this… privilege."

"I'm impressed," Rei said smoothly. It was beyond Yuuki how the woman managed to stay so cool and keep acting the part. "I guess you must be a clearer or a treasure hunter or something?"

It had been a pretty good leading question; Gitou chuckled and took the bait. "No, but I'm a lot more important than you think, Mei. Treat me well, and I'll take care of you just like I take care of Fianna. Maybe I'll even hire you both for an evening—that could be fun." There was a momentary pause. "What do you think of that, sweetie?"

"I think," said Rei in what Yuuki thought sounded like a very deliberate, controlled way, "that for tonight I want you to myself. You don't have anywhere to be anytime soon, do you?"

Gitou's belly laugh was sudden and loud, and it startled Yuuki enough to send another smaller surge of anxiety rising. She tried to let it flow over her instead of struggling against the current, leaning back against the wall of the closet and letting her chest rise and fall with breaths that were unnecessary, but helping more than she'd thought they would. "Hot damn, you're eager. I like that. Don't worry, I've got plenty of time if you do."

"Good," Rei said. "Then might I suggest we dim the lights and get a little more comfortable?"

"You really don't waste any time," Gitou said, pausing suddenly. "Are you sure this is your first time, sweets?"

"First time in the game," Rei said; Yuuki thought even she sounded a little uncomfortable for a moment. "But not my first time, if you know what I mean." Another beat, then: "Fianna taught me how things work in here, though."

There was an edge to Gitou's voice then that Yuuki found exceptionally unpleasant for no reason she could identify. "Oh, she did, did she? Well, well… you're going to have to tell me all about that."
"I will," Rei insisted. "But for now…"

"For now," Gitou said, interrupting her, "let's have some fun."

*Come on, Rei,* Yuuki urged silently, still trying to find islands of relative peace as her turbulent thoughts sorted themselves out and insisted on bringing old memories to the fore. *What are you waiting for? Get the drop on him, do your thing and—*

"Agh—what the fuck—?!"

Rei's voice cut through Gitou's sudden exclamation of outrage. "Yatto yojikke nushlavu jan!"

The obstruction gave way to Yuuki's shoulder as soon as she turned the latch, flinging the closet door open hard enough to loudly impact the wall. For a moment she was almost afraid to look up, but when she did, Gitou—mercifully—was lying prone on the bed, fully clothed. The icons for «Paralysis» and «Silence» hovered next to his head on his status ribbon, and his expression was apoplectic. That wordless rage turned to wide-eyed shock a few moments after he saw Yuuki.

Rei, on the other hand, was completely unclothed to a degree that she had never once seen anyone in the game achieve, even when bathing in private; Yuuki immediately dropped her eyes back to the ground out of embarrassment. A discarded dagger lay on the rug at the Imp woman's feet, and she was working both hands in the air as she re-equipped her armor and weapons, each appearing on her in quick succession. While she did, Yuuki kept her longsword trained on him in a threatening way, hardening her expression into cold neutrality as best she could.

"Okay, creeper, listen up," Rei said as she leaned over the bedside and pressed the blunt point of a tonfa against his throat, undisguised loathing replacing the sultry tones she'd used only a minute before. "Here's how this is going to work. That Silence will wear off soon, but the Paralysis poison won't, and you've got two high-level players willing and able to one-shot you. You're going to shut the fuck up while this nice girl here asks you some questions. When she's done talking, you're going to tell her what she wants to hear." She used the tip of her weapon to raise Gitou's chin, returning his silent glower with a smile. "And if you're very polite and we like the answers we get, maybe you don't become a statistic in Corvatz's boss menu."

Without another word, Rei took two steps back and bowed to Yuuki, indicating Gitou as if he was a gift at a surprise birthday party. "He's all yours." Then Rei really seemed to look at Yuuki's face, and worry briefly creased hers. "You okay?" she mouthed.

"No," Yuuki said out loud. "But I will be." *He can't move,* she reminded herself, although there and then it felt like a hope as much as a reminder. *He's got a Paralysis icon on his ribbon, probably from a status tip on that dagger Rei had hidden. He can't hurt you. He can't do anything right now.*

Emboldened by those thoughts and trying to ignore the receding waves of anxiety, Yuuki stepped past Rei. She took up station at the bedside, *Penitent Wrath* held at ready. Taking the time to really look at Gitou, she was surprised to find fear on the older man's face. The Silence icon began to flash, and Yuuki let herself draw strength from the knowledge that he was afraid. It occurred to her that her hands were no longer shaking; she wasn't sure when that had happened.

When Yuuki spoke to him for the first time in six months, the first words out of her mouth were not a question. *You recognize me.*

Gitou answered as if she'd asked one anyway. *"I run the jail in Gattan,"* he said, a little too sharply. *"Do you know how many Imps I recognize?"*
Yuuki felt a stirring of anger, and tried not to let it get away from her. "You're lying. We met once before, a long time ago. It wasn't from the jail in Gattan, and we both know it. It was the jail in Everdark—the one I sent you to. You tried to kill me."

She could see Gitou tensing up; it made her grateful for both the poison and the weapons drawn on him. But after a few moments, to her amazement, he actually smiled. Just a little, and it was closer to a grin or a smirk, but she still couldn't believe what she was seeing. "Times change. I should thank you, actually."

Rei seemed about as stunned at this response as Yuuki felt. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" the woman demanded. "And wipe that smile off your face, douchebag."

The smile faded, but only from his mouth; there was still amusement in the crinkle of his eyes. "When you sent me to that jail, I missed out on the rest of the action at Everdark, but I ended up with a lot of time to think. And I decided that no one, and I mean no one, was ever going to take me out of the game like that again."

"Getting to sit out the game for a day doesn't even come close to being what you deserve for what you tried to do to her," Rei spat, becoming visibly angry. "But go on, keep digging your grave by explaining how that makes you the victim here. She wouldn't have been able to do that to you unless you'd crossed the line first."

"You weren't there," Gitou replied to Rei without looking at her, and far more calmly than she had. "You don't have the first idea what I really wanted or did." His attention returned to Yuuki. "So yeah, after that I studied the game docs. Talked to the guys who helped Kibaou lock people up—that was before anyone understood how the prison really worked, you get me? They had to get real creative. Met with some crafters and other smart people, too. Put it all together and you know what I learned, sweetie?"

"That you're an asshole pedophile?" Rei said.

Ignoring her again, Gitou glanced between the brandished weapons that were still menacing him, and when the flashing Paralysis icon finally vanished from his ribbon, he flexed his fingers and leaned forward just a little with an ironic twist to his mouth. Yuuki's weapon swung towards him again; his eyes trained upon the sharp tip before returning to meet her even sharper gaze. "The same thing it looks you two did, with this neat little trap of yours: namely, that the system's not perfect. There are ways to capture and hold someone if you really need to, and it turns out that's a real useful skill in this game." His grin broadened. "So in a way, everything I have now? Is all thanks to you and your quick little fingers. You look like you've turned out pretty amazing, yourself—I'd say it worked out well for both of us."

The butt of one of Rei's tonfas struck Gitou in the side of the head. It hadn't been a particularly strong blow, but the amount of HP that it took away from the lower-level player was alarming—and he wasn't the only one to react to it that way. "Rei!" exclaimed Yuuki suddenly. "You said—"

"I know what I said," Rei snapped, burning with a harshness of expression and tone that stung. "You've still got right of first refusal on this monkey's fate. You ask me, he doesn't sound all that sorry, and his attitude's making me stabby. You want to get this over with?"

"Wait!" Yuuki said quickly, turning back to Gitou and trying to get ahold of herself. Although her growing anger had been surprisingly effective so far at suppressing the surges of panic every time the situation threatened to trigger unwanted memories, it wasn't helping her to keep the situation from escalating—let alone find a way to forgive Gitou and move on.
Of course, Gitou wasn't exactly helping her there either; Yuuki wondered if his smug defiance meant that he'd already assumed they were planning on killing him no matter what he did, or if that was just the kind of person he was. She forced herself to breathe again, and lowered her weapon as she stepped closer, voice calmer than she felt. Perhaps talking to him reasonably instead of threatening him would get better results. "You tried to kill me, Gitou. Worse, but let's start with that. You tried to kidnap me, then you tried to kill me—and my sister died."

"Did she?" Gitou's shoulders twitched in a slight, half-hearted way. "Sorry to hear it," he said with very little apparent sincerity. "She was still alive when you sent me to jail, though. I didn't touch her."

"I know," Yuuki said, her free hand tightening briefly into a fist and the other gripping her sword with renewed strength. "I didn't say you did. But my sister, Aiko, is still dead. She was the only family I had left in the world, she was stronger and better than me in every way..." The memories, for a moment, almost became too much; she could hear her voice cracking near the end there, could feel unwelcome tears beginning to well in her eyes despite all her efforts at suppressing them. "Aiko was one of the most caring, beautiful souls God ever gave to this world, and she's gone because of what you did, Gitou."

"Look, kid," Gitou said quickly. "That sucks about your sister, but like I said, it wasn't me who killed her. Maybe it was that dumbass I was with, or one of the others in the party—I really don't know; I haven't seen most of those assholes since then. And I haven't killed anyone, ever—that's a fact."

"Maybe not," Yuuki said, forcing strength into her voice and swiping a hand across her face to clear it of tears. "But you started this whole thing when you tried to kill me. Don't you feel responsible for what happened at all?"

"You won that one, you're alive, and until tonight I hadn't seen you since—so no, not really," Gitou said with blunt honesty. "What, do you keep a grudge against everyone you fight? Am I supposed to be sorry for trying to capture or kill you back then? That was war, and things in Everdark got pretty crazy. Really is a shame about your sister, but I honestly couldn't tell you what happened to her or why, because I wasn't there." He gave another partial shrug. "Don't know what more you want from me, but you pulled off a hell of an ambush here—my boss and I could put a couple of solid operators like you to good use. You just need some polish."

Rei stared at Gitou. Yuuki was not gaping openly the way her companion was, but she was no less incredulous, and it took a moment for her to respond. "Are you seriously trying to hire us?"

"Why not?" Gitou said. "I got no axe to grind with you two. I told you before: I've got a useful skill, and a benefactor who recognizes that. And my skill's not the only kind he needs. Sometimes people need to be dealt with, but non-lethally—and unless my guess is off, you both set this up because you think that, too."

"You're half-right," Rei said coldly.

Gitou went on as if she hadn't spoken. "This was personal, I get that—I respect it, even. But now I'm talking about a big opportunity for both of you. I can guarantee you good pay for serious work. You girls aren't guilded, but you're both obviously grown-up enough to execute this op all by yourselves, so what do you say about going pro? Join us."

The mention of a guild drew Yuuki's attention to Gitou's status ribbon. In all the commotion she hadn't taken any special notice of the detail before, but he did have a guild symbol: a stylized white hourglass against a midnight-blue background. And he had mentioned a benefactor, a "boss"—
someone who was presumably funding whatever it was that he did. He didn't seem the least concerned about his helpless predicament anymore, either.

Join us.

Panic suddenly flared again in Yuuki—but this time, it was backed by reason. "We have to go," she said urgently, giving the room a rapid glance around as if she might get some kind of early warning to validate her suspicions.

"What?" Rei said, eyes wide with alarm. "What happened?"

"We have to go now!" Yuuki said even more stridently. She glanced at the locked door and then at the heavy drapes covering the window on the opposite wall, considering avenues of escape.

As if in answer, a staccato hammering sound came from outside, in the direction of the building's front door. Muted but unmistakable, the noise drew the sudden gaze of every person in the room towards the curtained window, and the smile returned to Gitou's face. "That'd be the party of guildies that escorted me here from Gattan this time—those new mobs are almost as much of a bitch as you are, Rei. I'd be thinking real hard about taking that offer right about now."

Rei seemed to understand what was happening without the need for Gitou's byplay; she looked at Yuuki. "The hallway. Go to the roof, now."

Yuuki threw one last desperate look at Gitou, feeling the last illusion of control slip away from her. She whirled towards Rei. "But I—"

"It's Balthazar, open this door!" demanded a male voice from somewhere in the street outside, loudly enough to propagate indoors. The shout was accompanied by a continued loud pounding, as if on a door or wall.

"In here!" Gitou suddenly shouted, a full-throated yell that echoed off the walls and startled Yuuki into a defensive posture.

That instinct saved her—he had to have used some kind of quick-ready ability to bring his sword to his hand, and the shrill whine of a fast shortsword technique carried over his yell while a bright red flash streaked towards her. The blow keoned off the edge of her own sword just as she brought it up in a snap reaction; despite the increased priority and effect from his skill usage, *Penitent Wrath* had the greater weight and she took minimal blocking damage.

"Yakke juminu min!" Rei spoke the incantation in rapid-fire syllables; the last one had barely left her lips when a quick strike from one of her tonfas hit Gitou in the shoulder. The dark spellfire of Blindness status erupted in his eyes, and as one hand flew up to his face in reflex, the other girl leapt up and over his wild, unaimed swing.

There was a brief, horrifying moment while violet energy built up and surged noisily around Rei's tonfas, and then she—and they—descended like an angel of death. The System Assist brought down both weapons in an overhead strike that took Gitou between the eyes. His status ribbon had already been yellow; the blow delivered such overkill damage that his HP bar instantly disappeared, combusting him into a red-orange ball of flame that remained hovering in the air.

*This wasn't what I wanted!* Yuuki thought. She wanted to cry out, but found herself unable to voice even that dishonest, childish protest in the face of how little time they likely had. She'd known. On some level, some part of her had always known it would come to this. And still, desperate for closure, she'd kept telling herself that she would figure out a plan. That God would give her the
answers she needed. That she'd come up with something when the moment came.

That it would all work out… somehow.

Lies, Yuuki thought. Or if not lies, at least self-deception, which really wasn't any better. Lying isn't free. Someone always pays a price for sin, and now that's exactly what's happened.

Several long seconds passed while Yuuki stared with shame and horror at the churning red Remain Light, knowing full well that she could do nothing about it. "Good riddance," Rei said with one last look at what was left of Gitou. "Come on, we've gotta get out of here right now." When Yuuki didn't respond after a few more beats, she put her fingers to her lips and whistled; the sound was painfully loud in the enclosed room.

"Sorry!" Yuuki said, shaking her head vigorously. Snap out of it! Deal with this later!

Balthazar's voice now came from the hallway just outside the door, even more loudly. "They were in this room just a minute ago!" shouted the man. "His HP's gone, get it open! Now!"

Rei leapt across the bed and grabbed at the heavy black curtains covering the window, tearing them aside and clawing at the latch. "Come on!"

The door to the hallway swung open with a bang; Fianna spilled forward into the room and fell to her knees. A pair of well-armored Salamanders stumbled over her as they forced their way past, as if they'd been pushing the entire time. One stopped himself with the butt of his halberd, and his eyes went wide below his raised visor as he saw the Salamander Remain Light above the bed, growing smaller by the second. He pointed at Rei and Yuuki as the former threw the window wide open. "They turned on PvP in this room! Get them!"

The other Salamander had a longsword, and he was already rushing at Yuuki without needing to be told. His opening slash was freehand, not a sword technique; Yuuki let his blade glance off of Penitent Wrath at an angle while she sidestepped the blow, then shoulder-checked the larger man hard enough to send him sprawling towards the closet from his own momentum.

As her attacker scrambled to get back on his feet, Balthazar turned the spiked tip of his polearm towards Fianna. "Can you rez?" he demanded.

Fianna shook her head quickly, braids flying. "No, but I—"

"Lying whore! You set this up!" As he spoke, the man plunged the end of the halberd deep into her chest with a savage thrust, jamming her up against the wall and pinning her to it with her feet dangling. Her dying scream faded into echoes as an orb of blue flames erupted around the end of his weapon.

Then Yuuki could spare no further attention for the injustice of Fianna's fate. As crimson energy began to race along the sword wielded by the Salamander she'd deflected, she recognized the opening stance of «Howling Octave», a brutal combo that she had no way of dodging in this enclosed space. She adjusted her own stance to compensate. If she could soak the blocking damage from the first barrage of thrusts, she could take advantage of the pause and parry the next—

In all the commotion she hadn't heard Rei's voice, but the violet-black projectile that streaked past Yuuki's shoulder had to have come from her. It impacted the ground just in front of the Salamander swordsman and blossomed instantly into a blast of light and noise; Yuuki felt it wash over her without effect.

"Come on!" Rei yelled from the window.
Gitou's Remain Light was gone, and Fianna's was a foregone conclusion—neither of them could rez. Yuuki wasn't afraid to give her life for a good reason, but she knew there was nothing at all that she could accomplish by throwing it away there and then. The AOE had momentarily blinded both Salamanders; she took advantage of the opening that provided and brought out her wings.

But Rei dismissed hers as soon as they were through the window, dropping back to the ground and racing towards the nearest intersection on foot. "No flying yet!" she said sharply before jinking around the corner and weaving past an NPC-driven wagon. Yuuki was right on her heels, albeit losing ground slowly; they took a few more evasive maneuvers like that before Rei's wings materialized on her back again and shot her forward. They skimmed the ground at street level, weaving past NPCs and staying low well after they left the town's Safe Zone.

It wasn't until they'd put some distance between themselves and the town that they stopped, and by that point it was necessary to deal with a collection of trash mobs they'd been training behind them. This fight was nothing like the efficient, relaxed work of dealing with solo mobs and small linked encounters earlier that day—this was an all-out burn against more than half a dozen mobs of different types, with more adding themselves to the battle as they caught up with the two players before reaching their tether limit.

If the mobs had been level-appropriate, their deaths would have been a certainty. Even with the mobs outleveled considerably it was still too many, and without Yuuki's pinch-tanking or Rei's skill with Dark Magic debuffs, she was sure that either alone would've been overrun. It left her with no time to think, no time to do anything except move from one target to the next until several seconds had passed with no sign of any more adds. "Is that all of them?"

When she turned, Rei's eyes were glowing green. "Don't see any more cursors. No players, either, and I doubt those two meatheads have Hiding or Transparency." When she dropped Searching a few moments later, her eyes were still wary. "I'm not sticking around, though. We both need to get out of Sal territory and lie low. For now that includes Everdark, too."


"Kumi is Hayden's second," Rei said. "If she's not already out clearing, she's exactly who the monkeys will go to first when they come asking questions about us. She'll ask them for names and descriptions. They won't have names, and they only saw us briefly, so she'll have no trouble blowing them off."

"They're not going to believe her," Yuuki pointed out.

Rei shrugged, activating her Searching again and glancing back in the direction of the town. "Doesn't matter what they believe," she said. "They have no proof and no names. All we have to do is disappear for a while. Things will chill when the Sals get bored, and I'll send you a message if I get a lead on any of your other targets."

"Targets. The choice of terminology was not lost on Yuuki. "I'm not so sure I want the help," she said slowly. "Did you ever have any intention of letting Gitou live?"

"What the hell are you talking about? We were gonna run, and he jumped us!" Rei's fingers tangled in her dark pink hair out of frustration; she looked like she wanted to start pulling at it. "Look, was there a million-to-one chance that this monkey wouldn't turn out to be a complete piece of shit who had it coming? Sure. But that wasn't the way to bet, and even if it was, he forced our hand when his friends showed up. You shouldn't have turned your back on him."

Tears sprang to Yuuki's eyes again in response to the surge of guilt. "I'm sorry," Rei said. "But that's
just how it played out. Sure, we could've probably subdued him non-lethally—cut off his arms and legs, something like that. Once he pulled a weapon, though, he signed his death warrant. And the guy deserved to die anyway."

"Who are you to decide that he deserved to die?" Yuuki demanded, finally finding a voice for the deep misgivings within her. "For that matter, who am I or anyone else?"

"Are you kidding me?" Rei looked, and sounded, genuinely shocked with disbelief. "Were you listening to this guy when he was talking in there? You sent him to jail for trying to kidnap you, and the creep reacts by trying to learn how to do the same thing to someone else—just without the risk of consequences. And from what he said, he succeeded! Do you understand how fucked-up that is, Yuuki? He could've had other victims out there—victims who didn't get away like you did."

The idea hadn't occurred to Yuuki, and now she almost wished Rei hadn't spoken. "No…"

"Yes!" Rei insisted. "He was talking like he didn't just know how to kidnap people in the game, he made a job out of keeping them that way. And now he can't do that to anyone else… ever again. Don't you dare shed a tear for that bastard, Yuuki. We just did the world a huge favor."

"You don't understand," Yuuki said, tears flying as she shook her head hard from side to side. "If that's true, you might've just killed the only person who knew where he's keeping those people prisoner… or how to set them free. Killing him might've been one of the worst things you could've done."

She knew she'd hit the nail on the head when Rei stopped and said nothing further, mouth hanging slightly open. It took the older girl some time to figure out a response, and Yuuki took no pleasure or comfort in the procession of aborted words that rose soundlessly to Rei's lips but went no further. "I… I can… make some inquiries. Look up players who went missing, but aren't verifiably dead. He wasn't acting alone, Yuuki—I doubt this was some private project he had going on the side. Maybe I can check out this guild of his. Like I said, I'll PM you if me or my people come up with anything else that can help."

"I don't know," Yuuki said, eyes still downcast in shame. "I need some time to think. No matter how we try to justify it, we just did a terrible thing."

"Sorry," Rei said, reaching out to gently touch Yuuki's shoulder. "I thought you'd be happy. Maybe bringing you along was a mistake."

Yuuki looked down at the ground. "Maybe. Even if I thought killing Gitou was a good thing for the world… it wasn't worth the price Fianna paid for it. I'm ready to die if I need to. She wasn't."

Looking even more ill at ease than before, Rei's eyes went to the hard-packed desert floor. After a long pause, she spoke. "I'm sorry about what happened to her," Rei said quietly, though it was hardly necessary to lower her voice. "I didn't expect Gitou to come there with friends, of all places, and once they showed up… there wasn't anything we could've done for her."

The apology felt sincere, but there was a glaring hole in it that even Yuuki could see. "Then maybe we should've thought about that before using her to murder someone in her home."

"Using her?" Incredulity rose with Rei's voice again. "Have you forgotten that the honeypot trap was her idea? That she wanted to set it up so that this monkey wouldn't come around any more, one way or another? Fianna didn't deserve what happened, Yuuki, but she was using us just as much as we were using her."
Rei glanced back towards the town, attention drawn there. Yuuki turned as well when she saw the troubled look on the other Imp's face, following her gaze to the five neon-red tracers that began to slowly spiral out from the town's safe zone like the rough edges of flower petals. They were bright against the evening sky, and hard to mistake for anything else. "Flight trails. Looks like an expanding search pattern—probably the rest of his party finally showing up to help look for us, seeing if we went to ground nearby."

"Which we did." The words felt numb in Yuuki's mouth; a kind of shock seemed to be settling on her in the wake of the evening's violence. "If we stay here, there's a good chance they'll find us. But if we take off, they'll see our flight trails."

"Another reason for us to part ways for now," Rei said. "You're heading for Arun anyway, so if I head south, they'll have to split their party to chase both of us—and I don't think they'll do that."

"Why not?"

"They just had a party member die because they split up, and now they're under-strength," Rei replied, fingers moving swiftly through her game menu as she switched gear. "They have no idea what our actual numbers or abilities are; for all they know we could have a large guild waiting to ambush them. I think they'll be reluctant to weaken themselves even more."

That made sense to Yuuki; she nodded and gave her own gear a quick once-over. "Okay. How do you want to do this?"

"I'll take off first," Rei said. "That has the best chance of getting most or all of them to chase my trail. Soon as they give chase, make your own break whenever you're ready."

Despite her mixed feelings about Rei and her way of doing things, Yuuki still considered her a friend—and the idea of leaving her to the Salamanders didn't sit well at all. "What about you?"

"I can conceal my cursor, and you can't. I won't have any trouble losing them with this much lead." Rei made a face when she glanced toward their pursuers again. "Yeah, we do." Yuuki met the other woman's eyes a few moments later, trying to find the right words for what she wanted to say. "I want... I mean, despite how things turned out... I appreciate you trying to help me, Rei. I won't say no if you or Kumiko find out something you think I should know, but I need you to understand: I don't want to get anyone else killed. No matter who they are or how much you think they deserve it. If you bring me a plan, you'd better bring me one that has another way out."

Rei nodded after a few moments of thoughtful silence. The faintest smile that Yuuki could imagine came to the woman's face. "Okay. I'll let you know what I find." She opened her arms in what seemed like a clear invitation to hug; Yuuki hesitated for a beat and then reciprocated, closing her eyes as Rei's arms wrapped around her. It was a momentary comfort that she hadn't really had since parting ways with Kirito and Asuna, and Yuuki felt mildly conflicted about it. Friend or not, she still wasn't sure that Rei was even a good person—not after what had happened at *The Escort Quest*—but she quickly reminded herself that that wasn't really her judgment to make, either. Only God knew what was truly in someone else's heart, and that was a reminder she felt she needed more now than ever.

They had lingered long enough to produce the expected anti-harassment pop-up; both Imps swiped their hands automatically at the air as they each took a step back. "Safe journey, Yuuki. Time for me to go be bait again." Rei tensed for a moment as her wings appeared on her bank, and then launched herself southwards into the air at a shallow angle.
Yuuki watched the light show just long enough to confirm that all five crimson flight trails veered off in pursuit of Rei's bright purple tracer, then began the long trip back to Arun.

Kirito knew, from long hours of study and self-discipline, that sometimes there were unpleasant things in need of doing—and that putting them off didn't make them any easier. But knowing that was so didn't make it any easier to get on with doing them, either. He had been trying, for the better part of half an hour, to work himself up to meeting with Coper's group—with his new clearing group.

It had to be done; they were expecting him to show up any minute. The morning sun had already made its first appearance of the day, peeking around the rough edges of Yggdrasil's twisted trunk as it rose above the eastern mountain ranges and cast long shadows across the city in the bright interlude before the canopy interceded to provide Arun with its long midday shade.

The warpgate itself was too close to the trunk to get any direct sunlight, but Kirito still found himself dancing between sunbeams while he took every other step on the way up the hill. This was a busy time of morning, when clearers began to gather in small groups and full parties near the warpgate, occasionally hurrying or delaying so as to avoid crossing paths with others who might not be entirely friendly. He saw more than a few familiar faces, albeit faces known to him only from afar; as he reached the landing near the warpgate itself, he even thought he caught a quick glimpse of Klein with a cluster of Cait Sith before a blinding blue light sent them away.

The people he sought, however, were in one of the park-like side areas that branched off from the paved dais of the warpgate; the sight of a Spriggan, Imp, and Salamander all in one spot was unusual enough to draw Kirito's eye. Xorren was the first to spot him; the Spriggan utility mage grinned widely and hopped in place as he tried to be seen past the much-taller Mentat, waving vigorously in a way that drew the attention of the other two players with him.

"Dude, there he is. Hey, Kirito! Was wondering if you were gonna show up."

Kirito was finding it difficult not to like Xorren's goofy enthusiasm; an unforced smile rose to his face. "There a reason I shouldn't have?"

Burns turned away from Xorren and faced Kirito, wearing a twin to the other's grin. "You mean aside from expecting me to own you?"

Xorren wasn't having any of it; he stepped up to the Imp's side. "Who says you get to fight him first?"

Burns extended a palm and a fist in a clear invitation to janken for it. Xorren responded in kind almost immediately.

Kirito had known the question was coming as soon as he'd agreed to meet up with Coper's group the next morning. He'd been expecting the challenge—a follow-up to the duel proposal Burns had extended the day before. It was even fair to say that he had a plan for dealing with it, a plan he had still been refining even as he made his way up the steps towards the warpgate at the base of Yggdrasil. His equipment was in top shape, fresh from Lisbeth's overnight care and sitting at 150% durability. He even had backup plans in place. He was, as far as he could be sure of such things, in the right frame of mind to meet this challenge in good spirits.

Yet still, these other players found new ways to surprise him and put him off-guard. Kirito's mouth moved as he made sounds that came somewhat close to signaling his actual level of confusion before
finally finding words. "You're kidding, right?"

Xorren jerked his thumb towards Kirito without averting his eyes from Burns. "He thinks we kid."

"He does. It's really cute."

While the two other mages fought an epic hand-gesture battle for the right to face Kirito in combat, Mentat sat down on a nearby bench and carefully leaned his staff against his shoulder, never taking his hands off it. "You're both showing off." He then gave Kirito a sympathetic look. "They're showing off," the Salamander mage repeated. "They amp things up anytime there's new meat to break in. Usually dueling's a pretty casual thing with us."

"It's tough for me to be casual about something that has a nonzero chance of leading to someone's death," Kirito said honestly, topping the steps and folding his arms across the gray leather chest guard he usually wore into the World Tree.

Mentat pushed back his hood to reveal short reddish-brown hair a touch darker than the typical Salamander color range, and met Kirito's serious gaze directly. "I hear you. If the only time you ever fight is when it's life or death, that'll leave a mark. This is different, though."

Burns interrupted this solemnity with a brief shout of triumph. "Ha! Got you." Turning back to Kirito and shaking out both hands as if they'd been heavily used all day for typing, his tone turned towards the conciliatory. "Try to look at it from our perspective," he added. "It's just like any other risky hobby—you know, skydiving, racing, martial arts sparring, whatever. We accept the risks, try to minimize them where we can, then put it out of our minds and have fun. You still game?"

Kirito nodded, putting on a confident smile again. "I'm game. But I've got a few conditions."

Burns turned up his palms. "Everyone does. Let's hear 'em."

"Wherever we end up doing this, it needs to be a public place."

Burns shrugged. "All the same to me."

That was one less thing to argue over. Kirito wasn't quite sure whether to be reassured or not that Burns had agreed so easily. "And I'd prefer at least a little bit of useful cover, not an open courtyard or something like that—you're a status mage and I'm primarily melee."

"That's fine, but there's cover, and there's cover," Burns said. "No corridors; it's just as unfair if I have no choice but to move into CQC range to even get LOS on you." He grinned suddenly. "Fortunately, I think I know a place here in Arun that'll suit. That all you wanted?"

Kirito's gaze shifted to the Salamander who was still lounging casually on the slatted-wood bench. "Well, considering the stakes, I'd like to make sure that Mentat's going to be on hand with rez spells."

Mentat's rust-colored eyebrows rose a centimeter. "Spells, plural?"

"Spells," Kirito repeated. "I'm sure you've got more than one if you're a dedicated healer. I need you able to rez both of us without waiting for cooldown if things really go bad and we're too far apart for an AOE."

"Oh," said Mentat, seeming momentarily puzzled about the reason for Kirito's concern. "Is that all? Unless I've already used one in the last few minutes, that's... not really an issue. But sure."

Kirito was uncertain just how hard he wanted to press for details; they were already treading close to
the very personal topic of a player's stat allocations and levels. He decided to take the assurance at face value. "All right."

"You really haven't dueled since the beta, have you?"

Kirito had been ready for this, too; he faced the question unflinchingly. "We've been over this, Burns. Everyone took their own path from launch to get where we are now. Mine hasn't left a lot of room for PvP to be anything other than a fight for survival."

"But it wasn't always that for you, right? I know you used to. I know you remember what it's like. Nothing forces you to improve and be at the top of your game like another person who's also at the top of their game."

The memories that came back to Kirito filling him with a strong yearning, one he hadn't really felt in a long time. The Alfheim Online closed beta had been one of the greatest experiences of Kirito's short life, and one of the things that had made it so was the camaraderie within the PvP community—a community that revolved around that core drive to improve one's own skills by pitting them against other human opponents, challenging oneself in a way that an NPC never could. Duels had been a common occurrence even in the cities, a regular spectacle that bystanders enjoyed as much as the participants.

Kirito had been no exception, but he had never, strictly speaking, become a regular part of that subculture—he spent most of his time exploring and soloing, mastering the game in his own way on his own terms. And until recently, he hadn't really given the absence of those duels any real thought; Alfheim was simply a different place now than it was then.

"Yeah," Kirito acknowledged. "I used to." And if he was being honest with himself, he would again—if circumstances were different.

Kirito had already been 99% sure that he was going to go through with this duel, but the remaining percentage and change filled itself in as that passing thought really sank in. Because the circumstances were different now. This wasn't a fight for survival, or even a random scrap. This was as close to what he'd had in the beta as he was ever going to find in Alfheim—players who seemed to be dedicated to keeping the real-world, sportsmanlike side of PvP alive even in the face of that struggle for survival.

There was nothing left to argue. Burns had agreed to his requirements without batting an eye. Kirito had taken precautions to protect himself anyway if something went wrong. And this was something that he had to do anyway if he was going to lead these players.

*So why not enjoy it?*

He could tell that Burns was getting ready to prod him again. Before the Imp could say anything more, Kirito put on the most enthusiastic grin he could muster. "Let's do this, Burns. You said you've got a spot in mind, so lead the way."

Three flight trails arced into the air above Arun without a further word from their owners, leaving a path for Kirito to follow. Kirito gave them a moment's head start, then took to the air. Only then did his eyes snap onto an icon in his HUD that he'd allowed to minimize—a reminder of an unsent PM reply. At the lingering of his gaze, the icon expanded into a proper message window; he took a moment to confirm that what he'd begun typing to Asuna was still in the body of the message.

「We're on the move. Follow my marker and stay out of sight.」
Kirito focused on the «Send» icon, and blinked once. Insurance policy in place, he put on a burst of speed and prepared himself mentally for the duel to come.

Chapter End Notes

Does it really need saying at this point?

I feel like it does. So with that in mind: I'm sorry for the wait. This has been a pretty bad year for me. My creativity has been lurking somewhere deep in a singularity, with only intermittent gasps of Hawking radiation as a stray idea or bit of free time gets sucked in and eventually finds its way out into Google Docs.

Hobbies and obsessions can be transient things. I know that for many people, SAO is just one more anime in a growing list—something that they watch, perhaps even really get into for a time, but from which they eventually move on after a few months or years as new things enter their lives and command their attention. This is especially true for the younger end of the fandom; months and years have a much greater weight to someone whose perspective is limited by their own short years, and their interests can shift quickly.

All of which is to say that I don't blame anyone who has moved on during my long hiatuses. Fandoms come and go, and I don't kid myself that what I've created here is anything other than a niche sub-fandom for a show that aired nearly five years ago. If you stopped in for a time, liked what you read, but have since found other interests or decided that the wait between chapters is too long to keep following—I understand, I thank you for your readership, and I wish you all the best.

But for those who remain, who still get excited whenever you see a notification for this story, and who keep faith that it will be updated despite the sometimes-lengthy waits and the silence of depression that overtakes me during rough times in my life—I'm truly grateful. You help keep me going.

Life is stabilizing a bit now from the crisis mode that dominated most of this year, so hopefully the wait between chapters will not be anywhere near as long as the last. But as Argo says: hope is not a plan. My plan is to keep writing. Life will do what it does, and is what it is.

Love and gratitude to all.
"A failed spell incurs no cooldown, but penalizes the caster with the loss of MP. The amount of MP lost varies depending on the circumstances: a fumbled partial incantation might only deduct a portion of the spell's MP cost, since the system cannot know the player's intent and can only tally the costs of the spellwords that were spoken correctly. But a fully-incanted spell against an invalid target will incur the loss of the spell's normal cost, and the spell will fail to manifest or affect said target. Players are cautioned that repeatedly fumbling incantations or attempting to cast a spell beyond one's skill level have a chance of triggering more serious consequences—both for the caster, and for those around them..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Spell Failures and Fumbles»

10 May 2023
Day 186 - Morning

For a few moments, as Kirito and the other three players from his new group rose rapidly past the orchard and hedge maze that bordered the steps ascending to the Warpgate, he felt a passing suspicion that Burns was leading him somewhere far off in order to force him to tire his wings. It was not a trivial concern: having the high ground was useful in a fight, but taking the high ground rapidly expended wing energy, and Kirito was familiar with more than a few tactics for forcing opponents to fly or ascend when they didn't need to. Once drained, wings took a fair amount of time to recharge, and a player who couldn't use their wings on a moment's notice not only couldn't fly—they couldn't use a burst of flight-assisted speed as an evasive maneuver on the ground. Kirito had every expectation of needing tactics like those in order to avoid all the debuffs Burns was likely to start throwing at him the moment the duel timer counted to zero.

He knew he was predisposed to distrust Burns, and had any number of good, well-informed reasons for that distrust. Doing something outside of the duel to put him at a disadvantage, like making him use up wing energy on a long trip to some inconvenient location, wouldn't have struck Kirito as being out of character—even if that was a handicap that cut both ways. But it seemed like the four of them had only been in the air for seconds before reaching the apex of their flight arc. They descended towards the upper terraces of the Arboretum, an expansive open-air park near enough to the Warpgate that they could've very well walked; Kirito realized what their destination had to be at about the same time that the colored streaks trailing from the other three players cut off and put them into a glide.

The Grand Gazebo loomed large over the sparse treetops from Kirito's vantage point, the domed roof with its thick post-and-lintel timber supports rising nearly four stories above the raised tile platform it covered. A scattering of NPCs from various factions were present, some in the faint shade beneath the dome and others pathing their scripted ways along the irregular stone walkways that meandered through the open garden which filled the clearing around the gazebo itself. A quick toggle of Searching revealed no other players nearby—at least, none who weren't hiding their cursors in some way.

It certainly qualified as a public place, and it was well within Arun's safe zone—but it wasn't exactly Main Street, either. As a place to hold a duel, however, Kirito had to admit that it was inspired.

He knew that the game considered everything within a hundred meters of the point where a duel was
initiated to be part of the playable area for the duel—and everything further to be "out of bounds". By long practice eyeballing distances in the game, he estimated that the entire garden area surrounding and including the Grand Gazebo was just shy of 200 meters in diameter on its short axis.

For much of his time in Alfheim, Kirito's eye had come to evaluate terrain from the perspective of a solo player seeking to evade or gain advantage over larger groups, or to see it in terms of how it might affect PvP battles and survivability. But for the first time in a long time, he found himself automatically appraising the site's suitability as an arena. Not just an arena in the general sense, but as an element of game and level design. He came in for a landing near the center of the central structure itself, an octagon of perhaps fifty meters with open sides that allowed free movement in and out of the covered rotunda. The roof, rafters, and man-thick pillars provided sources of potential hard cover against AOE's, while the scattered trees and hedges throughout the garden served as "soft" cover that wouldn't protect him—but might, in a pinch, be able to block LOS if needed.

"It's perfect," Kirito said quietly.

Soft as his words were, he hadn't realized that he'd spoken aloud; Kirito felt a light impact as Xorren slapped his back with one of his white-gloved hands. The other Spriggan stepped past his landing spot at the center of the towering gazebo, grinning and spreading his arms wide as he turned in a half-circle. "Isn't it the best? Burns knew this place from the beta, and it's one of my favorite spots for arranged duels now."

Burns seemed as if he'd been busy in his menu; he swept his hand to one side and looked up past a loose drift of long, straight black hair. "I just sent a quick hey to Kramer and Yar, letting them know where to find us, but they'll probably be a few minutes. Any last-minute stuff you need to sort out?"

"Let's go over ground rules," Kirito said while pacing the breadth of the structure and getting the lay of the land. "Gear limitations?"

"Well, I think I mentioned sev gear before?" Burns said immediately, with a faint rise to his tone that suggested a half-question; Kirito turned back towards him and nodded. "Yeah, that's probably the one constant rule we have for duels—don't buff your Critical Severity; it makes for more extreme damage spikes, and spike damage runs the risk of corpselighting someone unintentionally."

Corpselighting, Kirito thought. That's a cute new euphemism for killing. Though in an effort to be fair, he reminded himself that if the rez was timely, getting turned into a Remain Light wasn't murder—just the punishing death penalty to skills and experience. Bad enough at their levels, and to be avoided…but still within the bounds of sportsmanship if it wasn't intentional.

"Other than that..." Burns shrugged, then donned a grin that slowly spread across his broad cheeks while he spoke. "Free advice you probably don't need if you're half the player I think you are: got any gear that can buff your Status Resist, put it on now. You'll need it."

Kirito nodded, saying nothing. Burns was almost certainly aware that Spriggans had innate Status Resistance. And if he didn't already know, Kirito wasn't going to surrender an advantage by warning him that some of his debuffs might not stick for as long as he was expecting—or, if Kirito was lucky, at all. "Starting position? Buffs and pre-casting?"

Burns upturned his hands in yet another signal of indifference. "Start where you want, do what you want. If the game'll let you make a play, go for it. Just don't get DQ'd, because we'll laugh and make fun of you."

"A lot," added Xorren with a grin.
In other words, Kirito thought as he signaled his understanding with a single nod, anything goes as long as the game doesn't flag it as a violation. Which means you could start casting a few seconds before the start, and have your spell go off before the other person has a chance to retaliate. He resolved to be prepared for any ambush of the sort, although trying to pull off something like that would be tricky—get the timing wrong, and you'd be disqualified for attacking before the duel actually started. The thought brought an unpleasant memory back to Kirito, a reminder of Fausta's attempt to exploit duel mechanics in order to try to OHK him with a Dark Magic suicide-bombing.

He pushed the memory away; this wasn't the time for distractions. Burns seemed to be examining him closely, and from the shifting direction of his gaze Kirito surmised that the other boy was taking advantage of the spare moments by evaluating what he could tell about Kirito's gear. He quickly took inventory of the mage's equipment with his own gaze.

Nothing I recognize except his gloves; the star-shaped pattern on the back of the hands looks just like the Slitharch sigil. If I had to guess, he got those from a named drop a couple zones back. Slitharch gear leans towards AGI buffs and status procs—he might be faster than I expect, and his hits could inflict debuffs. The rest of it... I see a few Jotunn-themed adornments that suggest HP buffs, but most of his gear looks like rare drops, not crafted pieces—I can't tell anything from just looking at them.

When his eyes returned to the Imp's face, their gazes met; Burns gave him a slight smile, as if to say that he knew exactly what Kirito had been doing. For all Kirito knew, he approved.

"Let's do this," said Burns.

A thrill of excitement raced through Kirito. It didn't feel quite the same as it might have in the real world; he couldn't feel his heart pounding in his chest, even though he knew his real one probably was, and the rapidly-spreading chill that the system tried to simulate in response to his mental state and bio-signs was a best-effort facsimile of the way a real adrenaline rush made his extremities feel cold. But it was close enough, and it was the sort of reaction that fed back on itself. He shifted his weight from side to side, flexing his fingers, and met his opponent's enthusiasm head-on. "Let's."

Burns was well-practiced at the motions of initiating a duel; his hands moved in a way that was almost pre-programmed, gaze snapping up above Kirito's head to where his cursor would be. A moment later the invitation window popped up in Kirito's vision, prompting him to choose the win conditions. He tried not to register any surprise; if Burns had ulterior motives for the duel, he'd passed up a chance for advantage by not specifying the duel type. A gesture of good faith? Kirito wondered. Or something to put me off-guard? They'd agreed on a half-HP duel, but there wasn't anything stopping the recipient from picking something else if the initiator didn't specify the kind of duel they wanted.

Kirito had no intention of doing anything like that; he didn't hesitate before selecting «50% HP» as the win condition. The moment he did, the window disappeared, and a flat holographic banner appeared in the air at the midpoint between the two players declaring their names and the beginning of the countdown. They were standing near the center of the towering gazebo; as soon as Kirito accepted the duel, Burns startled him by bringing his wings to life just long enough to give himself a burst of acceleration backwards. His arc took him a good twenty meters back to just before the gazebo steps, and without thinking, Kirito mirrored the move, putting each other at the edge of typical spellcasting range almost as if they were taking starting positions in a formal match of some kind.

Remember, Kirito reminded himself fiercely, Burns knows this terrain better than you do. He knows his own range, he knows the sightlines and the sources of cover, and he's more practiced at PvP. You'll always be at a disadvantage in this fight, whether you know it or not. He could see Burns
working at his menu, and thought he caught a flicker on the other boy's 3D model; some of his equipment had changed. Kirito did the same now that they were at a distance, reviewing his gear and deciding to swap in a few pieces of subtle jewelry that would sacrifice a small amount of STR in order to raise his base Status Resistance.

Twenty-five seconds. Kirito watched Burns carefully. He could faintly hear an incantation, and for a brief moment green energy surged along the length of the other boy's wand, sheeting over his body. *A Wind Magic buff. Not Transparency; that'd be a visible change. Blur? No, I'd see that effect too.*

There were only so many Wind effects that would be useful for a mage to cast at the start of a battle. *It has to be Haste,* Kirito concluded. *Burns is reducing his cooldowns—smart. Only thing I have to reduce mine is my Momentum skill mod, but I actually need to be landing hits in order to proc that. I don't think Burns is going to give me many opportunities to strike; he'll stay as far from me as he can. If he's got Wind, there's still a good chance he'll use Transparency to hide his cursor, which will make my sword techniques harder to land.*

It occurred to Kirito that he had no need to back off as far as Burns had, putting so much distance between the two of them—in fact, it was disadvantageous. Burns himself had said that he could start wherever he wanted and do whatever he wanted, and Kirito was much better served by getting as close to melee range as he could manage before the fight started. His wings were already manifested; Kirito gave his jump a flight assist and landed close to the center of the gazebo floor where they'd initiated the duel in the first place. He began slowly advancing on where Burns stood, closing the distance between them with each step. *Let's see how you react to being pressured.*

Ten seconds. Kirito had expected Burns to back off, circle around, or otherwise try to put some space between himself and the imminent mortal danger of being caught within Kirito's sword range. The Imp mage smiled as he watched Kirito close within about ten meters, then whipped his arms out to the sides and slightly downwards quickly enough to startle Kirito into stopping with his sword presented defensively. Violet eyes alight, he spoke an incantation in a rapid-fire near-whisper. "*Yatto yoijkke plemzure ralth tepnaga dweren.*"

Kirito realized almost immediately that the spell wasn't directed at him; Burns had his arms pointed straight out in nearly opposite directions, one of them past Kirito and the other behind himself. Dark power rippled down his arms and raised a veil of violet-black from the ground before him, the energy churning itself into an opaque wall that slanted diagonally across the arena and separated the two combatants. As the wall was still forming, Kirito heard a second incantation, nearly but not quite identical to the first; another Dark Hazard shot out in the other direction, converging roughly on a single point just in front of its caster.

Eight seconds. Alarm flared in Kirito's brain; he took to the air to get a clear picture of where his opponent was, backing himself up and away. The pair of Dark Hazard effects drew a massive slanted X across one side of the gazebo, each wall two meters thick and crossing each other almost exactly at the gazebo steps where Burns had stood. Kirito could not see the Imp at all, even when he toggled on Searching; he had to be hiding inside the Darkwall somewhere.

*I can't see him, and he can freely take all the time he wants to target me. Worse, if I chase him into that hazard to get in melee range, it'll keep me Blinded as long as I'm touching it. Think!*

Two seconds. Kirito had time enough to cast a single spell. The biggest risk to him in these opening moments was a homing attack with a disabling status effect; nearly anything Burns hit him with would be bad, and he had every expectation of it being Delay or Distress, or something similar. He just barely heard the beginning of an incantation—
"Futto zabukke—"

\textbf{Wind, Fourth Magnitude.} The recognition triggered a response before he consciously thought about it; Kirito began casting. "Matto zabukke—"

"—plorjabu vethleka—"

\textbf{Homing attack, like I suspected.} Kirito had been intending to summon a Decoy, but the incoming spell would already be targeted on his cursor at this point; he switched spells. "—tamzul buren!"

Just as the countdown timer reached zero, Kirito's maintained shield flared out from his outstretched free hand into a translucent disc of gray smoke, manifesting in time for the incoming projectile to burst against it. The two spells were equivalent in magnitude; Kirito lost a small amount of MP but suffered no other effect, and clenched his fist to release the defensive spell the moment he saw the impact.

The projectile had come from within one of the strips of the overlapping Dark Hazards, but Kirito did not make the mistake of assuming that Burns was still in the same location, especially not after a follow-up burst of violet shot out from a spot several meters in another direction. Kirito kept moving at high speed, circling the interior perimeter of the gazebo to make it harder for Burns to target him with non-homing attacks.

Want to hide your cursor? Two can play at that. As soon as the next projectile seared out towards him, Kirito wove his flight path behind one of the support pillars to break LOS, and spoke quickly while the AOE detonated harmlessly on the other side of his cover. "Matto zabukke vayezul dweren."

While the intensity of Transparency's visual effect was minimal at low magnitudes, the spell still had one important use in PvP: until the effect expired or Kirito attacked, Burns would find it impossible to see his cursor or—more importantly—use Focus to target it. That granted Kirito some momentary relief from homing attacks as he emerged from behind the pillar, but he didn't kid himself that he'd done anything but buy time to come up with an attack plan.

Burns wasn't giving him that time if he could help it. When a third Dark Hazard spell stretched out to create a churning, lopsided asterisk just moments before the first barrier vanished to again leave behind a giant X shape, Kirito quickly repositioned himself with a grimace. The Imp's strategy was clearly to hide within his own spell effects, making it impossible for Kirito to pop his cursor or even be certain of his real location, while allowing Burns to attack at leisure. And with enough cooldown reduction, he could probably sustain those barriers for some time as long as he had MP.

It wasn't even unfair or imbalanced; Kirito could think of any number of hard counters to this approach. All he needed was the ability to cast a Dispel effect, or carpet bomb the Dark Barrier with ranged AOEIs and force his opponent to either eat the splash damage or flee his cover.

Neither of those options were feasible for Kirito. His Illusion was high enough to cast a number of AOEIs, but the unique property of Illusion was that despite its capacity for high spike damage it was, in effect, "scratch" damage—a temporary effect that slowly faded until it was made "real" by striking the target with a different damage type. Even if he could tag Burns with the splash damage from Illusion AOEIs, he couldn't wage a war of attrition; in order to lock in the damage dealt, he'd have to immediately use another element—which he didn't have—or hit Burns with a physical attack.

Burns certainly had multiple sources of AOE capability; Kirito grimaced as he took a small amount of splash damage from the edges of a Fire Magic spell that burst against the rafters. For a brief
second, Kirito felt the telltale slow-time sluggishness of Delay status, but although it threw off the rhythm of his evasions, it was gone before Burns could take advantage of it. He couldn't recall any way for Fire to inflict Delay; it had to be a proc from something on the Imp's gear, a random chance for an added effect. He couldn't afford to take any attack for granted.

*That's three elements he's used now*, Kirito thought, twisting his body to evade another Fire-based projectile. *Dark is racial; he'll have at least three more skills I don't know about. From the attacks so far, he seems lean heavily on Dark and Wind, and prefers a steady onslaught of low-cost, quick-recast projectiles to keep the pressure on me.* That pressure forced Kirito to constantly maneuver while he tried to get a read on Burns's location; once he had to sharply evade away from the ground in order to avoid being Rooted, and the threat of an AOE root coming out of nowhere as well as the need to get a vantage point on the overlapping Darkwalls forced Kirito to stay in the air.

*The way he must be burning through MP, he doesn't seem worried about running out—he's got to be recovering it somehow, and I doubt he's drinking potions or using up Mana Crystals for a duel. I'm betting he's taken cost-reduction skill mods, and probably has some MP recovery procs on all that expensive gear of his—*

A thought occurred to Kirito then, an idea strong enough to carry through the distraction of fending off the barrage of ranged attacks. *I need a way to track Burns within his Dark Hazards, but it blocks «Searching». «Detect Movement» probably would've been perfect, but Burns is the one with Wind Magic, not me.* All Kirito had was a very extensive toolkit of Illusion spells, most of which were of very limited utility in PvP.

Including the one that he was considering using in a way that struck him as… not entirely intended.

Kirito reasoned that the base-magnitude version would do as a test. He took a moment to recall the words to a spell he usually only used when soloing, and uttered them as quietly as he could: "*Makke hevakulth dweren.*"

At that magnitude the buff would only last for a few seconds, but it was enough to validate whether the «Detect Treasure» effect would work the way he expected in this context. The spell wouldn't pick up anything that Burns had currently equipped or stored in his inventory; it was designed to highlight loot hidden in containers or sitting out in the world waiting to be discovered. But consumables like potions and crystals needed to be ready at a moment's notice; no one could afford to be distracted in their inventory during a battle. And items in pouches or pockets, Kirito knew, counted as being "in the world"—if they had durability, they would decay just as if they'd been sitting on the ground.

Kirito was counting on that, and hoped he wasn't wrong.

As soon as the spell took effect, a few glimmering golden motes in varying shapes began to shine brightly at roughly waist level within the roiling blackness of the Dark Hazard; a dotted line of them traced upwards and diagonally for a short distance in the shape of a belt or strap. While Kirito watched, they jerked to a stop where the two Dark Hazard effects crossed, then abruptly changed direction and headed down one of the legs of the X just before the Detect Treasure effect faded from his vision. A moment later, a Fire projectile burned its way towards Kirito from the very same spot.

*Got you.* His hunch confirmed, Kirito quickly cast the next-magnitude version of the detection spell so that he wouldn't lose track of his opponent again, but took care not to stare directly at the spot where he could see the glow of the valuable consumables Burns carried on his person. *I only get one shot at this before he realizes I can see him. Make it count.*

Burns was dashing down the length of the Darkwall that he'd just recast, heading towards the center;
he fired off an unguided Dark projectile from the intersection of the two walls before immediately changing directions and racing away within the confines of the older barrier. Kirito responded with his own attack almost immediately, an Illusion projectile that trailed black wisps as it rocketed out towards the point where the attack had come from. A explosion of coal-black smoke blossomed out from the place where the two walls overlapped, and Kirito swooped low to put that temporary cloud of obscurity between himself and Burns as he closed the distance.

_He won't be able to see through that smoke cloud, and detonating an AOE right there will make him avoid that spot for a few moments—he's trapped in that leg of the wall unless he leaves it._ Kirito cut his wings as he dropped through the smoke and landed right beside a particular point on the churning blackness of the Dark Hazard, sword already in position to execute «Hurricane Slash».

It wasn't one of the more powerful longsword techniques. It wasn't even a multi-hit combo, and it took nearly a full second to charge up. But Kirito had it fully charged by the time his feet touched the ground, and the diagonal upward slash released a torrent of brilliant green energy that had built up along the length of his sword, turning it into a short-range blast of elemental Wind.

Kirito wasn't expecting his blade to connect with anything, and it didn't. Hitting Burns with the melee attack wasn't the point. The Wind-based blast that was the technique's secondary effect had a range of 5 meters, and it was more than enough to penetrate the intangible Dark Hazard and squarely impact Burns. Kirito didn't wait to see the results; as soon as the brief freeze time ended he kicked off the ground and sent a surge of power to his wings, rocketing him up and over the Darkwall just in time to see the physics impulse from the Wind blast eject Burns from the other side of it at high speed.

The instinct of most players, when thrown any distance by an attack, would've been to use their wings to stop themselves before they hit something; Burns allowed himself to be catapulted back and away from Kirito, aiming his wand while still in mid-flight. "_Futto famudrokke zhukaru jan!_"

A crescent-shaped blade of green energy shot out from the wand; Kirito was already incanting his Defensive Shield spell in order to block it. As the shield was manifesting, he caught the last bit of a follow-up that Burns chain-cast as soon as the first spell left his wand. "—_tovslagu vethleka ayelejan!_"

Kirito kept the shield up, free hand outstretched in anticipation of the homing attack. No second projectile came shooting out towards him from Burns; instead he sensed danger and heard the sizzle of magic above him just before the spell impacted him in the shoulder. The icon for «Distress» status appeared in his HUD, sealing off his ability to use weapon techniques and for a short time—six seconds, Kirito read, sparing a moment to Focus the debuff icon—removing a considerable amount of the melee threat that he posed.

_Well-played_, Kirito thought as he closed the distance further between himself and Burns, meters disappearing in fractions of a second. _You got me expecting another attack from the front, and instead used a Strikedown spell to hit me from another direction. And you saved that play until a clutch moment._

It had been an excellent gambit, and it had almost bought Burns the time to get back to the concealment of his Darkwalls, but Kirito had no intention of allowing that—or of giving Burns the time to stop and cast anything else, if he could help it. Every time the Imp tried to maneuver to get past him, Kirito used the opportunity to cut him off and close more of the gap between them. The seething black mass of the closest Darkwall began to dissipate and fade as its duration expired; Kirito had correctly judged which one would run out first and put himself between Burns and the more recent source of cover.
"You're using up lots of MP, Burns," Kirito called out as his opponent summoned an Offensive Shield effect to discourage Kirito from getting closer. "Even with recovery procs and cost reductions, you can't keep casting those walls forever."

"It's not the only tool in my kit," Burns said, folding his wings and dropping just long enough to evade a freehand crosscut that Kirito aimed at his neck. "Most real-world fights don't give me a chance to set up the battlefield for maximum cheese anyway. I just wanted to see how you'd handle it."

Kirito could feel the DOT from the Imp's Offensive Shield begin to eat away at his HP now that he was in close proximity, but his gauge wasn't dropping quickly enough for him to worry about it. He used his wings to thrust himself downwards as he redirected his blade into an overhand chop. "And?"

Burns killed his wings entirely and dropped to the ground, then rolled out of the way and re-manifested them in order to carry himself beneath and behind Kirito just before Phantasmal Dirge bit into the ground. Kirito spun in mid-air as he yanked his sword free and leapt to the side, bringing up the flat of his blade just in time to block a smoky ultraviolet projectile and mitigate most of its damage. When he rotated the blade edge-on to Burns, he saw the other boy grinning. "We'll chat when I'm done kicking your ass."

Kirito took a moment to glance at Burns's status ribbon. The Wind blast from Hurricane Slash had done the job of getting the fight out in the open, but had delivered surprisingly little actual damage. The other Darkwall began to dissipate as well, but rather than trying to recast it, Burns suddenly held his wand straight up in the air, arm stretched high above him, and chanted the words to a spell that Kirito had never heard before. "Yatto famudrokke, kredstabralth dweren."

Faced with a skilled opponent casting an unfamiliar spell of unknown power, Kirito knew to be wary. With no time to either summon his own shield or close the distance again and interrupt the spell, he braced for virtually any kind of attack that could hit him from any direction and raised his own free hand to begin casting.

No attack came. Instead, a column of crackling violet-black energy sheeted across Burns's entire body, culminating in a purple stroke of lightning that briefly connected him with the ceiling of the gazebo. Globes of black fire erupted from his hands, and Kirito had a Defensive Shield chanted up before he even realized he was doing it.

Then, beginning with a single spoken word, Burns began chain-casting faster than Kirito had ever seen anyone cast before.

Projectile after projectile shot forth from the twisted wand the other boy held out before him, each flick of the wrist and accompanying litany barraging Kirito with homing attacks that he didn't dare try to dodge or soak; his own MP rapidly dropped with every impact against his maintained shield. Some of the attacks struck down at him from above again, afflicting him with short-lived status effects as they bypassed his shield and eroded his HP.

It was hard to see anything through both the smoky disc of his own shield and the effects exploding against it, but when Kirito caught a glimpse of his opponent's status ribbon, he was startled to see the other boy's HP actually going down—rapidly. Every few spells, Burns would cast a heal of some sort in order to recover some of the loss, but whatever spell he'd used to supercharge his casting ability appeared to come at a cost—it was quickly draining his own HP, and it wouldn't be long before it reached the halfway point if he didn't keep healing himself.

There was no telling how long that spell effect would last, or whether Burns would be able to sustain
it longer than Kirito could maintain his shield. Before, he could've played for time, trying to goad Burns into using up his MP and leaving himself defenseless—now the shoe was on the other foot.

Burns cast another Wind-based healing spell; Kirito took advantage of the brief lull in attacks and tensed up his entire body, wings vibrating as hard as possible within the limits of his control over them. Just as the next attack splashed across his barrier, he kicked off the ground and channeled all the power he could muster into a burst of acceleration that almost instantly shot him forward at full speed. He had just enough time to see Burns's eyes go wide before he collided with the other boy, Defensive Shield still held out and maintained in place with the last of his MP.

\[ F = ma, \] Kirito thought triumphantly.

Alfheim Online was, ultimately, a simulation of reality that resulted from the interaction of complex systems and rulesets. Kirito knew many of them very well, some almost intimately from his hours of experimentation and study—and one of the most important lessons he'd learned was that when it came to physical damage in the game, a weapon's special properties and upgrades only enhanced, to one degree or another, the outcome of the extremely simple physics equations underlying the simulation. Any weapon's damage would vary depending on how hard and how accurate a blow the player struck, which was part of what made the System-Assisted weapon techniques so powerful.

*And anything can be a weapon if you hit someone hard enough with it.*

The total mass of Kirito's avatar had to be, in his estimation, somewhere in the vicinity of 70 kilos with all of the equipment included. At his maximum burst flight speed, Kirito reasoned that he was probably traveling at least 12 meters per second. He didn't have time to work out the math, but the end result was exactly what he expected: Burns went tumbling backwards from the impact, HP dropping, and Kirito's shield dissolved while trying to mitigate his own HP loss. Kirito didn't stop there; he let his momentum carry him forward and struck Burns in his empty-handed near arm using a quick, cheap single-strike sword technique with a fast recovery time. The blow severed the limb at the elbow and sent a burst of particles spraying away from the stump, interrupting the spell that the mage had begun casting.

It was a gamble that Burns would panic for a moment over having an arm cut off; Kirito was locked for half a second in the end frame for that technique, his body frozen in place—and now, for a few seconds at least, he was completely out of MP. To Kirito's chagrin, the other boy kept his cool; he still had his wand in his main hand, and at this range he couldn't possibly miss with whatever he was about to cast. Undeterred by the loss of one of his arms, Burns was already quickly chanting an incantation, victory in his eyes. "Fuppa yatto yojikke navgoji—"

A loud tone sounded in the air. The greenish-black projectile that Burns finished casting impacted harmlessly against Kirito's torso just as the freeze time for the technique ended, allowing him to launch himself backwards in a state of wary confusion. Burns seemed just as confused—but only for a moment, only until his eyes went upwards.

Kirito followed his gaze to the duel result banner, then back down at Burns. The other boy's status ribbon popped as soon as his cursor did, revealing his HP at exactly the halfway point—and clearly yellow.

Burns started laughing. Suddenly, loudly, but with unmistakably genuine amusement. "Oh, that's awesome."

"I won," Kirito said, almost tentatively. He was still trying to understand why he'd won; the last time he'd checked Burns had been just about to lock Kirito down with what had sounded awfully like a Paralysis spell. He gave his sword a perfunctory flourish before sheathing it on his back. The rest of
the party had clearly arrived at some point during the duel; Xorren and Kramer jogged up to the two former combatants, both Spriggans with grins that matched the one Burns was wearing.

"Yeah," said Burns, still tamping down his chuckles so that he could hold a conversation. "That was great. I can't believe you got me to «Lifeburn» myself below fifty. I'm usually really good at managing that, but I didn't realize just how much damage you did when you body-slammed me with your shield. Burned myself right out of the match."

Burns glanced down at the stump of his left arm, laughed again, and slipped his wand into a sheath at his side. He held out his remaining fist; after a moment, Kirito gave it a bump with his own, then answered the same gesture from Kramer.

"Not bad for a carebear," said the Spriggan tank, causing Kirito's smile to falter. "Wouldn't mind taking you on myself sometime, straight melee."

Xorren laughed, but still gave Kramer a punch in his arm where armor didn't cover. "Cut the carebear crap, dude. Anyone who can tank Burns when he goes all-out gets respect."

Kirito now had the leisure of wondering where Asuna was hiding; he hadn't picked her up with his brief use of Searching during the duel, and he was expecting her to show herself any minute now that the duel was over. She had to be somewhere that she could keep visual tabs on what was going on in addition to watching the party list—but given that neither of them had known where they'd be going, she would've had to improvise and could be anywhere. He felt a hand on his shoulder; glancing and half-turning to his left, his eyes met Mentat's.

"Nicely done," said the Salamander healer. "Something to be said for getting your opponent to defeat himself." He stepped past Kirito and briefly touched Burns while casting a Water spell that restored the Imp's missing arm.

"It wasn't any kind of grand strategy," Kirito admitted, watching with fascination as the arm reformed in a blue-white shimmer once the lost HP had been restored. "When I realized that Lifeburn spell of his was trading HP for power somehow, I knew I had to stop Burns from healing himself."

"It sacrifices all my MP, and five percent of my max HP every second," Burns explained, flexing his left hand and all of its fingers while Mentat healed both combatants back to full. "But while it's running I don't use MP to cast spells, and all my cooldowns are halved."

"That sounds almost broken. What's the catch?"

"Besides that it's slowly killing me?" To snickers from the rest of the group, Burns went on. "Eh, it makes a great oh-shit button, and I'm pretty good about knowing when to cancel it early, but I need a dedicated healer to make the most of it. I've got access to a few heals through Wind, but as you saw, they can't really keep up with the burn in a one-on-one if I'm taking damage, too."

"Good to know if I ever have to face Burns for real," Kirito thought. 'I'm sure he's thinking the same thing about whatever he learned from our duel."

A soft tone and a flash in his notifications caught his eye; he briefly diverted his attention just long enough to focus the message and confirm that it was what he expected. A moment later he got the pop-up he was anticipating, letting him know that Asuna had just dropped him from her party.

Kirito caught a glimpse of blue and white in his peripheral vision; he saw Asuna emerging from the edges of the hedge maze and making her way through the garden on foot. On cue, he opened his game menu and turned towards the others. "Anyone already partied up?" At the chorus of shaken
heads, he Focused each player's cursor and sent invites with the ease of long practice, bringing his new group into a party of five.

"Incoming," said Kramer with a tip of his head to the side; Kirito followed his gaze to where Asuna was slowly strolling towards the group.

"Just a squid," Yar remarked. "Not bad-looking, though."

Kirito ground his teeth together at Yar's comments, but decided this was as good an opening as any to make his play. "Yar," he began, waiting until the Salamander boy turned at the sound of his name. "What color is her cursor?"

"Yellow," Yar replied immediately.

Kirito turned to Kramer. "What about you?"

The Spriggan tank hadn't taken his eyes off Asuna. "Same. Why?"

In lieu of an answer, Kirito asked Mentat the same question. "Green," said the healer. Xorren had the same answer, while Burns, like Yar and Kramer, reported seeing Asuna's cursor as the yellow of a neutral race.

Kirito nodded. He'd expected as much. "Yar, Kramer, and Burns," he said, waiting for each boy to look at him. "I need you to change your cursor mode to Friendly Bias, please."

Yar frowned. "Why the hell would I want to do that?"

"Because that's the only way you join any Spriggan clearing group from now on," Kirito said, meeting Yar's suspicious look with a hard expression of his own. "We're going to be working with other clearing groups—as equals, and as friends. When we do, I need to know that they're not at risk of friendly fire." He nodded towards Asuna as she joined him at his side. "Asuna here is on my friend list, and I'm partyed with you. The only reason any of you should've seen her as yellow is if you've set your cursor to Hostile Bias."

"News flash, group leader," Yar said, crossing his arms in defiance. "Some of us have enemies who legit want us dead. I'm not gimping my ability to see one of them coming just because they might be your friend."

Kirito didn't budge. If anything, he was doing his best to keep his anger in check, an anger that was pushing him to be even harsher than he already was. "This isn't a request, Yar," he said. "It's a requirement of partying together. I need to know that your nukes aren't going to hit anyone but the mobs we're fighting. If someone comes after you while you're in our party, I'll back you up—but I am not going to tolerate anyone putting innocent lives at risk."

Yar snorted in a clear expression of derision. "Innocent. Listen to this fucking clueless carebear. Can you guys believe this?" His hands moved jerkily in the air; despite being in a safe zone, Kirito tensed up until he saw what he'd expected: the notification of Yar leaving the group.

"That your final answer, Yar?" Kirito asked as the cluster of players all went uncomfortably still. He could sense Asuna seething beside him, and thanked his good fortune that she was keeping it to herself—for now. "Think about it carefully. You don't get a do-over on this."

The substance of Yar's response was delivered in the form of a raised finger. "Dunno what Coper was thinking making you his lead clearer, but it's him I trusted to have my back, not you. I'm not dying to some butthurt frog with a blood feud just because you want to be everyone's buddy."
Kirito looked at the other players in his party. His gaze wasn't unfriendly, but only because he was doing his best to keep his contempt for Yar off his face. "Anyone else who wants to walk because they can't play nice with others, don't let me stop you. Our job isn't just to clear the game—it's to show all the other factions that Spriggans are better than Yoshihara made us look. If you've got so many people wanting to kill you that you can't afford to take the chance of giving other players the benefit of the doubt, maybe you don't have what it takes to be a part of what we're trying to do here."

"Whatever," Yar said as he began to leave. "Anyone who doesn't want Kirito here getting you killed, meet me by the LFG wall in ten minutes and we'll find another party."

Kramer sighed and shouldered his polearm. "Hate to say it, Kirito, but the guy's got a point. I don't have a bunch of people gunning for me, but I'm not cool with having my group leader tell me what to do with my UI settings."

"It's not just a UI preference," Kirito said. "The cursor color you see determines who your spells and abilities can affect. Why take the chance of killing someone or making their party hostile with a stray AOE?"

The Spriggan tank's shrug was slight, but his weapon still bobbed on his shoulder with the motion. "I'm a tank, man. I don't think it's as big a thing as you're making it out to be, but like Yar said, whatever. Good luck with what you're trying to do. I think I'll find another group." Kramer reached out to give parting fist-bumps to Xorren and Burns before jogging off to catch up with Yar.

*This party is shrinking pretty fast,* Kirito noted with mixed feelings. *And becoming a lot less Spriggan by the numbers.* He turned his attention to the only remaining person in the group who'd mentioned seeing Asuna as yellow.

Burns met Kirito's gaze directly; a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth before he opened his game menu and dropped his eyes to it. "I think I'll stick around, actually," he said. "You're an interesting guy, Kirito, and that was a damn fun duel. I'm curious to see where you're going with this."

Kirito had to fight to keep the grimace from showing on his face. He'd been half-hoping that mandating Friendly Bias—a harmless change for anyone who didn't have a long list of enemies—would drive out Yar and Burns, but he would've preferred that Kramer stick around. Instead he now found himself with a party member he still didn't quite trust, but didn't have any reason to eject without risking looking unreasonable to the others—and he had the vague feeling that he was already on thin ice with them.

"You sure about this, Burns?" Again, Kirito tried not to be blatantly unfriendly, but it was a struggle to keep an even tone. "I'm not trying to go on some kind of power trip here, but it's a fact that Coper asked me to lead the clearing groups, and he did that because he thought I'd help smooth things over between our clearing groups and the other factions. You want to be part of that, you're welcome, but that's going to mean changing some of how we do things."

"It's going to mean finding a new tank, too," Burns said with a glance in the direction that Yar and Kramer had gone. "Look, Kirito, Yar's not wrong; he's got to look out for his own skin. But he was kind of being a dick about it, so that's on him. I'm no stranger to people setting ground rules for a party, and I don't mind tweaking my cursor mode if I've got a group backing me up." He gave Asuna a long look, eyes going to just above her head. "Green to me now."

"Don't worry about tanking," Kirito said. "I've got a replacement in mind from the list of volunteers Coper sent me, and for today, Asuna and I can handle it."
A long silence spread after this comment, with more eyes training themselves on Asuna as the implications of what he'd said sunk in. "She's joining the party?" asked Mentat.

"She's my second in command," Kirito said, dropping this news in tones that welcomed no debate on the matter. He drew open his game menu and glanced to the side just long enough to catch a glimpse of Asuna's cursor and send her a party invite. "She my friend, she's a top clearer, and I trust her with my life. That's not a problem, is it?"

Mentat shook his head. "Not at all. I'll be the last guy to bitch about having a second healer, but it seems redundant unless we're raiding."

"The way I see it," Asuna said, taking a step forward as she spoke and looking over the rest of the group, "this gives us versatility. I've reviewed all of the information Coper sent over on your group. I have experience healing in both a raid and a clearing group, but I can do just as well at melee DPS. So here's how we arrange this."

Asuna gestured between herself and Kirito. "Until we get a regular tank, Kirito and I will take the forward positions. We've partyed together and know how to balance each other's aggro. Mentat and Burns, you'll stay in your previous dedicated roles. Xorren, I want you to default to magic DPS, ready to go melee if we need more physical damage." The named players nodded; Asuna went on. "On the other hand, if we encounter mobs that resist physical, I can take over healing while Mentat adds armor-defeating magic DPS, and in a worst-case scenario we have two strong healers to get people back on their feet."

"We have the beginnings of a solid group here," Kirito said. "We can make a difference, and show the rest of the world that Spriggans aren't outcasts who can't be trusted to work with anyone else. But first we have to show that we can work together. Are you with us?"

A visual chorus of glances went back and forth between the three other players, and Kirito was intrigued to note that he could almost see the subtext passing between them based on what he knew of those players. It was fascinating to watch. One by one they seemed to arrived at a consensus, and it was actually Burns who delivered the answer with a two-fingered salute that almost but not quite touched his forehead.

"You're the boss, boss."

Klein was trying his hardest to be patient. He really was. But patience in the face of inaction, though an easy thing to recommend to others, had never come easily to him—especially when people were depending on the outcome in some way.

In this case it was actually Dale who was the subject of all player attention in the Cedar Ridge Inn's common room, and Klein's longtime friend seemed no more comfortable than Klein was with having more than half a dozen eyes trained on him. The Gnome healer had a flower in one hand, and a blue glowing thingamabobber—that was, Klein determined, its proper name—in the other. Dale's lips were moving slowly but silently while he read through a spell in his game menu that—judging from his first few attempts—was probably supposed to sound like a German car commercial, and kept coming out imperfectly unintelligible even by that standard.

Klein's eyes made a circuit of the few people lingering in their corner of the public room. Thelvin was leaning against a wooden load-bearing post as motionlessly as if he was trying to become one with it, still enough that his full plate armor made no sound; if he was growing impatience, it didn't show on his face or in his body language. Drem's leather boots were propped up on the table of the
booth where he was sitting, and his gaze was averted so pointedly that he might as well have been staring; his striped tail occasionally thumped against the cushion of the seat beside him. Teel, standing a meter away from Drem, was staring—but under the circumstances that was entirely understandable, as was the nervous hand-wringing the archer probably didn't even realize she was doing.

The Caits in the room were being incredibly polite, but after nearly a full minute with nothing but the soundless shapes of almost-words on Dale's lips, Klein's reserve finally broke. "Any time, man."

"Shut up, I'm trying to concentrate."

"I get ya, but the World Tree won't clear itself and that's where we gotta go. Like, an hour ago. Need any help?"

Dale's dark brown eyes met Klein's gaze; the frustration in them was about two hairs short of unfriendly. He sighed and set his menu visible, flipping the spell list to face his party leader. "Sure, man, you can cast this spell for me. How the hell do you pronounce that third word?"

Klein leaned in and squinted at the small print. "Jye… jebu… jeburu… jebureru… fuck if I know."

"'Fuck if I know'. Thanks, I'll try that. Meanwhile, this is how it's supposed to come out sounding." Dale spun the list back to face himself and pressed the «Pronunciation» button; since the menu was currently set visible, it played the sound for everyone in the room using a natural-sounding male voice. "Dotto yojikke jevrelth shaja min."

Dale's own attempts had been noticeably—and at least once, spectacularly—short of matching the middle word in that computer-generated demonstration. Klein gave Thelvin a look of entreaty. "I'm really sorry about this, Thel, but… any chance you could lend us a mage to help Dale out with this spell?"

Thelvin sighed lightly, stirring from his lean and shifting his weight more fully upright. "The reason I asked you in the first place is because we don't have anyone near Arun right now with Earth high enough for this. I would've tried hiring Sasha again, but she wasn't at the church this morning."

"We can't keep depending on outside help, Thel," Drem said. "Getting Earth mages trained up needs to be more of a priority for us now that we know the requirements for pet-rez. Some of our healers have it, but that's just for basic tank buffs like «Bracing» and «Stoneskin». Until now they didn't have any reason to grind it the way they do Water and Holy." His eyes briefly shifted to include Dale. "Or have a racial advantage that lets them level it up faster," he added.

"It's not my race or skill level," Dale said with a touch of defensiveness. "It's my tongue. This freaking word here—look, these letters show up in a couple of my other spells—"

"Not to mention the start of Thelvin's name."

"Nobody pronounces that correctly anyway," remarked Thelvin. "I just liked the way it looked in print."

"That's different, though," Dale said. "It's not as bad when it's something you've said a lot, or when it's at the start of a word—instead of in the middle where you have to go from saying one thing to saying another exactly right while you're chewing on a ball gag."

Dale's colorful choice of metaphors did not result in a visual gift that Klein appreciated receiving. "Er."
"Point is, I've had to spend hours practicing all those words so that I can say them without screwing it up, and I still practice them every day by casting them in combat. It's one thing to say them exactly right, but I've never used this spell before. It's gonna take me some repetition to get it even once, just like with the others."

"It's okay," Teel said, breaking her long silence and putting an end to the back-and-forth. "I really appreciate you trying, Dale. «Mochi's Heart» should last at least another day, so I'll stay here as long as it takes to get it right."

Klein threw up both hands in surrender and turned back to Dale. "Well bro, you've only made the room explode once. At least we're in a safe zone." He glanced reflexively over at the NPC innkeeper, who had previously admonished them about behaving in a way that was courteous to other patrons in the immediate wake of said explosion. The innkeeper otherwise seemed to pay no mind to the group of players; for all intents and purposes they seemed to cease to exist as far as he was concerned unless something triggered him to pay attention. If anything, Klein was surprised the NPC wasn't pitching a fit about Drem's big boots on one of his tables. Maybe that's not rude in NPC-land.

Dale's mouth moved a bit more in a deliberate, almost exaggerated way, and then he straightened his posture and took a deep breath, holding out both hands with an item in each. "Dotto yoji—"

"Whoa, warning please!"

"Son of a—" Dale pressed his lips together tightly and puffed out his cheeks, nearly clenching his fists; Klein saw a small amount of MP disappear from the bar in his party list. "Klein. Dude. Not another word. I need to concentrate."

Klein's hands went up again, and he backed slowly away.

"Dotto yojikke, jevrelusu—"

It took several more tries after that; thankfully there were no further catastrophic failures, and only a few minutes were spent waiting for Dale's MP to recover. It was impossible to miss when he got the spell right—there was a blaze of golden illumination that made Klein wince, and the items in Dale's hands began to levitate of their own accord, which caused him to take a worried step back with his arms spread wide.

"Not me! If it explodes, I'm not doing this!"

"You already did it," Thelvin said calmly, gesturing to everyone with both hands in a bid for calm. "It's working. Teel?"

"Come back to me, baby." Teel said, taking a few tentative steps towards the painfully brilliant warm light that blazed out from where the Heart and the Flower had joined. The light that faded could have easily been replaced by the light in her eyes as she saw her pet Gazer form in the air before her, solidifying until it spread its bat-like wings from around the single eye that dominated its teardrop-shaped body.

"All good?" Klein asked.

With a laugh almost as musical as the jingle of the adornments on her braids, Teel vigorously rubbed Mochi's sides while the creature made high-pitched sounds that Klein could only assume were as friendly as Teel's own affectionate coos. "Yes, you're just fine now aren't you, you ugly little flying rice ball? Guess who's not standing watch next time?"
The Cait Sith archer didn't actually seem to be talking to him specifically, but Klein took the response as an answer of sorts. A flash and a subtle chiming sound drew his gaze to his notification bar; he stepped back in and slapped a hand on the back of Dale's robes. "Knew you could do it, man. Why don't you catch up with the guys? I need a minute before we head out."

"Something on your mind?" Thelvin asked, giving a glance at the retreating backs of the other players as Drem exited the room right behind Teel.

Klein shook his head vigorously. "Alicia wants to talk to me before we head in. Go on, I'll catch up."

A brief smile touched Thelvin's expression. "To you. Not to her raid leader. I see how it is."

Mild heat spread to Klein's cheeks. "Dude, please don't. I get enough of this from my buddies."

Thelvin chuckled softly, giving Klein's shoulder armor a light swat with the back of his hand. "Just amused. Drem fully briefed me on the new zone last night, so there shouldn't be any surprises—nothing I need from Lady Alicia today except to know that she supports what we're doing. Meet us at the warp gate when you're ready."

At least this time she messaged me before calling, Klein thought once the room was empty of players. He didn't really care about the NPCs that were still in the inn, and in fact more or less dismissed them entirely when he didn't need something from one of them. Privacy was nice, but it only really counted if the prying eyes belonged to people.

It was just as well that they'd arranged the call in advance; the only warning Klein had before the spell activated was the way the light level around him seemed to dim slightly before a dark hole ripped open in the air, flattening itself into a shimmering oval trimmed with purple fire. The iridescent surface faded, sank in, and gained depth before resolving into an image of Klein's favorite person in Alfheim, lounging on her belly in the middle of a pile of pillows.

"Morning, babe. Ready for another exciting day of adventure?"

Klein's first answer to this long-running joke was a snort. "Oh yeah, it's gonna be a blast. Three guesses where I'd rather be."

Little sharp fangs peeked around Alicia's lips as she pursed them and tapped at her cheek with one fingertip. "Oooh, do I really get three? Because for the first, I'm going to go with: at a bar in Ginza getting plastered with your friends. Do I win anything?"

For a jest, Alicia's guess came uncomfortably close to the truth. And here I was trying to be legit sweet. Leave it to my girlfriend to ruin it with a way-too-real joke. "You win, uh..." Klein racked his brain. Seconds flew by while Alicia propped her chin up on both hands, blonde eyebrows raised expectantly. He stalled for time. "You win... um..."

She grinned. "I win. I'll take that. You know, you're really cute when you're trying so hard to pop off with a funny line but can't think of anything." Then the playful grin faded a bit. "Listen, I don't have much time, conditions are super crappy right now for «Moonlight Mirror». But I know the new zone's been tough on everyone, and I wanted to give you a quick call so you know I'm thinking of you. And to tell you... well, be careful."

The warmth that had previously rushed to Klein's face spread out a bit, filling him with a pleasant floaty feeling while making him feel vaguely embarrassed. He looked around; there were still no players in the rustic inn's main room to see him acting that way. "Thanks, Alicia. You know me—I'm always careful."
"Except when you're not," Alicia said quickly, and with a quirk to her smile. "Fortunately, Thelvin's got enough careful to go around, so maybe you can borrow some of his."

Klein's thick red eyebrows rose with skepticism. "Oh, right. That'd be the same Thelvin 'careful' that ended up with him needing a rez last time? I'll be sure to ask him to share."

Alicia grimaced briefly in an automatic sort of way. "Okay, forget I said anything. Speaking of rezzing though, you get Teel taken care of?"

"Yeah, that hideous thing she calls a pet is back up and... well... doing whatever it does, I guess. She seemed happy."

Alicia made a disapproving noise. "Way to be all judgey. Just because you don't have a floating eyeball thing of your own..."

"Oh yeah, that's high on my list of 'shit I need in my life' right now." Klein's face twisted as if he'd eaten something that didn't quite taste the way it ought to. "You know what I need in my life? A vacation. Somewhere with you. Maybe in a hot spring again." A pause, and then: "Preferably with no recording crystals anywhere nearby."

Alicia, for once, was the one to blush slightly. "I made Verity destroy that thing! Anyway, you just had a vacation. Like, days ago. So there's that."

Klein sighed. His eyes went briefly up to his clock; he wasn't sure exactly how much duration Alicia had, but he didn't want to keep Thelvin or his friends waiting for too long. "I know, I know. It just sucks that the place I have to go to do my job is so far away from you. It gets hard sometimes."

"I'll bet it does."

Klein opened his mouth slightly to follow the flow of conversation onward, then stopped when he saw the mischievous look in Alicia's eyes. "I..."

"Yes? Would you like to rethink your phrasing?"

"I, um..."

Still lying on her belly with her chin in her hands, Alicia fluttered her eyelashes with theatrical innocence, tail waving languidly in the air above and behind her. A few more moments passed with no coherent response from Klein. "I can do this all day, you know. It's kind of funny watching you discombobulate at the slightest hint of sexytime."

Klein's eyes were drawn to the shrinking edges of the portal that was their link to each other. "Oh damn, what a shame that your spell's running out of duration. I can barely hear you, you're kshhhht breaking up a bit, pshhhht too much static..."

Alicia laughed and bounced up to her hands and knees, shimmying her way closer to her side of the arcane mirror. Her voice, almost a whisper, still carried clearly through as she pressed her face almost up against the threshold. "The spell doesn't work like that, babe." She kissed at the air, then grinned. "Message me when you get out tonight. Give Thel and everyone else my best."

Even though he knew there were only NPCs in a position to see him, Klein still looked around the room self-consciously before turning back to the dwindling mirror and awkwardly answering Alicia's air kiss. It was not a gesture that left him feeling exceptionally manly. "Will do," he said. "Take care, and stuff."
"And stuff?" Those two words, followed by Alicia's uncontrolled laughter, were the last things Klein heard before the portal shrank to a point and closed with a sound like rushing air.

"And stuff," Klein said aloud, though there was still no one to hear other than NPCs. His gaze tracked around the inn's main room, taking in the waitress and the barkeep. He felt an odd sense of reassurance at the inhumanity of their uncaring, scripted animations. "You know," he explained to the air unnecessarily. "Stuff. Stuff that's important. Stuff that I'd say if I knew the right words."

The front door to the inn cracked open, admitting the sounds of the morning crowd outside. Harry One's sharp-featured face peeked in through the opening, eyes shaded by both his metal helm and the backlighting from the outdoor illumination. "Hey, Leader. Thel's getting itchy."

"Ugh," Klein said, abruptly ceasing his monologuing and hoping Harry hadn't overheard any of it. "Not too bad I hope?"

Harry stepped the rest of the way in, but kept the door held open. "Well, I mean, it's Thelvin. He's not going to be a dick about it, but I can tell he wants to get moving. Guess what? So do we."

"And so do I," Klein said, making for the door. "So let's go turn in our marks and get on with the next zone."

Yuuki opened her eyes, and found that she couldn't move.

It took a moment for the panic of immobilization to penetrate. Her mind felt fuzzy, as if her thoughts had to clear their way through a fog bank and wait their turn to be acknowledged, and her vision blurred in odd ways. There was no Paralysis status in her HUD, no status effects of any kind that she could see, but she felt constrained all around—as if something encased her avatar entirely, leaving only the eyes exposed. She couldn't even feel her hair on her face, and couldn't see it when she tried to look around.

Yuuki's gaze wouldn't focus properly, and it was tough to tell exactly where she was. Somewhere dark, to be sure; she could see the glimmer of torches in the edges of her sight, hear the crackle as they burned, and smell the oil in which they'd been dipped. But even those impressions came and went, as did the faint whimpers and cries she thought she could hear in the distance. Or perhaps they were closer than she thought; it was impossible to tell with the way the sounds echoed.

She tried to squirm, tried to test the limits of her bonds, but her body wouldn't respond. Her imprisonment was total; she had only the feeling of being bound and the numbers in her HUD to tell her that she wasn't a Remain Light. Panic welled up in her again as she heard voices draw near, and every time her gaze darted around she thought she caught a glimpse of someone that she knew—somehow—she didn't want to see.

Self-discipline had kept her quiet until then, but after struggling for some time like that and being unable to so much as wiggle a toe, she cried out. "Is anyone there? Can you hear me?"

"Oh, I can hear you all right," said a voice she never thought she'd hear again. Gitou stepped into her view, and no matter how much Yuuki wanted to recoil into herself at the sight of him, she still couldn't move at all. "But no one else can. No one else ever will again."

Yuuki's panicked thoughts fell over each other trying to get out, ending in a jumble of incoherent babble that was the only protest she managed to voice. *You're dead,* she thought, over and over again, the words echoing in her head. *You're dead, I saw you die.*
"I let it happen."

"That's right, sweetie," said Gitou, leaning in close to her until his face filled her vision no matter how much she wanted to look away. "You tried to have me killed. Got someone to do it for you, since you were too much of a coward to chop my head off yourself when you had a chance."

"No!" Yuuki yelled back, trying to twist free and still finding herself unable to even make the effort. She felt as if she was trying, but nothing moved in response to her will; she didn't even have the weak twinge of stamina that she would've in her real body. "You're not real, you're dead, I know it! I saw your Remain Light disappear!"

Gitou simply laughed, the sound echoing off of the unseen walls in a way that only amplified the claustrophobic feeling of entrapment. "Yeah, well guess what? You *fucked it up*. Got that whore Fianna killed instead. And now you're mine."

"Ours," said Trey, the other Salamander from her tormented past coming into view and standing at Gitou's side. "And so is she."

Yuuki's eyes moved just enough to see the immobile figure behind them as the shadows parted enough to reveal the form of another person she had never thought to see again, and one whose face would forever be inscribed in her memory. Another scream rose up within her at what she saw.

Looking at Aiko had always been, in many ways, like looking into a mirror. And it was terrifying to see that reflection of herself lying immobile on a stone slab.

A frenzy overtook Yuuki then, a mix of anguish and righteous rage filling her at the sight of her long-dead sister, imprisoned as she was. Layer after layer of belted straps flew out from behind the slab to which Aiko was affixed, snaking around her until everything except her terrified face was covered with the rough-worked leather belts. Yuuki found that she could move then, but only enough to thrash and claw at the air, forever held out of reach of either Gitou and Trey or her sister. *You were always the strong one!* Yuuki thought in the midst of her despair. *What do I do now?*

"Run!" Aiko screamed suddenly. "Run and don't look back!"

"I can't!" came Yuuki's full-throated reply as she struggled to free herself from restraints she couldn't even see or touch. "I'm stronger now! I can stop them!"

"Not strong enough," said Fianna, drawing Yuuki's panicked gaze to the side just long enough to catch a glimpse of steel-blue braids beneath another form mummified within countless leather straps. "You can't fight this. You're too young."

"Too young," agreed Rei, the older Imp girl's voice coming from yet another corner of the room.

"There are ways to capture and hold someone if you really need to," Gitou boasted, again stepping into her view and filling her vision with his loathsome face. "Sometimes people need to be dealt with."

"He didn't just know how to kidnap people, he made a job out of keeping them that way," Rei said from within her own cocoon. "He could've had other victims out there…"

Yuuki heard the words, but her eyes wouldn't leave Aiko now, and laughter rung in her ears from Gitou and Trey almost as loudly as her sister's shrieking insistence that she run and save herself. The laughter built like a crescendo, the cries from the other fellow prisoners rising with it, and before she knew it Yuuki found herself joining them in their horrific lament.
She awoke screaming.

It had been several days, but she still wasn't used to Asuna not being there when she woke up. There was no comforting sisterly warmth next to her, only the mild chill of the empty inn room. She couldn't feel her heart beating—a player's avatar had no heart to beat—but the same sense of anxiety and trembling excitement from the lingering dream filled her as if it had been pounding against the inside of her chest the entire time. For all she knew, her real heart in her real body was pounding; weak as it was, she wondered if she might end up having another heart attack. She was certain that was what had happened to her in the Sewers; it wouldn't have been the first time in her short life.

*It's in God's hands,* Yuuki reminded herself. *There's nothing you can do if it happens, and you won't know until it's too late. Just keep living the life He's given you.*

It was far from the first time she'd given herself a reminder like that; for someone with her chronic health problems, it was an important part of being able to get on with the business of living. But not for the first time, it brought with it a nagging counter-argument that would not go away. *Is it good enough to just survive? Is it enough to keep living, if that's all you're doing with it? What am I supposed to be doing with this life?*

From very early in the death game until this moment, she'd had easy, ready answers for that annoying nag of self-doubt—answers that she'd rarely been able to muster before Alfheim Online. She was Asuna's clearing partner, chosen sisters in all but blood. She was a member of the Undine clearers. She was fighting the good fight, trying to help make sure the people she cared about—and as many others as possible—could survive to escape the game.

But was she doing enough? Was she even doing the right things? Haydon and Kumiko hadn't been sure. Rei had had other ideas. Even among the Undine clearers, she only really had a place because she was paired up with Asuna.

And the dream would not leave her. Her mind kept circling around to it, like a train always being rerouted back to the same run-down station in a bad neighborhood.

Even now, staring at the plain oaken walls and sparse furnishings of the inn room she'd rented for the night, Yuuki could still hear echoes of the horrible things she'd seen and heard. *It was a bad dream,* Yuuki told herself. *One of the worst I think I've ever had, but still just a dream. All the things they were saying were just jumbled-up memories. Don't let it mess you up.*

It was easy to say; harder to do. Yuuki pushed away the bedcovers and sat up, stretching with her arms high above her head before bouncing to her feet and heading over to the window. She'd slept in her field gear, which left uncomfortable spots here and there where the buckles had pressed. The late morning sun was shining through the treetops and momentarily dazzled her when she pushed open the shutters, but the warmth felt good on her face, and she slid herself into a sitting position on the broad lintel, letting the sunlight recharge her wings while it filled her with something approaching calm.

The vision of Aiko, imprisoned and screaming, just would not go away. It crawled back into her mind whenever a stray thought took her anywhere near recent events or the people connected with them, a flash of awfulness that she hoped would fade quickly in the way that dreams always seemed to do. If it had been just the nonsensical product of her subconscious, she thought that would've been easier to deal with. She'd banished horrible thoughts like that before by distracting herself with other things, and perhaps that was what she ought to be trying to do here.

But every distraction led her back to the same place: the nagging, guilt-ridden feeling that she was running away from something she didn't want to face.
Still soaking in the comforting feeling of the sunlight on her skin, Yuuki opened her game menu and navigated to view her friends. It was a very short list: Asuna and Kirito, of course, as well as Diavel and a handful of Undine clearers from her usual group. She touched Asuna's name, selected an option, and checked her location; Asuna showed up as being in the World Tree, but since they weren't in the same zone as each other, that's all she could tell. No reason to rush the rest of the way to Arun. She's out clearing, and won't be back until much later. No point in trying to send a message right now, either.

Yuuki went back to the list of friends. No matter how much she wished it were otherwise, Aiko wasn't there; they'd never been apart on the first day of the game, and everything had happened before they ever got around to exploring much of the game's systems. But if Aiko had lived a bit longer, if they'd had the time, she knew her sister would still be there, right where Asuna's was in the Latin-alphabetical list. Even if it only ended up as a greyed out name.

Aiko is dead, Yuuki told herself, the words no longer quite as painful a reminder as they once were. She'd had to tell the story so many times in recent days, had revisited those traumatic minutes in so many ways that she'd almost become desensitized enough to be able to think about them clearly. Let her go. You've tried PMing her, and it doesn't work. You would've found each other long before now if she was alive. Maybe you should've asked Haydon while you were there, but there didn't seem to be a point—in your heart, you know she's dead, and believing otherwise is just wishful thinking.

The dream nagged at her again, and this time Yuuki took notice. God had never spoken to her before—not with words, at least, not the way He did in movies or Scripture. But her mother had always told her that God spoke in other ways, that sometimes you just had to stop and listen to realize that's what was happening. Yuuki always tried to do what she felt was right, and she'd always imagined that her conscience was God's voice, in a way. Is that what's happening now? Is that awful dream some kind of message from God, and that's why I can't get it out of my head?

Yuuki stopped there and made herself think. Gitou was dead. She knew that, for a fact; she'd been in the room when his Remain Light disappeared. Fianna was dead too, as was Aiko. Yet all of them had been present in her dream, talking to her, and the whole thing seemed to revolve around being imprisoned somehow. Why was that so bothersome to her that she just couldn't let it go?

He didn't just know how to kidnap people, he made a job out of keeping them that way. Rei had said those words to her the night before, and they'd showed up in the dream again. The older girl had also told her she was going to ask her friends, to try to find out more info about Gitou's guild and what they were doing. They could have other victims. No, there's no 'could' about it—they do have other victims. They have to.

If he's made a job out of this, if his guild is actually kidnapping people for money, that has to mean they've done it more than once. It means there's at least a few people, if not many more, that they've figured out how to capture and imprison. People who've been 'dealt with' by locking them away somehow... and somewhere.

It wasn't just a hypothetical question anymore. The more she thought about the mere fact that Gitou's guild existed, and his claims about what they'd been doing—and doing well enough for Gitou to want to hire Yuuki and Rei to work for them—the more horrified she was at the implications. The terror she'd felt in her dream, that she'd seen and heard from the others imprisoned in that dream—it was only a fraction of what someone might be going through for real, kept in that position for months without end.

Sure, they'd be alive. Plenty of others weren't so fortunate. But was it enough to simply survive? What kind of life would they have, locked away inside themselves like that—unable to go anywhere,
do anything for themselves, or even reach out to anyone else without assistance?

_No life worth living_, was Yuuki's immediate answer to herself. She knew that on a deep, personal level, because that had been her life before the FullDive virtual environment—and the medical experiments based on its early prototypes—had given her the freedom to truly feel alive, rather than just continuing to live. A life trapped in a body that didn't want to cooperate with being alive was no life at all.

Alfheim Online had been a promise of the kind of true freedom she never would've known in her own body, wracked as it was with illness and seemingly always on the verge of failing. Kayaba's promises had been fulfilled beyond her wildest dreams… albeit with a terrible, unspoken price for everyone who took part in it. Yet even that price, that risk of losing a life she'd long ago accepted as nothing more than borrowed time, was one that she was happy to pay in exchange for the freedom she'd been granted.

She couldn't stand the idea of someone else being locked away in their own body the way she had been. And the more Yuuki thought about it, the more certain she was that that was what had to be happening. *You can't stop someone from using their game menu, not without cutting off their hands. There'd be no way to keep someone from contacting a friend unless you did that, or unless they were all tied up the way that Rei wanted to do to Gitou.*

Yuuki was still facing the morning sun; she turned her eyes southwards for a time. *I can't just go straight back there; Rei said we need to keep our heads down for a few days. But I can't just let this go without trying to do something about it, either—it's not right. I'll continue on to Arun for now, and meet up with Asuna tonight while I'm there.* She turned back to the north, following the path of her thoughts. *I have to be smart about this—get my gear repaired, see if Argo knows anything, see my friends. I miss them, and they miss me. Give things time to cool down around Gattan and Everdark, give Rei some time to talk to her network.*

The question, then, was what to do in the meantime. *I could still ask Asuna for help—maybe even Kirito, though from Asuna's last message they're probably going to be busy trying to help the Spriggans build up their clearing groups. I know they'd make room for me in a moment if I asked… but maybe it's better that I don't. Kirito needs to focus on what he's doing, and he needs to earn the trust of his new group. If I tell him my suspicions about what's going on with Gitou's guild, he's going to insist on doing something about it. I know Asuna would, too—and they need to go back to clearing now, not be distracted by this.*

Yuuki still had a choice of what to do from there—by going back to Arun and taking some time to prepare, she wasn't bound to a single course of action. She could still decide to ask for help from her dearest friends if she really needed to.

It wasn't an amazing plan. But for the moment, it would have to do.

Yuuki had nothing in the rented inn room to gather and no bill to pay; when she felt that her wings were sufficiently recharged from spending the night indoors, she let herself slip off the edge of the window sill. The hooked-blade shapes of her translucent wings blazed with power, raising her into the air and arcing northwards at the head of a thin streak of purple.

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For all of her entirely justified skepticism towards these new party members, Asuna had to admit that their first outing together was going surprisingly well.

Perhaps part of that success came from the fact that she and Kirito, as forwards, were able to set the
pace and call the shots. The two of them made an excellent team; they knew each other's capabilities pretty well, and after traveling solo together for so many days, they were so in tune with each other's attack rhythms that there were times she found herself switching in at the same moment that Kirito called for it. With a decent healer backing them up, the two of them probably could have carried even a mediocre group.

And this was not, despite her misgivings, a mediocre group.

Asuna knew that, for all of her inexperience with games prior to Alfheim, she had by this point become a skilled and knowledgeable clearer who knew her way around a raid group—enough so that both Diavel and Argo had, each in their own ways, encouraged her to provide that expertise to Kirito in an attempt to get the Spriggan clearing groups off the ground. She thought herself a good judge of a player's abilities, and had spent most of the game working hand in hand with the very competent members of the Undine clearing groups.

She had never, in all her time raiding, seen anyone who was as good at crowd control as Burns. The boy seemed to have an almost preternatural sense of when adds were incoming, and consistently locked them down and kept them under control before they even reached the group. He knew the attack patterns of the mobs they were facing here in the «Halls of Judgment», and was able to apply exactly the right debuffs at the right time to neutralize their most dangerous attacks. And on top of it he had an easygoing attitude that caused her to question the intensity of her dislike for him—a dislike that was, admittedly, predicated on what Argo had told them about his supposed involvement with Yoshihara's assassination and connections to the Salamander clearers.

That raised what was for her a somewhat uncomfortable, awkward question: could Argo be wrong?

The question was uncomfortable, but in a way also silly. Of course Argo could be wrong about Burns. She could have received bad information, or even have an agenda of her own that she was trying to push. Asuna trusted the info broker up to a point, but it was difficult to put complete, unconditional trust in someone who bought and sold secrets and regarded everyone as a customer. Kirito considered her a friend, which also disposed Asuna to do the same, but Kirito was also—to put it mildly—far from the world's foremost expert on the female mind.

What it came down to, for Asuna, was this: it was possible that Argo was wrong about Burns, and equally possible that Kirito himself was wrong about Argo.

And so far, Burns had given her no reason of her own to doubt him.

Neither, for that matter, had Mentat or Xorren. Although something within Asuna still cringed defensively whenever she saw a flash of red hair and crimson robes in her peripheral vision, Mentat's heals were on point, and not once so far had she felt the slightest worry that she might drop below half-HP, let alone find herself suffering the death penalty from needing to be rezzed. The man was quiet, reserved, and even laconic to a degree, and only when a mob was nearly dead and Kirito called for all DPS in did he expend his MP on anything other than keeping the party topped off and the two forwards buffed.

He was, in short, one of the oddest Salamanders she'd ever met. Though Asuna had to concede even inwardly that most Salamanders she'd met had not been under the best of circumstances.

Xorren himself was reliable enough with his own share of the buffing… but he confused Asuna quite a bit. Even though she knew enough about his abilities and style to assign him a default role, that role in and of itself was a bit fluid. She wasn't really sure exactly what kind of character he seemed to prefer—melee, magic, utility—only that he seemed to shift from style to style as needed and had a keen eye for when it was necessary to do so. Kirito and Argo had joked about him being a
Red Mage, which she supposed made sense to them, but the one time she'd asked Kirito to elaborate he'd tried to describe some kind of "fantasy job" of his; with a few exceptions the words had been Japanese, but the explanation itself had bordered on gibberish.

All in all, the situation left Asuna with mixed feelings. She'd volunteered to work with these people, to do everything she could to help Kirito build up a Spriggan clearing group to the point where they could work with the Undine clearers, and so far the group had exceeded all of her expectations—or, more to the point, had confounded those expectations, none of which had been particularly high in the first place. She'd staked out Kirito's duel with Burns fully expecting to need to rez someone at some point, and had prepared herself for the possibility that she and Kirito would have to eject members and carry the group themselves—or worse, fight one or more of them.

Instead, what she'd found was a small group of irreverent but highly competent and skilled players who would've been an asset to just about any clearing group. As the day went by, it became increasingly difficult to sustain animosity or distrust towards people who were doing a very good job of watching her back and keeping her alive.

Kirito held up a hand as they approached a closed metal door at the end of a long hallway; the gesture brought Asuna out of her musings and sharpened her attention. "Cursors," he said, eyes suddenly alight with his Searching skill. "Five red in the next room near floor level, big cluster of yellow and green further away."

"Betting those are Graveworms other side of that door," said Xorren, his yellow eyes shifting into the same green as Kirito's for a few moments. The glow faded, to be replaced by the glow of good humor as he smirked. "That, or we've got a small party of Sprig exiles crawling around on their bellies in the middle of the World Tree for reasons."

"Hey, you never know," Burns remarked. "I've done weirder things to throw off pursuit and make myself look like an isolated mob."

Kirito gave a light snort of amusement; when Asuna looked back at the others, they were all grinning. "How many in the far cluster?" asked Burns.

"Twelve," Kirito answered.

"Raid group," Burns said immediately, caution in his voice. "One hundred percent guarantee you that's two full parties of players right there. We should give them some space."

"Friendly players," Kirito said almost as quickly, as if reminding others who might have forgotten. "I see one of them as green. They're not in our party, so that means they have to be either a Spriggan, or friends with one of us."

Kirito doesn't have all that many people friended, Asuna thought. I doubt many of us in this group do—the list of possibilities must be pretty short, and I bet everyone's thinking about them.

Both Burns and Mentat seemed to relax slightly, nodding as Kirito glanced at each of them. "Not going to be a problem, is there?"

"None from me," Mentat said, their healer almost sounding a little put off by being asked.

Burns shrugged. "None that I'll start, boss. If your friends are cool, I'm cool."

That, Asuna thought to herself, is an equivocal answer at best. But it was hard for her to see a way for him to answer any other way, either. Burns couldn't really know who that green contact was, what Kirito's friends were like, or—perhaps more importantly—how they were going to react to him.
Kirito gave him a look of scrutiny, and then nodded. "All right. Let's go clear this trash and meet some friends. Watch your AOE's." His eyes met Asuna's then, and the two of them smiled at each other in a way that sent warmth through her.

Then Asuna felt a different kind of warmth and faint tingle rush across her body as her party buffed her; one by one the icons for Stoneskin, Haste, Bracing, and Reactive Heals appeared on her status bar, with a similar collection popping up beside Kirito's and showing on his visible ribbon. As soon as the first of the buffs began landing, she and Kirito rushed through the now-open doorway with weapons drawn, charging down a short stone stairway into a large open area filled with packed dirt and broken gray stone sarcophagi.

Another party had been clearly through this room relatively recently; the signs of combat and the scorches of magic impacts on the environment were not only obvious to the naked eye, but showed little sign of having begun to fade or reset. Asuna wasn't sure exactly how long it took for a zone to return to its default state, but she suspected not much more than half an hour had passed, if that. It also struck her as somewhat unusual to find only a single encounter in such a large room, but she pushed the thought out of her mind as Kirito engaged the Graveworms with a long-charge, long-cooldown AOE technique that brought his sword around in a sweeping, almost over-extended slash that hit the whole clustered encounter of mobs at once. With aggro squarely on him, Kirito immediately jumped back and called for a switch. Asuna was already on her way in, unleashing the broad cone AOE of her «Wild Impaler» technique in order to get the attention of the nearest mobs. She heard chanting; black tendrils erupted from the floor between her and the Graveworms, and the mobs found themselves Rooted as soon as they slithered towards her.

The moment the Root status took effect, she heard Xorren's voice from behind her; a smoky projectile shot between herself and Kirito and exploded right in the midst of the Graveworms. Their HP bars all dropped by nearly a third, but began to slowly creep back up until Kirito waded in with a series of sweeping strikes that managed to tag each mob at least once, locking in the fading Illusion damage and turning it permanent.

A mob exploded into particles at the touch of Asuna's one precisely-targeted single strike technique; the next followed almost immediately as Kirito spun on his heel and cut down a Graveworm that broke its Root and lunged towards the back ranks. The three remaining seemed to hesitate for a moment as Kirito switched out, and Asuna was already in mid-motion of leaping forward to intercept a third when she heard the always-unnerving sound of mobs spawning behind her.

"Adds!" Burns said sharply, the word flowing almost immediately into an incantation. "Yatto tsutakke navamdu tepnaga jan!"

Asuna didn't have the liberty of turning to look, but she knew, in that moment, exactly why it had been bothering her to find only a single encounter in this large, recently-cleared room. Repops. There had to have been multiple Graveworm encounters in this room, and only one had repopped—until just now.

She had no choice but to trust her party members and let them handle it; she risked a glance over her shoulder and only barely caught a glimpse of the new Graveworms that Burns had just Rooted, then had to return her attention to the fight in front of her as one of the mobs remaining in their first encounter burrowed into the ground and reappeared right in front of her. It hadn't even finished the animation of rising from the ground before Asuna's attack struck it right in the mouth, eliminating the last of its HP. The next fell to the black blur of Kirito's sword, and Asuna chanted up a Defensive Shield just in time to block the acid spit from the final mob, with Kirito taking advantage of its
preoccupation to get the Last Attack.

"First group clear!" Kirito called out.

"Adds locked and disabled," Burns said from the back ranks, while both Kirito and Asuna dashed past their squishier party members in order to deal with the new encounter. "Six seconds on Root."

"We can handle these," Kirito said, a heavy diagonal slash trailing elemental flames as he engaged the nearest Graveworm from the second group. "Burns, keep an eye out for any more repops!"

If Asuna hadn't already been wary and alert for more adds, she might not have noticed the strange but disturbingly familiar ripple in the air a few meters behind the Graveworms. As dark as these barrows were, it almost escaped her notice—and she might have mistaken it for one of the many spell effects filling the air had she not seen the same thing very recently, and under circumstances that had burned the image into her mind.

It was just like when the spiders had uncloaked themselves back in Snjarholt—except that the shape was roughly humanoid, rather than that of a dog-sized arachnid.

"Someone's invizzed over there!" Asuna called out in the moment she had while her technique was charging up.

She'd barely begun speaking before Burns had another Root deployed to that part of the room, Dark Magic blackening the floor near his target just before stretching out to grasp at the legs of their new assailants. Humanoid they might have been, but they were not players; their forms were twisted and stooped beneath dirty, ragged robes, with eyeless faces and the loose skin of advanced age. Cursors that had been yellow for a brief moment after appearing shifted immediately to red as the pair of mobs were Rooted, and as Asuna's gaze lingered on them, the tag of «Umbral Caretaker» appeared above each of their heads.

Asuna had heard a bit about these mobs, but the sense of recognition from most of her party was far more immediate and personal. "Oh shit, Caretakers!" Xorren blurted out.

"They're locked down!" Burns called out immediately after casting what Asuna recognized as a Silence spell. "Try to avoid hitting them!"

From what Asuna had been told by everyone who'd encountered them, that was sound advice. Near as she could tell at a quick glance, neither Caretaker had suffered any damage so far; she quickly returned her attention to the Graveworms that Kirito was making short work of cutting down.

"Asuna, switch!"

The corrosive spittle from the remaining two Graveworms converged on the spot that Kirito had just occupied a moment after he leapt back; Asuna danced in past the hissing puddle on the ground and neutralized the weakest Graveworm with a quick freehand strike that pinpointed the weak spot on its upraised belly, then took advantage of the short freeze time to unload a far more hard-hitting technique against the Graveworm that was still at half HP. Both mobs exploded obligingly with the sound of tinkling glass, leaving only the two visibly upset Caretakers still bound by the long-duration Root Burns had hit them with. "Worm adds clear!"

"Clear!" Kirito said loudly, before eyeing the two Caretakers. "Mostly. Burns, Xorren, you've dealt with these before. What's your play?"

"Burn them down fast and GTFO," said the Imp mage. His violet eyes went briefly upwards. "Eight seconds on Root. We start damaging them, it's gonna summon a Norn. We don't wanna be here
when it shows up."

Kirito was already turning towards the nearest Caretaker. "Asuna—"

"I'm with you."

Kirito's target was still Rooted; he began charging up what she thought she recognized as a very powerful multi-hit technique. "Everyone, as soon as this hits I want you all to—"

The voice from behind them was sudden, unexpected, and alarming. Its almost-sibilant, raspy tones were spoken by no player, by no human mouth of any kind; the words were in no language that Asuna recognized, nor any spell that she knew. But by the reactions of nearly her entire party, those words meant that all of them were in danger.

"Noruna domuru, uthan."

A status effect appeared in Asuna's HUD with an icon she didn't recognize; by a healer's long habit she focused on it to pop its description. She actually had to stop for a critical moment and double-take; «Judgment of the Norns» apparently had no duration and was simply… there.

"You can't cure it, don't waste MP!" Mentat said loudly towards Asuna, saving her the trouble of trying. She was only a few paces behind Kirito as he broke away from the group and rushed towards the «Norn Custodian», a Dark Magic projectile from Burns streaking just past his shoulder and Rooting the mob. The Norn had some kind of Offensive Shield that crackled with energy she didn't recognize; the moment Kirito came within its range, his HP started dropping alarmingly fast, and some of that energy actually arced out from Kirito to strike Asuna just as she switched in.

Whatever element was behind the mob's shield DOT, It didn't seem to do quite as much damage to her, but Asuna couldn't really spare any time or attention to reason out which of her resists was responsible—there'd be time to debrief and figure out the mechanics later. The Norn began to cast another spell, but Asuna had already prepared «Stinging Barb», and the extremely fast one-hit technique inflicted an «Interrupt» on the Norn that cut off its incantation and caused it to turn its attention to her. The technique had no freeze time in its End Frame, but a startlingly quick slash from the Norn's weathered metal gauntlet still struck a glancing blow. It did minimal damage through her Stoneskin and Spiritual Armor buffs, but forced her to jump backwards to evade a follow-up.

Kirito, freshly healed by Mentat, was already switching back in, but was just a moment too late to prevent the Norn from trying to cast its spell again. A wave of dark silver-gray energy blasted out from the Norn and washed over Asuna; her MP began to drain away rapidly for a few seconds before Mentat's cure landed and got rid of the debuff. As he'd said, however, Judgment of the Norns didn't respond to the same cure, nor was it clear to her what the effect was even doing. Argo said a lot of clearers think it increases the damage you take if you've hurt Caretakers, but this is the first time Kirito and I have even seen them!

From far behind Asuna, she heard Burns call another debuff on their targets. "New Root, thirty seconds! Melee out!"

Both Kirito and Asuna had been briefed by Argo on the new zone, but Burns clearly knew this mob better than either of them; they wasted no time in leaping and somersaulting backwards as soon as the Root landed and fixed the Norn in place. No sooner than they'd done so did the Norn chant out another spell that hit her and Kirito with Silence. Almost at the same time, the air began to fill with chanting as Mentat cast a Dispel on the mob that shattered its Offensive Shield, then another chain of incantations cured their status effects, healed them, and refreshed some of their short-duration buffs; all the while Xorren and Burns barraged the Norn with ranged magic attacks.
Asuna spared a moment to review the party's status while the mob was incapacitated and she was being healed. Everyone's health was still in good shape, but both Kirito and Mentat were low on MP. Mentat's usage made sense; he was working overtime to keep the party topped off and deal with all the debuffs that the Norn churned out. But he'd cured the MP drain almost immediately, and Kirito had barely cast anything at all; she saw him chugging an MP potion and wondered why it was even necessary at this point in the fight.

Asuna knew the Root wouldn't survive the onslaught of all-out magic DPS, and sure enough, the thick ropes of Dark Magic that kept the Norn pinned in place dissolved once enough damage was dealt to the Rooted mob to trigger its break chance. Kirito, already healed to full and on his way back in, charged and executed a dashing move that sideswiped the Norn with a glancing slash as he passed it. The Norn, whirling on ethereal legs of translucent mist, obligingly turned to face the opponent that had maneuvered behind it, exposing its back to the rest of the party; by the time it had done so, Kirito was already past his freeze time and was able to successfully parry the backhand that it dealt to him.

Now that the mob was turned, the party was safe from its frontal attacks, and it gave them a buffer to bring their ranged DPS in closer. But no matter how artfully Kirito evaded the Norn's physical strikes, a single hit from a PBAOE spell centered on the mob cut deeply into his HP pool, and neither Mentat's direct or reactive healing spells were keeping up with the thing's damage output. Asuna had to switch in more and more often, and each time she did, Kirito came back into the fray with his HP just a bit lower than before.

"Serav kewemzul dweren." Another short incantation brought the Norn's damage shield back up again, and brought Kirito back out of the fray for healing with a frustrated look on his face. Why isn't this shield hitting me the way it is him? Asuna wondered. It definitely acts like Lightning damage with the way it's arcing between us, but I don't have any buffs or gear on that would be helping mitigate that—it's been a pretty rare damage type so far, only a couple of mobs use it.

Asuna could clearly see her own HP ticking down as the proximity effect sparked and sizzled around her, so she certainly wasn't immune somehow—but the damage wasn't nearly as severe as what Kirito was taking every time he got close to the mob, and she could see the same HOT icon on both her status bar and his countering the Damage Over Time effect. Kirito still needed time to get his HP back up, but Asuna could tell she was building a considerable amount of aggro; she called for a switch as soon as the next of Mentat's big heals landed on Kirito, and he dashed past her in a flurry of black just as the mob began to drift backwards, chanting an unfamiliar spell. "Yavuk tomezal kezure mejuru tepnaga kwedan."

A noxious greenish-black cloud blasted out point-blank from the Norn, briefly obscuring Asuna's view of it and Kirito. She could still see her HUD, and what she saw there filled her with a sudden spike of fear: Kirito's HP had immediately dropped below the halfway mark from the initial hit, and was dropping horrifyingly fast by the second. Asuna's voice was almost a scream as she dashed into the dissipating cloud, a sickly green version of the Damage Over Time effect icon appearing in her HUD. "Kirito, get out of there!"

Asuna almost collided with Kirito, so quickly did he circle past the Norn and retreat towards the back ranks for healing, but a quick hop on one foot allowed her to pirouette around him and engage the mob before it turned back towards the party. Trying to buy them time, she stepped into the pre-motion for her «Quadruple Pain» technique, and after a fractional pause that cost her a clawed slash across her left arm, she released the devastating four-hit combo against the the breastplate of the Norn's armored robes.

Her luck held; the technique had a small chance to inflict a short Paralysis status, and the Norn failed
to resist it. "DPS in!" she shouted.

No attack spells lanced out from the party in response to her call. Only a few moments had passed since the last time she’d looked, but when Asuna's eyes went to her party list, the HP bars by both Kirito's and Burns's names were gone, and everyone else’s was dropping. Asuna felt like someone had just driven her sword through her chest; she choked for a moment out of pure shock, then gave an anguished outcry as she looked past the Norn and saw the black smoke and churning violet flames of their Remain Lights. On the status ribbons for the rest of the party, she could see the same point-blank DOT that had afflicted both her and Kirito steadily burning through everyone else’s HP pools now as well. Mentat, his HP nearly to the red, was chain-casting in a clear attempt to heal everyone who was still standing so that they stayed that way, and he glanced in her direction with desperate entreaty on his face.

Asuna was already bringing her hands into the position for one of her Raise Fallen spells and preparing to drop her weapon, but those moments of distraction almost cost her her life. She'd barely noticed the Norn casting a Delay debuff on her until the moment it landed, and it took her a painfully long second to slowly reach her free hand into a pocket and touch one of her consumable Crystals. "Cure!"

A torchlight shadow warned her; Asuna ducked and dropped into a sitting spin to avoid a streak of metal claws, slashed at the Norn's limb on the way around, then felt the System Assist portion of her «Acrobatics» skill engage as she kicked off the ground and flipped in place over a low follow-up. "Mentat!" Asuna shouted as she parried a double slash from the Norn's long-clawed gauntlets and followed it up with an Interrupt to keep the thing from completing whatever spell it began trying to cast. "Rez?"

Mentat stopped casting only long enough to shout back. "Trying not to die! I need you healing!"

But there was nothing Asuna could do with the Norn in between her and the party—if she didn't hold her ground, it would quickly turn its attention to the rest of the group and finish what it had started. Xorren's low HP left him in no condition to be trying to switch in for Asuna, and no one else could. One of the Umbral Caretakers had wandered over to Kirito's Remain Light and was holding out its gnarled hands for no clear reason that she could tell; the other Caretaker was nowhere in sight, and Asuna hoped it was dead—the last thing they needed right now was another add to deal with.

Asuna gritted her teeth as the Norn recast its damage shield and slashed with both gauntlets, sparks careening off her rapier as she blocked the heavy attack, knees starting to buckle. Her eyes went past the Norn's misty form just long enough to fix a distance to Kirito's Remain Light, then withdrew her sword and tucked her shoulder into a combat roll just before the mob's claws clashed against the ground. *It's never going to let me cast this spell unless I get past it!*

It was in that moment of her greatest despair that the double doors at the far side of the burial chamber flew open with a bang. Two full parties of players poured in through the breach, accompanied by several pets. Their charge was led by a massive Cait Sith tank and a Salamander with a katana—the first of them she thought she recognized; the second she knew she did, especially once she saw the mixed-race group of players backing him up.

*A friend of Kirito's,* came the thought flashing through Asuna's mind as she briefly laid eyes on him before leaping out of the way of another of the Norn's physical attacks. *Klein, I think it was?*

Whoever these new parties were, they wasted absolutely no time stepping in despite most of them starting the battle with HP bars already depleted to varying degrees. Klein, his own HP only barely above the halfway point before a heal landed on him, had a gleaming katana raised high above his head and glowing crimson with the opening of a weapon technique as he rushed directly at the Norn.
"Thelvin, help me pin this thing! You, go help your friends!"

Asuna triggered her «Linear» technique without targeting the mob's cursor; she streaked past its side and out of the way just as Klein's initial blow crushed into the Norn's shoulder. The Cait Sith tank came in right on his heels, the blue glow of his shield charge streaking behind him as the System Assist shot him forward several meters and collided solidly with his target, rocking it backwards. Not questioning her good fortune, Asuna took advantage of the distraction and dropped her rapier on the floor, holding out both hands before her as her footsteps carried her towards the party.

Never before in her life, not even in the Sewers fighting Prophet, had it been so important to her to cast a spell correctly. In the moment that she reached the exact midpoint between where Burns and Kirito had fallen, her focus narrowed to nothing more than the posture of her hands and the movements of her lips—ignoring her HUD, the pitched battle still in progress, and even the nearby Caretaker that had seemed to ignore her just as completely. "Zutto mezal kefletaz tepnaga yasun!"

A lambent blue light blazed out around her, the sixteen-meter AOE encompassing the Remain Lights for both Kirito and Burns. Both of them began to re-form immediately, and Asuna immediately followed up with the most potent AOE healing spell she was capable of casting quickly—the first Focus version of which she had, fortunately, just unlocked earlier that day. "Zutto famudrog shippura tepnaga yasun!"

It wasn't enough to bring them back to full, but it was enough to get them out of immediate danger. The nearby Caretaker stared almost stupidly at Kirito for what seemed like a full second before he swept his blade from its sheath; his longsword split the mob from one shoulder to the opposite hip and cut deeply into the bare packed dirt. The cloud of glittering polygons from its death briefly clouded Asuna's line of sight to Kirito just as a wheezy shriek from the Norn preceded its own end.

"Rez!" came a cry from the direction of Klein's group. Three Remain Lights were on the ground; two amber and one green.

The Gnome mage from Klein's group was already fishing frantically through his pockets. "Nyakago is down and I used up my only MP Crystal on the last Norn we fought!" he called out. "Anyone got?"

Asuna herself was virtually drained of MP, but she knew she had at least one MP Crystal. Almost everyone, including an Imp and several of the Caits, had their hands shoved into pouches, pockets and bags; before anyone could deliver, Mentat took a few steps forward and snapped his arcane staff into a level position. "Zutto famudrokke fletaz shippura tepnaga yasun!"

Her hand already touching an MP Crystal of her own, Asuna's jaw dropped. She couldn't cast that spell, though she recognized it and knew there were more than a few Undines who could. Her own Water Magic skill wasn't too far off, but it was still a bit surprising to hear it cast by a Salamander. The Remain Lights of the two Cait Sith players immediately began to re-shape themselves into players, but Asuna had to look twice to realize that the Sylph's hadn't. There were a few stunned moments of silence and shock from the other players Klein had brought with him; the look on Mentat's face was no less shocked than theirs. "I'm out of—"

"Save it!" shouted the Cait Sith healer who'd just been rezzed as he threw out his hands, nearly touching the Sylph's Remain Light. "Zutto mezal kefletaz shaja yasun!"

As soon as the fallen Sylph player finished re-forming, nearly everyone was talking at once. Not all were arguing, but the outcry from those who were trying to urge calm did no less to add to the noise level. For a moment Asuna wondered if they were going to attract roamers; adds of any kind were the last thing they could afford at the moment. Or repops for that matter—
Enough was enough.

A burst of light and stunning sound rang out and briefly illuminated Asuna's immediate surroundings as she picked up her rapier where she'd dropped it and quickly triggered her «Flashbang» technique. No one was anywhere near being in range of the point-blank Holy damage, but it was one of her few taunts and it surprisingly did just as well at drawing the attention of every player in the room and interrupting the drama in progress.

Face clouded with anger, Asuna flicked her rapier out to her side and returned every challenging gaze as she advanced forward. "What just happened?"

"Ask your pet monkey," snapped one of the Cait Sith players suddenly, a scowling young blonde woman with a bow on her back and a Gazer floating at her side.

"Teel!" came an immediate rebuke from the orange-haired melee player standing next to Thelvin, his jaw still hanging open after speaking.

Teel's hand was already clapped onto her mouth, her wide eyes going to Klein. "Oh my god, I am so, so sorry."

"There's a fair question buried in the pointless insult," said Thelvin with a look towards Teel that was just as hard as the one he then turned towards Mentat. "Why didn't you AOE rez?"

"He did," said Asuna at the exact same time that the other three healers in the room expressed the same thing. They were all still looking at each other in confusion when Thelvin followed up with the more important question. "Then why didn't it work on Dynamm?"

Kirito had joined Asuna at her side at some point during the proceedings; she didn't realize it until his voice surprised her from just behind and to her left. "Mentat," he said. "I thought you had Friendly Bias set."

"I do."

Now that Dynamm had been rezzed, he had a cursor to Focus; to Asuna it was the expected yellow of a neutral race. Everyone in a clearing group knew to avoid AOE attacks when there were mixed-faction groups around who weren't in a raid with you. But with Friendly Bias on, a rez should've—

Mentat's eyes were already on Dynamm, and an almost physical pain passed across his face; his weight leaned for a moment on the twisted wood of his casting staff before he straightened. "Oh, shit.

What looked like a mixture of confusion and realization passed across the three parties like a ripple. Kirito took a step forward; Asuna could see the knowledge of what had happened on his face as plain as day. "You're at war."

"Not me," said Mentat, returning Kirito's gaze with an unreadable conflict wracking his face. "My faction." He turned towards the only other fellow Salamander in the room. "You understand, don't you? I tried. I cast the most powerful Focus AOE rez I could. The game wouldn't let me rez him."

"I don't think I quite understand yet," Asuna said, sheathing her rapier and stepping forward. She looked towards Kirito, who'd been the one to originally explain a setting she'd never bothered to change from its default. "Shouldn't this Friendly Bias setting make everyone who isn't Allied show as Neutral? That's how it's always been for me unless I was being attacked."

"Only if they're not Hostile to you, your guild..." Klein glanced around at his friends, then
exchanged a look of sympathy with Mentat. "Or your faction. Thanks for trying, man."

"I'm so sorry," said Teel again, coming to join the circle of conversation that seemed to be forming. "I thought—"

"I'm used to it," Mentat said bluntly. "Nothing I can do." Face grim, he looked back at Klein. "You seem to have found a way around it."

"We all use Guild cursor settings," Klein said. "Since Fuurinkazan isn't at war with anyone, everyone who doesn't attack us shows as Neutral or Allied."

Thelvin held up both hands in the air for a moment. "I hate to break this up, but we shouldn't use this room as a rest stop. It's not safe, and we're all still a bit worn down."

"He's right," Kirito said decisively. "We need to get moving. But there's something you all need to know first. Something I just found out the hard way."

"Don't die?" quipped Burns, who'd just nearly done that very thing. He struck Asuna as being unusually composed, even chipper, for having just lost so much progress to the death penalty when he was rezzed—let alone having had a near-death experience in the first place.

Kirito looked at him. "You didn't notice it happening to you? Those seconds were counting down a lot quicker than they should've."

"They do that, boss. I was a Remain Light, too."

"Yeah," Kirito said evenly. "But I guess you didn't have a Caretaker eating yours."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoy this fairly sizable update. There's a lot going on here, and all of this action is building up to some pretty game-changing developments in the coming chapters. I was listening to a lot of Avantasia and other symphonic metal while writing the combat scenes, but feel free to insert the badass soundtrack of your choice. It's hard to go wrong if you want to stick with Kajiura Yuki and put on something like "We Have to Defeat It" or "False King."

I'm trying to get back to a more regular writing and publishing routine. A chapter a month is just not something I can really sustain anymore while working a day job, but every other month or thereabouts might be doable. We'll play it by ear. I should have health insurance again soon, which will do a lot of good for my arm and my overall level of spoons.

My best to all.
"The close affinity that the Leprechaun faction has with mechanical devices and metalcrafting permits them to invest those devices with arcane power, turning them into player-usable items known as «Mecharcane Constructs». The most basic of these Constructs are simple tools that can be found in nearly any city, such as orelight lamps—but advanced high-level recipes permit the creation of even more complex modular devices, some of which are capable of performing powered work. This is not a craft to be undertaken lightly—many recipes require both Alchemy and Enchanting skills in addition to the Metal Equipment Smithing skill which all Leprechauns possess, and consume a great deal of materials in their creation. However, as with most of Alfheim's systems, creative and technically-minded players who dedicate themselves to learning the purpose of each component have the freedom to connect them in potentially limitless combinations..."

— Alfheim Online manual, «Mecharcane Constructs»

10 May 2023
Day 187 — Evening

Kirito's PM inbox was currently dominated by lists of names. Big lists, short lists, and even the overall list that was his inbox itself. Beyond PMs from Argo and Coper containing the majority of those lists or replies discussing them, he also had a substantial collection of individuals who'd either PMed him directly when he wasn't in the World Tree, or had their messages forwarded to him by Coper.

And there were so many of these messages; more than he could see at once, even at the window's maximum size. It was one of the first times Kirito could recall being glad that it was impossible to PM someone who was underground or in a dungeon; it was likely the only thing keeping the message notification from chiming to interrupt him at an inconvenient time—say, in the middle of a battle.

It was, in a word, overwhelming.

Not least because he wasn't yet sure what to do with most of them. The bulk of the Spriggan volunteers or job-seekers were not only underleveled for anything remotely resembling clearing work, they barely outleveled the newly-spawning mobs in the field zones surrounding Arun—if they even did at all. A good number of these players would need an escort or a good party to even get from Penwether to Arun alone, Kirito thought with a grimace. What am I going to tell them? Thanks for wanting to make the world a better place, but no thanks?

"There has to be something they can do to contribute," Kirito mused aloud, forehead creasing slightly beneath a loose drift of black hair.

"Use them to build the mid-level support infrastructure you're going to need," said Asuna, neatly summing up the solution as she returned to the table of his inn room bearing a tea tray. Kirito twitched slightly in surprise at the sound of her voice; he'd been so focused on his UI that he hadn't noticed her quiet entry. She set the tray on the table and politely began pouring a cup for Kirito while she spoke, a thin curtain of steam rising up between them. "You're still poking at the same problem as when I left, right? The way things are now, every prospective Spriggan clearer is on their own just
as much as you are when it comes to mats, upgrades, and maintenance. Jahala is always on about the logistics of supplying and fielding a clearing group, and he's right. You need people on that, and they don't have to be high-level—just high enough to clear field mobs efficiently."

Kirito nodded, sipping at the hot tea even though he wasn't particularly thirsty. It was better than the usual inn fare; he wondered if the time it had taken her to return meant she'd actually made it herself using the «Cooking» skill. He wouldn't have put it past Asuna to march right into the inn's back areas and commandeering its kitchen if the NPCs there would've let her, and the idea made him smile.

An answering smile rose to Asuna's face as she seated herself. "Something funny?"

"Just thinking that you're right," Kirito said, setting down the cup. "Also thinking that between the culture in the beta and the example that Yoshihara set, Spriggans have been pushed towards a mercenary approach to getting by in the game. If nothing else, I'm pretty sure we could hire these people to farm for us." He grimaced for a moment. "Well, I say we, but unless Coper's holding out on me, the Spriggans don't have much in the way of a treasury—Yoshihara had no taxes of any kind set up, and Coper won't be changing that if he wants to keep his position. I'm going to be funding this out of pocket at first."

"We can work on that," Asuna said. She closed her eyes and raised her own cup to her lips with both hands, taking a sip of the hot liquid before continuing. "But it's not just farmers, Kirito. Talking with Diavel and some other players has gotten me thinking about the bigger picture a bit. The new mobs have made trade and travel dangerous again, and one thing Diavel's started doing is having our patrol groups clear the roads between Parasel and Arun."

Nodding along while Asuna spoke, something suddenly clicked in Kirito's head right as she finished. His menu was already set visible; he pulled up a note window with the list he'd begun making of players who weren't high enough level to be front-line clearers, but who were at least strong enough to potentially travel. "Here," he said, turning the window slightly so that Asuna could see better. "Tank, DPS, DPS, healer, mage, tank, mage…"

Kirito's index finger traced down the list in the note-taking window, the faint tactile resistance of the virtual pane sliding past his fingertip as the typing cursor and a block of highlighted text followed his touch; the highlight cleared when he tapped his finger at the end. "There are at least three full parties we could put together here, depending on how they get along—most in their twenties, a few up to low thirties. Could maybe even get four or more groups, if we can recruit some pickups to fill in the gaps."

Asuna was clearly thinking one step ahead of him. "Exactly. And it's work that needs doing." She then met Kirito's eyes again. "You have good relations with the Cait Sith clearers at least, especially after friending Thelvin today. For that matter, you've already got an in with Argo, and she can talk to Alicia about any official permissions or coordination you might need."

"Alicia's already on my friends list," Kirito said. Adding Thelvin had been Asuna's strong suggestion; it made good sense to start building connections with more clearing groups. "I've helped the Caits out before. So yeah, if it comes to it, I might have some pull with them."

Asuna blinked in apparent surprise, then smiled. "Even better." She drew open her own menu and scooted her chair closer to Kirito's seat at the tiny table, zooming her game map out until it showed most of Allheím's central continent. A quick tap at a sidebar option let her draw a series of glowing paths with her fingertip. "Put together one group to start clearing back and forth between Arun and Freelia here, and another to help take some of the pressure off the Undine patrols doing the same in the east—I'll send messages to Diavel and Laffa about that. If you can spare a third, they can start clearing the northern routes. I'm sure the NCC won't complain."
"One group on a given route isn't going to be able to make much of an impact," Kirito pointed out. "It'll take at least half a day to clear one direction, and the rest of the day just to clear back. Some of the mobs will start repopping within minutes."

"It's better than nothing," Asuna replied. "Especially if you set up a consistent schedule, and get your groups to stick to it—make it known that a group will be clearing a route, say, every weekday starting at 8:00 AM. Anyone who wants safe passage can follow behind them."

"The LFG walls," Kirito said, snapping his fingers. "Anyone looking to travel is going to be there, seeing if there are any ads for parties heading their way."

Asuna gave him a radiant smile that made him feel a now-familiar lightness in his chest, a warmth coming to his face in response. "That's perfect. Just get your groups to advertise and hang out there prior to the time they're supposed to head out. Players will come to expect it if they're reliable, and word will get around."

Kirito gave the proposal some thought, his own feelings conflicted. It wasn't that it was a bad idea, really. If anything, it was the best either of them had yet come up with for how to deal with their surplus of under-leveled volunteers—something truly productive and helpful that they could be doing, something to take advantage of this window of opportunity before everyone just melted back into the shadows and went about their own business.

The problem was that it required organization and planning that Kirito didn't have the time or aptitude to provide. And he wasn't sure who could.

"I guess it's a start," Kirito said finally. "At least it gives me something to tell some of these people, and they'll farm a lot of useful stuff while they're clearing those routes. Maybe I can get Coper to take on getting the non-clearing volunteers organized. Give him something to do besides sit in Arun and relay PMs."

"I'll talk to Diavel too," Asuna said. "And I bet Laffa can offer some advice. He's done a great job with our own farming and patrol groups."

"That sounds worth a try," Kirito agreed. "There are a few tanks who aren't quite high enough level to be in front-line groups, but they'd make great anchor members to build patrol or farming groups around." He pulled a face then, suddenly reminded of the shortcoming that he still had to fill in his own group.

What they clearly needed most—especially after the punishing near-wipe they'd endured when facing their first Norn—was a real tank. Although both Kirito and Asuna could, with skilled parrying and evasion, suffice in a pinch as off-tanks—not an uncommon arrangement for clearing groups—when it came to facing off against a tough boss they were more suited for the DPS side of the equation. Their ability to hold aggro was directly tied to their ability to dish out damage and avoid a mob's worst attacks, while switching out at the right time for another forward to give them a chance to recover and keep the aggro balanced.

Which wasn't to say that Kirito considered himself any kind of glass cannon; like most clearers who wanted to stay alive, he had a respectable number of stat points in VIT, and both his clearing gear and his heavy investment in STR increased his HP further still. But unlike a real tank-spec player, neither he nor Asuna had much—if any—investment in the hate-generation skills necessary to properly anchor a mob, nor the equipment and build to absorb the punishment that would result. Even the enchanted light breastplate Kirito usually wore was equipped without an actual «Armor» skill of any kind, and more for its stats and other effects than its actual damage mitigation numbers.

He also knew for sure, now—she'd told him, though he'd suspected long before then—that Asuna
didn't have a skill allocated for hers, either.

It's too bad Kramer decided to quit the group over the cursor change, Kirito mused silently while he searched his notes for yet another list of names—this one much shorter than any of the others. But given what happened today, I'm even more convinced that it was the right decision.

If anything, Kirito thought the failure to rez Dynamm demonstrated that the change didn't go far enough. The Friendly Bias cursor setting wasn't going to help as long as there was a Salamander or an Imp in their party—and right now, they had both. It had been a good first step, and a useful gambit to push out someone who hadn't been a good fit anyway, but it wasn't a complete solution—especially since it still didn't completely solve the problem of neutral players being vulnerable to stray AOEs.

And that was something Kirito knew they were going to have to deal with before going back out again as a group. It was just one more thing piling up, one more obligation to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

So lost had Kirito become in his thoughts that he didn't realize Asuna had risen from her chair until he felt her hands settle gently on his shoulders. He froze for just a moment in surprise, then relaxed as her arms slipped comfortably around his neck and shoulders in a somewhat awkwardly-positioned hug from behind.

"You don't have to bear all this alone, you know," he heard Asuna say, her voice close. "It's not all on you to fix. You have people who are willing and able to help break down your burdens into manageable tasks, if you'll let them. If you don't, you'll be letting your burdens break you."

She was right, and Kirito knew it. That didn't make it any easier to accept the help, let alone seek it out.

Kirito had always been a loner by nature, with few friends and a knack for getting things done on his own. His time in ALO—both in the beta and after launch—had only served to cement those qualities that were already present in him. In many ways they'd served him well, but now he was faced with a responsibility that was bigger than him—one which outstripped his ability to simply push through the challenges with cleverness, persistence, reflexes, and gaming experience.

Without thinking about it, Kirito's hand rose to cover Asuna's where it rested on his shoulder. He felt her arms tighten around him almost reflexively, and it took a moment for him to relax at the touch. The two of them hadn't really discussed it explicitly yet, and he couldn't quite put a finger on when it had happened—but at some point in the last few days, his relationship with Asuna had changed. The unspoken closeness they'd been sharing, the way they'd been traveling and facing mortal danger together, and these moments when they touched each other... all of it pointed towards a huge shift in the way Kirito and Asuna regarded each other.

"We need a real tank," Kirito said, leaning his head back against the soft resistance of Asuna's shoulder—at least, he thought that was her shoulder—for just a moment before her arms slipped away from him and she stood up straight. "I'm not sure what that debuff is that the Norns use, but it seems to make everything else do more damage—and I don't have the resists or the HP to tank it."

"I'm not so sure it's your resists that are the problem, Kirito." Had that been a quaver in her voice? Kirito couldn't be sure, but for a moment he could've sworn she'd almost stuttered. "That damage
shield the Norn was using, it was Lightning-based, right? I had the debuff too, and I barely have any
Lightning Resist—yet I was taking normal amounts of damage. And I have no idea what kind of
damage it was that took down you and Burns at the end."

Kirito had been speaking partly out of frustration; whatever the mechanics of the Norn's debuff, it
wasn't as simple as just stacking enough resists or EHP to soak the damage—there was something
they were missing. "I know. But regardless, I need to find us a real tank, and I need to do it tonight if
we want to make decent time in the morning."

Asuna stepped back around the chair to stand at Kirito's side, arms folded as she looked down to
meet his eyes. "We," she said insistently. "We need to find a tank. And it might not be a bad idea to
expand that 'we' to include the rest of your party. They're going to be a lot more likely to go along
with a new member if they feel like they had some involvement in picking them out."

Kirito made an agreeable sound of acknowledgement, coming to his feet and swiping all of his
windows closed. "Then we should go meet our first candidate soon. Which meant that it was time to
head downstairs, rejoin their companions, and head out into the city again.

"We got a couple of applications from plate tanks," Kirito explained a few minutes later, walking
down the street with Asuna at his side and the other three players in the party clustered loosely
behind them in a reverse delta. "Problem is, they're low 30s at best."

"Too old," Xorren said immediately. "Can we not have my dad leading the charge?"

"Thirties as in their level, Xorren," Kirito said, wanting to laugh but also not wanting to encourage
his teammate to make another dumb joke.

"They told you that?" Kirito couldn't see his face without turning, but Burns actually sounded
surprised. "That's pretty personal info. Maybe don't go sharing it."

"I have access to the Spriggan roster," Kirito admitted after a moment. "But don't worry, I'm not
putting any levels to anyone's names."

Asuna spoke up then. "The point is, they're not what we need for our first clearing group. We can
help get some people caught up once we're established, but right now we need our best in the
vanguard."

"I might be able to help with that," Burns said. When Kirito and Asuna both stopped and turned to
face him, the party arranged itself into a rough circle off to one side of the busy street while players
and pathing NPCs alike flowed past them. "I've worked with various clearing groups before, and I
still have friends and contacts. If a tank's what's holding us back, I can probably hook us up."

Kirito actually considered the offer for all of a few seconds before the likely catch occurred to him.
"A Spriggan tank?"

Burns shook his head, the long ends of his glossy black hair following the motion. "Not too many of
those I know of, period, aside from the one who just quit. But I've got a few Sal buddies who'd
probably be willing to step up. Good people, Kirito. And reliable, solid tanks. Just say the word and
I'll get some PMs out."

Why am I not surprised? Argo did say that someone in the Sals wanted to bring the Spriggans into
their alliance—someone who isn't Corvatz—and that Burns was their catspaw who helped arrange
Yoshihara's assassination. She was trying to be vague about it, but let's face it: we know it's someone
with connections to their clearing groups who's making a power play to advance Salamander
interests, but who doesn't want Corvatz getting the credit. That means they're also playing the political angle for someone who wants to lead but doesn't currently have the job.

I'm not dumb, Argo. I can put those pieces together and figure out who Burns is probably talking to. And if I can, so can someone else.

Kirito didn't need to consult with Asuna to know what she was going to say, but he looked at her anyway before answering, and suspected that what he saw on her face meant she had similar concerns. "I appreciate the offer, Burns, but I'd like at least half of what's supposed to be the lead Spriggan clearing group to be a little more… well…"

"Spriggan?" Xorren put in helpfully.

Kirito grinned, relieved at having someone else say it. "Something like that. Anyway, that's why we're headed over to this part of the market row. We've got a Spriggan evasion tank who said she had a bunch of gear maintenance to do, and gave me directions to her smith. Since she's probably going to be there for a while, we figured it'd be a good time to meet up."

"You know," Xorren put in, leaning close enough to Burns to prod him with an elbow. "It's probably a good thing Yar bailed. If he was here, he'd probably have something to say about how chicks can't tank."

"Fuck Yar," Burns said bluntly, momentarily taking Kirito aback. "Asuna tanked a Norn while everyone else's ass was on fire. If she can hold her ground, I'm pretty sure someone who's actually specced as a tank can do it."

"Well yeah, that's kinda what I was getting at. Great guy to duel with, solid DPS, but a bit of a salty prick. We've both heard him say shit like that before." Xorren glanced over at Kirito and Asuna, seeming to suddenly realize that the side conversation might be relevant to the rest of his party, and looked sheepish. Asuna, fortunately, seemed to be mollified enough by the compliment to overlook Xorren's other comments, and Kirito tried to steer the conversation back in a useful direction.

"Well anyway, that's the plan. We're going to meet up at the smith's shop, have a chat, and see if she's a good fit for the group."

The shop in question was located on one of the side streets relatively close to the warpgate—not all that far from Lisbeth's smithy, which made sense to Kirito; most player crafters who wanted clearer business would be setting up shop in the same general area, or as close to it as possible. Kartwright's Korner, he read off the sign out front above the usual hammer-and-anvil icon; beyond the English-language alliteration it had the enviable good fortune to be located on an actual street corner, and was easy to find. A trio of high-pitched bells jingled above their heads as Kirito entered with his party at his back.

Still something I'm having to get used to, Kirito thought. Every now and then I get this weird, nagging feeling like I'm being hunted, and I turn around and it's just because there are a bunch of players following me. Sometimes I'd swear I can almost feel all their gazes popping my cursor. How long has it been since I've actually been a part of a regular group? Or hung out with more than one or two people at a time when we weren't out partying?

He hadn't actually met their would-be tank in person before, but Kirito had no trouble spotting her. Although there were a couple of players in the main room of the smithy, only one of them was a Spriggan, and despite having no obvious headgear, the subtle shapes of medium armor were clearly visible beneath the thick-hemmed black longcoat in her faction's style. He took a gamble on the odds of there being another female Spriggan melee player who'd just happened to step in while his
applicant stepped out, and addressed her. "Are you Nori?"

The tall, athletic-looking Spriggan girl—or young woman, it was hard to be sure—had already turned at the sound of the doorbell; she grinned immediately upon seeing the collection of players who'd entered and gave the group a quick wave. "Yupyup! You've gotta be the guy I'm waiting for, amirite?"

Kirito stepped forward, extending his hand as Nori did and briefly clapping forearms with her in greeting; her grip was strong and firm. "Kirito. Behind me are Asuna, Xorren, Burns, and Mentat."

Nori's keen gray eyes took in each player as Kirito gestured to them one by one. "I'm going to forget all your names immediately until I've heard them like fifty times," she said while looking everyone over. "Sorry, I'm bad at that. But you're a decent-looking group. Couple-three mages, even an Undine for the pro heals. Kinda light on melee though."

"I'm only healing as backup," Asuna clarified. "In this group, my main role is melee DPS."

Nori seemed to give Asuna an even sharper look of scrutiny then, eyes dropping towards the single breastplate that she, like Kirito, wore mainly for its stats and so that the system would consider the torso to be covered by some kind of armor. "You don't say? Well excuse my assumptions. I didn't see a weapon on you." Her infectious grin reappeared as she turned back to Kirito, swiping a thick lock of hair out of her face and off to the left with the back of her hand. "Any other surprises I ought to know about? 'Cause if you've got your Sal doing the healing, this is gonna be the best 'opposite day' ever."

Kirito's party members seemed to have no clear consensus on whether to snicker, cough meaningfully, or remain silent; he caught signs of all three reactions from behind him. Nori's jaw hung open for just a beat before she closed it. "Right. I'm just gonna shut up now and go check on my gear." "You're fine," Mentat said, breaking his silence. "I'm used to it. But yes, I'm primary healer for this group."

"And the best damn healer I've ever partied with, too," Burns added with a belated nod to Asuna. "No offense to the lady who saved our asses today."

"None taken," Asuna allowed, a response that was probably well-earned after the day's events. They'd both fought at each other's sides; neither seemed to have any doubts about the other's abilities, which Kirito found interesting.

Burns waited a few beats after Asuna's comment, then directed his attention back to Nori, who kept glancing anxiously towards the back room of the smithy until he spoke. "What's your build?"

Nori's thick eyebrows raised halfway to her hairline. "How do you mean? I'm not telling you my stats."

"Nah," Burns said, unruffled. "I mean, what do you use? Kirito mentioned you were an evasion tank, but nothing else."

"Oh," said Nori, seeming to relax somewhat. She tapped a fingertip against the slight bulge of her chest; there was a thick sound of resistance from the breastplate she clearly wore underneath. "Staff and medium armor."

"A staff?" Xorren asked, sounding a little surprised. "Weird choice."
Burns nodded as if that meant something to him. "Two-handed STR/AGI weapon with high priority, emphasis on the AGI. Not ideal for tanking, but I've seen people make it work." He reached out and gave Xorren a light prod in the arm. "You're one to talk about weird builds, my dude."

A Leprechaun man in a blacksmith's apron whose obvious youth contrasted sharply with his avatar's short silver hair emerged from the back room, cradling an immense quarterstaff in his arms. He had a baby face and narrow, squinty eyes that widened slightly at the sight of so many players, and he hesitated at the entrance to the shop's back area. "I thought I heard the door," he said. "Nori, you didn't tell me you'd invited friends." He gave a quick bow in the direction of Kirito and his party. "I'm Kartwright, and welcome to my little corner of Arun. I'll be with you just as soon as I'm—"

Nori had already impressed Kirito as being a fairly energetic, sociable person, but as soon as she caught sight of the smith and what he was carrying, she rushed towards him so abruptly that it even seemed to catch him off-guard. "Ooooh, are you done? Gimmegimmegimmme." She snatched up the staff almost as soon as Kartwright had begun to hold it out to her in both hands, and proceeded to make the kinds of noises that Kirito normally associated with girls in the presence of small, cute animals. "Oh, baby, did you miss me? I know you did. Who's a good legendary head-basher? You are!"

"Um," said Kirito while he tried to figure out what else he could possibly say to that. It was certainly a fine-looking piece of gear, with ornate filigreed carvings along the length of it and a silver-framed bulge of some dark stone or crystal at one end. He had no doubt that it had been a rare drop of some kind, but he was at a loss for how to respond to Nori's reaction.

After thanking Kartwright almost as profusely as she'd just gushed at the weapon itself, Nori turned back to Kirito, eyes alight while she rocked the staff lovingly in her arms before sliding it into a set of loops on her back. "It's all good, right? Don't make this weird; you can't tell me you never talk to your weapon."

"I've met a few players who do," Kirito said noncommittally, finding it hard not to smile. Asuna made a sound of amusement from behind and to his left, drawing his attention. "A few? You need to spend more time with the Undine clearing groups, Kirito. Some of the guys might as well be married to their best gear, for how much they love it."

Kirito could understand the feeling; he got rather attached to a good sword himself—enough so that one of the first things he'd done after launch was rush a quest that he'd known to have an extremely good low-level longsword as its reward. He didn't love his weapons, though, not to the point where he started cuddling them and giving them baby talk... but he supposed that as quirks went, it was hardly a deal-breaker as long as Nori could do the job.

The speech he gave next wasn't precisely rehearsed, but he and Asuna had talked it over, and she'd managed to suggest a few pieces of wording that they both agreed would probably make the best impression. "Nice to finally meet you in person, Nori. I mentioned a few things in PM about what we're trying to do here, but here's what it comes down to: we don't just want to clear the game, we want to clear our name. We obey the Treaty, and we do our best to be friendly with everyone. All of that okay with you?"

Nori gave Kirito a double thumbs-up. "All good here. Life's too short to go making enemies if you don't have to."

Kirito wasn't exactly surprised by the question Burns asked next, but the timing of it caught him off-guard. "Do you duel?"
Nori's eyes shifted towards the Imp with a sly grin, almost as if she'd been expecting the question. "Oho? I've been known to once or twice. What about you guys?"

"Yeah, some of us more than others," Xorren said, exchanging a grin of his own with Burns. "He and I were probably gonna go a round after this. You up for it?"

Nori put two fingertips to her full lips. "Maaaaybe. But I'm not really interested in fighting mages."

Xorren spread his arms wide, shifting the panels of the vest and robes he wore so that she could more clearly see the short sword on one hip. "What about a Red Mage?"

Nori snorted. "A what? Nah, thanks for the offer, but I like to be right in the thick of things, facing off with someone who can keep up with me. You look slow and squishy." Her eyes went back to Kirito for a moment, seeming to look him up and down before her gaze shifted towards a point slightly behind him. "You, though."

It took Kirito a few seconds to realize that Nori wasn't actually talking to him, even though she was still looking in his general direction—or more precisely, past him. When he glanced back over his shoulder, he saw a look of confusion on Asuna's face as she turned from side to side, clearly not understanding. "What?"

"Yeah, you," Nori said, snapping her fingers a few times as she struggled to recall something. "Miss Melee DPS. Asa… Asu…"

"Asuna."

"Asuna," Nori said with a final, more decisive finger-snap. The Spriggan tank's grin widened. "I wanna see what you can do."

"Um, Nori," said Kartwright from behind Nori with an awkward hesitance. "Not trying to be rude, but I'd like it if you maybe didn't start a fight in my shop?"

Nori whirled on Kartwright and waved both hands quickly. "Oh, nonono! It's not what you think, Karto, we were just talking about a friendly duel is all. We'll do that out in the street or something."

"You're on."
Although Asuna was outwardly silent while she walked with the rest of the group, her thoughts were loud and insistent, reprimanding her for her impulsive, prideful response. You could've just said no. Leave the dueling to the boys, since they seem to enjoy it so much.

But as Nori herself demonstrated, it clearly wasn't just a "boys" thing. The challenge had put Asuna on the spot, and she felt like the legitimacy of her role in the group was being put to the question. Burns and Xorren had already asked earlier if she was interested in dueling, and she'd demurred as politely as possible, but for some reason this challenge made her feel a lot more reluctant to back down.

Perhaps it was, at least in part, that when it all came down to it… they really needed a tank. There was no telling how Nori might have responded to a refusal, and Asuna didn't want to put Kirito in a position of having to search for another Spriggan to fill the spot when his options were already limited—or worse, having to take up Burns on his offer of recruiting a Salamander friend to tank for them.

*Besides*, Asuna told herself, *you can't say that it doesn't sound even a little bit fun, can you? Be honest.*

It was not long after the hour when most players would be having their evening meals, and the streets themselves were far too crowded to be able to appropriate a quiet intersection or city square for the duel she'd gotten herself into, but Nori seemed perfectly content to make a beeline for a small recreational area not far off the busy street where Kartwright's shop was located. The concentric, terraced streets twisted in places to avoid the massive, gnarled roots of the World Tree, and here one of those twists resulted in a grassy overlook just off the market street that was built atop the roof of a building from the next street below. The far edge of it jutted even further out over the lower street itself like a balcony; Asuna had seen overhangs like this all over the city, providing shade to the street below and making use of the space on the rooftops, but she'd never taken any special notice of them.

A small, circular fountain with a winged Valkyrie statue half again as tall as a typical person dominated the park-like clearing, and the only people sitting on the carved wooden benches around the fountain popped the simple white cursors of NPCs when Asuna's gaze drifted past them. Nori took her staff from her back and waved it in their general direction. "Scram, bots."

Asuna doubted the NPCs understood either word, but they seemed to get the gist of it based on Nori's vaguely-threatening gestures with her weapon. The four of them quickly unseated themselves and headed back into the crowded street, a few giving backwards glances that Asuna thought almost looked concerned.

"Was that really necessary?" Kirito asked, almost sounding defensive on behalf of the NPCs. "We could've just asked them to move."

Nori gave Kirito an odd look. "Whatya mean, 'ask'? They're just mobs." She turned her staff over in her hands, then absently gave it a full-circle twirl in front of her and let it roll back across one shoulder and over to the other arm while she spoke. "This isn't a larping thing, is it? Because I'm not really into that."

Xorren snickered. "This from someone who talks to her staff?"
"It's fine," Asuna said, giving both Kirito and Xorren a look that might have been just as skeptical as Nori's. She then turned a bit of that skepticism on their immediate surroundings. "But is there really enough room here for a duel? This little rest area is lovely, but even if the others sit on the railings or watch from the air, there's won't be much room for either of us to maneuver."

"You'd be surprised," Nori said, taking a slow walk around the fountain. "Little nooks like this help keep my reflexes and situational awareness sharp. The way I tank, it's not just about avoiding an attack, y'know—it's about doing that without getting out of position or putting the squishies at risk." She reached out and tapped the Valkyrie statue with the head of her staff; it responded with the thick sound of stone on stone. "I like practicing in tight spaces with obstacles to avoid. Had my eye on this place for a while."

Asuna tried to think of what else she should ask, turning over in her mind everything that she could recall about Kirito's duel with Burns, as well as the others she'd witnessed in the past. "What are the win conditions?"

Nori came full-circle around the fountain and hopped up onto the edge as easily as a cat might, using the full length of the weapon to help balance herself as if walking on a tightrope. "How do you feel about First Strike?"

Asuna was fairly sure she recalled someone mentioning what that was before, but she turned to Kirito for more details, and he correctly read the look on her face. "First Strike basically means one clean hit wins," Kirito said, stepping forward while he spoke. "That's any unblocked attack with a weapon or projectile doing at least its minimum damage after resists."

"Right," Nori said with a quick tip of the head in Kirito's direction. "AOE splash damage doesn't count as a clean hit, and neither does damage from a block or parry—but any damage'll still do the job if you wear 'em down to half, or if their HP's lower than yours when the time limit runs out."

**So it really comes down to avoiding that one good hit, and picking just the right moment to get yours in. One and done.** Asuna signaled her own understanding with a curt nod. **Speed and precision—I can do this.**

As she and Nori faced each other next to the fountain, Asuna heard familiar wings behind her; a flash of black and silver out of the corner of her eye turned out to be Kirito taking a seat on a railing with his back to the rest of Arun as it stretched out and downwards to the west, so she assumed others must be taking similar positions to watch the duel that was about to unfold. She turned her head just fractionally enough to catch Kirito's eyes; he gave her a nod and smiled at her encouragingly.

**You can do this,** she told herself again, returning her gaze to the woman she was about to fight. Nori's hands were busy and her attention was on her menu, but when she looked up at Asuna, they both exchanged smiles of their own.

"Alright," said Nori, eyes going to just above Asuna's head as her hands worked in her menu. "Let's rock."

The chiming of game sounds came from the air above her as soon as she accepted the duel request; she assumed it had to be the banner and countdown timer that she'd seen in the other duels she'd watched, and didn't let herself get distracted. Nori seemed focused as well; the Spriggan woman took a step back and turned partially to the side, presenting her quarterstaff before her in a two-handed stance that slanted it up along a line pointing at Asuna's chest.

Asuna felt no need to fuss around with swapping equipment for what promised to be a quick stand-
up fight with her weapon, and Nori seemed content to wait out the timer with no changes of her own. Since they had nothing else to do with the long countdown, Asuna ventured to ask a question that had been on her mind. "Why me?"

Nori didn't pretend not to understand the simple but vaguely-worded question. "I dunno. I'm used to having to prove myself before joining a group. It's usually cocky dudebros calling me out, trying to embarrass me or thinking I'm an easy win." She grinned suddenly. "Which I'm not. So I guess you could say I kinda wanted a change of pace."

Asuna wasn't precisely surprised at the answer. Near as she'd been able to tell from observation, somewhere around a third to a half the game's overall population was female, but the demographics were nowhere near as balanced in the clearing groups, or at the higher levels. "I've never dueled anyone before. So I suppose that'll be a change of pace for both of us."

"Don't worry," Nori assured Asuna, with a brassy self-confidence that didn't even come close to being reassuring. "I'll go easy on the noob."

"Noob?" Asuna echoed back, genuinely offended for a moment. "Noob? You do realize that I didn't just join Kirito's group as a pickup? I'm a top member of the Undine clearing groups, and I don't have anything to prove to—"

A loud buzzer sounded in the air. Asuna was fortunate that her attention was fully on Nori at the time; the moment the tone signaled the start of the match, Nori shifted her grip on the staff slightly into what must have been the pre-motion for a very fast technique. The Spriggan woman did a quick shuffle forward and turned the tip of the staff into a blur that struck at Asuna several times in different places, telescoping out from Nori's mid-staff grip like a pool cue; only the rapier's speed and high priority let Asuna deflect the first light strike, giving her an opening to hop-step back from the rest of the blows.

That left Nori stuck in the end frame of the technique for what seemed like nearly half a second; Asuna tried to capitalize on the opening, but that freeze time ended just as she finished her «Streak» technique's opening motions, and Nori was able to parry the diagonal slash by spinning the butt of the staff around and knocking the blade of the rapier wide. Nori spun the staff in her hands and tried to catch Asuna low from her open side as the head of the weapon came around, but Asuna had been expecting something like that, and she jumped over the swipe with a quick hop, bringing her rapier back up in an en garde position before she even landed. They tested each other several times after that, launching quick techniques that required a response but left the other player little or no opening to exploit.

Avoid big attacks, Asuna reminded herself as she was tempted to take advantage of one such opening with a multi-hit combo. They're going to commit you to a series of predictable movements, they'll take too long to charge, and you'll be vulnerable for longer. Her decision not to try using «Crucifixion» turned out to be sound a moment later when Nori—who'd appeared to be put off-balance by a successful parry—swung the full length of the staff from a fulcrum point near the end that brought the now-glowing stone head slamming back down to the ground right where Asuna would've been if she'd tried attacking. Instead, Asuna sidestepped the heavy attack and watched for the freeze time, ready to seize the advantage.

There was none; Asuna realized momentarily that Nori's attack had been a freehand response to having her weapon knocked back and away. It was just as well that Asuna hadn't tried exploiting an opening that hadn't been there to begin with, and she abruptly found herself fully occupied fending off a flurry of strikes that seemed to come from different directions each time her opponent spun the staff, or shifted her grip along its length. It wasn't any way that Nori herself was maneuvering, but
because every bit of the staff—from one end to the other—seemed to be a potential striking surface.

In fact, if anything, Nori wasn’t maneuvering—she'd all but planted herself in one place, and although she shifted a bit from side to side, and danced around within a constrained area as the System Assist carried her through her techniques, she never seemed to leave a spot about two meters from the side of the fountain.

This is how she tanks, Asuna realized suddenly. She even said so herself—she likes practicing in tight spaces with obstacles, and when she's tanking, she can’t very well run around leaving the group exposed.

An idea began forming in Asuna’s head. I can use this, she thought. If she's planted herself like this, I might be able to outmaneuver her.

And then she had no more time for thinking; Nori had begun pressing her attack hard, and Asuna found it challenging to simply keep deflecting the incoming attacks, let alone formulate any kind of strategy. A pinwheeling staff attack forced Asuna to deal with multiple quick strikes coming from either side, and although she was able to easily parry the first few hits with her rapier, the rest came quickly enough that Asuna disengaged by backflipping out of the way the moment there was a brief lull in the attacks, putting a few meters of distance between herself and Nori.

She had no sooner finished her acrobatic evasion than she found Nori charging at her to close the gap. The Spriggan woman's leading hand held her weapon loosely while her right hand slipped back to the butt of the staff and slid it forward in a deceptively long-range strike that Asuna only barely managed to parry with another «Streak>. The thick tip of the staff deflected high and wide, and she felt a faint tug at her hair as it skimmed just past her right cheek in a flash of silver filigree and glowing stone.

Asuna had no idea how long the freeze time on that technique was, and she didn't feel like taking a chance. Rather than trying to lunge past two meters of fully-extended quarterstaff in order to gamble on getting a hit, she leapt to the side and grabbed the outstretched arm of the Valkyrie statue with her free hand, using her momentum to slingshot herself up and around the statue and putting it in between herself and the unpredictable reach of Nori's weapon. She flipped as she let go, landing in a crouch on the Valkyrie's shoulder with enough of a breather to cast a single spell. "Setto zabukke datranyul dweren!"

A transient sensation swept across her body like warm air as Spiritual Armor took effect. It wasn't absolute protection, but for the next minute and a half she'd take significantly less damage—and at the rate things were going, that could make a difference.

The fundamental problem for Asuna was that rapiers were light, and staves were heavy. Both were high-priority weapons, which meant that both combatants were on more or less equal ground when it came to parrying—but Asuna couldn’t block the staff attacks outright without clash damage bleeding through, whereas Nori could block with nearly any part of the staff without much concern. Even if neither of them landed a clean hit, it wouldn't matter if Asuna had less HP remaining when the duel timer ran out, or dropped to 50% at any point. She could heal herself if she got a chance—but that, at least, almost felt like cheating to her for some reason; she briefly wished she’d thought to ask about it before they’d begun.

Asuna had been half-expecting Nori to protest the use of any magic at all, given her comments about fighting mages—but if anything, the Spriggan’s gray eyes seemed to come alight as she grinned. "Alrighty then," she said, wings appearing on her back, and launched herself into motion with startling abruptness. "Ma min!"
Almost instinctively, Asuna manifested her own wings, which carried her backwards in a surge of sparkling blue energy that trailed before her eyes. Smoky magic streamed from the glowing stone in the tip of the staff as it described an arc that cut through the air Asuna had occupied moments before, and Nori turned the miss into a full-body spin that let her bring the staff around from the opposite side, just barely grazing Asuna's outstretched thigh and transmitting some of the Illusion damage from the spell. Asuna tucked her legs under her and dropped back to the ground, casting a Holy Bolt that Nori twisted herself around to evade; she enchanted her weapon with another spell and followed Asuna down with the staff raised so high that it almost disappeared behind her. Alarmed, Asuna rolled out of the way, and heard the thunderous crunch of the weapon's impact against the geometric stone tiles around the fountain.

_How can she be this fast?_ Asuna wondered, coming back to her feet at the end of the breakfall roll and trying to find a way to recapture the initiative. _She needs at least some STR for this staff and the medium armor she's wearing. She can't possibly be putting all her stat points into AGI, and I know she's not using any spells that would make her go faster. But her reaction time is insane—it's like watching Yuuki or Kirito fight!_

But as she went on the attack, Asuna took notice of something she'd seen earlier: as soon as both of them were back on the ground, Nori had again staked out her own little zone, and seemed to be defending it for all it was worth. If Asuna tried backing off to spellcasting distance, Nori would close with her, or take advantage of the length of her weapon if Asuna was near enough. But as long as Asuna was the aggressor, Nori might as well have been nearly immovable, shuffle-stepping within a few-meter radius and turning only to face Asuna if she attacked from a different direction.

_She's practically rooted in that spot there. This is my chance._ Asuna dashed in and past Nori with her rapier held out, watching the dark-skinned young woman slowly step in a circle in order to track her movements. As soon as Nori lashed out with a swift freehand strike, Asuna evaded to one side of the attack and threw out her free hand, casting a spell she didn't use often and hoping she didn't fluff the incantation. "Zutto zabukke plorjabu tepnaga jan!"

_Two seconds of Delay status_, thought Asuna as she saw the surprise projectile zip out and strike the ground just in front of Nori, exploding into a five-meter AOE that splashed cool blue energy across both of them. _She'll have good Status Resist, just like Kirito, but I don't even need half of that time to trigger «Linear». This is over._

Rapier already raised into the simple pre-motion for the basic starting technique, Asuna skidded to a stop, and an energetic rising tone sounded while the glow of her weapon gained intensity. As the technique went through its very short charge-up time, Asuna took in the look of shock on the Spriggan woman's face and confirmed the presence of the debuff icon on her status ribbon; Nori's staff moved in slow motion as she desperately tried to bring it to bear on an opponent that was already nearly behind her.

As she prepared to release her attack, a glimpse of purple drew Asuna's attention past Nori to where a familiar but very unexpected figure stood at the edge of the gathering crowd. Asuna's eyes widened in recognition.

Yuuki's eyes went equally wide in response as their gazes met, and she opened her mouth. Her shout of warning came too late as the head of Nori's staff arced around at full speed and took Asuna in the midriff during her moment of distraction, doubling her over and sending her tumbling across the grass as her rapier flew free of her hand.

Asuna wasn't stunned for long before her wings came to life almost without conscious thought, all four of them spread wide and vibrating furiously to halt her flight. At almost the same time, she heard
Spriggan's wings behind her; she didn't even have to look to know that Kirito had done his white-knight thing and tried to catch her. She appreciated the thought, but between her wings and her Acrobatics skill kicking in, she righted herself and skidded to a stop in a crouch just past and to one side of the fountain.

Asuna glanced back over her shoulder as soon as she stopped moving, and smiled as she saw her suspicions confirmed; Kirito was practically right behind her, arms frozen and held out as if he'd expected her to be flying into them. It was hard not to giggle at the half-startled, half-disappointed look on his face.

Then a familiar warm lump struck her hard enough to nearly knock her out of her balanced breakfall crouch, and equally familiar laughter rang in her ears as Yuuki bodily lifted Asuna off the ground and whirled her around.

"Oof," Asuna managed in the midst of the little girl's STR-infused bear-hug, wanting to laugh but finding it almost physically difficult at the moment. "I missed you, Yuuki," she said once the purple-clad arms loosened a bit.

"Sorry to ruin your duel, Asuna," Yuuki said unnecessarily, setting her down with a sheepish look. "I guess I missed you too."

As exciting as it had been, the last thing in the world Asuna cared about at the moment was the outcome of the duel. "It's okay, really—it doesn't matter."

As soon as her own arms were freed, she reached up and habitually swatted away the anti-harassment warning pop-up, just as Nori came jogging up with a concerned look on her face, followed closely by the rest of the party.

"Hey, you okay there, Miss Melee DPS?" Almost as an afterthought, Nori looked up at the glowing mid-air scoreboard that declared her the winner. "Asuna? That was a hell of a hit you took."

Asuna waved it off, feeling a vague bit of fuzzy numbness in the stomach, but no lingering discomfort. "I'm just fine, thank you," she said, finding it impossible not to smile at the silly grin on her dearly-missed companion's face. "I let myself get distracted at the last moment."

"I'll say. I thought you had me there."

Asuna returned the Spriggan woman's smug look in equal measure. "I did have you."

Nori's lips formed a lopsided grin as she glanced over at Yuuki. "Yeah, you did."

Xorren nudged Burns. "Who's your adorable imouto?"

Burns regarded Yuuki with a comprehensive look from bandana to boots that had Asuna very nearly about to give him a piece of her mind for ogling a twelve-year-old girl, until he turned back to Xorren with a matter-of-fact response. "Dude? Little sister will kick your ass."

Xorren snickered, but seemed to give Yuuki a second glance, taking in her gear and the way she looked back at him with what might well have been a direct challenge. He opened his mouth for about a second and a half, then seemed to think better of whatever he was going to say—for which Asuna figured he was probably wiser than he seemed sometimes.

"This must be the new party you've been messaging me about," Yuuki said with a grin of her own.

Asuna introduced them all to Yuuki one by one, trying not to roll her eyes at Xorren's third or fourth invocation of "Red Mage" or the predictable offer of a duel from Burns, but laughing at the way Nori ended up regretting her attempt to squeeze Yuuki's hand in a contest of strength.
She'd expected Mentat to simply nod to Yuuki, or utter something reserved but polite; instead he ended up following his greeting with an unexpectedly awkward question. "Is your friend going to be joining the clearing group?"

Asuna caught sight of Kirito joining her at her side just as she turned to look at Yuuki. However, Yuuki spoke before anyone else could, catching her completely off-guard. "No, I'm not."

That brought total silence from all involved; into that silence Yuuki went on, looking at Asuna with a heartbreaking sadness touching her expression for a fleeting moment before her bangs fell forward with her bow. "I'm sorry, but there's still something I have to do," she said. "But I need to talk with you before I go, Asuna."

Confused and more than a little saddened herself, Asuna returned Yuuki's bow without thinking, and then turned to Kirito and tried to find the words to apologize for the way she was about to run off.

Kirito shook his head with an encouraging little smile. "Don't worry about it. Do what you need to do." He waved. "Hey, Yuuki."

Yuuki gave Kirito a look that was almost as sheepish as the one she'd worn after hugging Asuna. "Hey, Kirito. I'm going to borrow Asuna for a bit. I promise I'll give her back to the party."

Asuna just barely caught the bemused look on Kirito's face before Yuuki took her by the hand and led her off into the street, barely slowing long enough for Asuna to scoop up her rapier off the ground. At first she was tempted to ask where she was being led, but after a minute Yuuki let go of her hand and gave flight. Asuna brought out her own wings and matched courses with the purple flight trail ahead of her, following as it spiraled up and around one of the towers that rose above the two- and three-story buildings that were more typical of Arun's structures.

Six floors later, Yuuki touched down feather-light atop the minaret, boots settling into a nook near the edge so that she faced out across the city towards the sunset with her knees drawn up. Asuna landed with equal grace moments after, easing into a sitting position that was a little more ladylike but no less comfortable. She found herself wishing that Kirito was there to share the sight with them; she knew he missed having Yuuki around as well. And from what the girl had said, it sounded like she might not be back for long.

But for the time being, it was enough just to have her back at all.

"Ne, Asuna," Yuuki said. "There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"Of course, Yuuki." The answer was automatic, but she was getting a little bit worried. Whatever was on Yuuki's mind, her friend was acting like she was afraid of what Asuna might think of her when it was done.

Yuuki went quiet for another minute, then, at the moment of sundown. She waited until the last of the corona's glow had dipped below the mountains, and only then—as the day began to darken into night—did she turn to Asuna with a sad, wistful smile. "I want to tell you about Aiko," she said. "She was my sister, and she was the most beautiful soul in the world..."

\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*

_Such a little thing_, Agil thought as he examined the tiny, ornate rectangular box that Grimlock passed to him. About the size of a soda can and bearing a polished white crystal at one end, it was smaller and more compact than the «Visual Sensor» modules they'd used previously during their testing.
From what his Leprechaun crafting partner had said, that just meant it required more expensive mats to produce—the actual function ought to be identical.

Agil hoped so. Their experiments were getting increasingly costly, and cost came with a corresponding escalation in expectations from the Proxies—as well as from those whom they represented—who were counting on them to provide a useful deliverable for their clearers.

The moment that Agil's incantation for the «Enchant Item» spell was complete, the device in his hands began glowing with the same bright golden-amber light that had been flowing down his arms, "priming" it with the first stage of the enchantment. Working quickly, he handed the item to the tall Puca mage standing next to him. Sendak took the component in hand and held it by his slender fingertips, then wasted no time in casting his Wind spell; the freshly-primed item drew in the spell energy with an anticlimactic rush of air and glowing green energy that ended as soon as the imbuenement completed.

Neither of them were strangers to enchanting items with spell effects; they'd worked together long enough to have the routine and the incantations down pat. But working with components for «Constructs» was—although conceptually the same process as creating enchanted weapons or armor—far less of a science as yet. Even though they'd tested this particular effect a few times now, they wouldn't truly know if they'd achieved success until a Leprechaun with the appropriate skills assembled the end product into a functional machine.

That was where Agil's partner came in.

"New one for you, Grimlock." The named Leprechaun crafter, sitting at his bench across the workshop, turned at the sound of his name; Agil lobbed the device towards him in a slow, gentle arc.

Grimlock made a sound of mild exasperation after catching the component with both hands and gingerly setting it aside. "Please stop doing that," he said. "You're going to break one, and then we shall all complain bitterly about the wasted mats."

"Nah," Agil said, grinning over at his partner. "You know well as I do that one knock on the floor ain't enough to break these things. I'm just trying to lighten things up a bit."

"They're quite light enough after these latest improvements, I'd say," said Grimlock, hefting the small object and giving Agil a pointed look just over the rims of his glasses. A slight smile took form then, and he turned the item over in his hands to examine it, then tapped it once to open its status window. "Satisfactory," he said. "I was hoping to see what a crit might do, but a success is a success."

"I can list on one hand the number of times I've critted on Enchant," Agil said with a good-natured smile of his own. "Unless you got a track record of winning lottery numbers, that falls into the category of don't count on it. Now come on, man, don't keep us in suspense."

"I'm getting to it, good sir," said Grimlock, already carefully positioning the module next to a partially-completed device the size of a desk phone, then sliding the connection into place with a metallic click. Last in place was a glowing power crystal that he plucked seemingly at random from a steel bin of like objects; a single twist into an empty socket locked the spiral-framed orelight in place with a similarly satisfying sound, and arcane energy immediately flowed from the crystal into the device it powered.

"All good, Grim?"

Grimlock inclined his head towards Agil in answer, and bowed slightly as he gestured towards the testing area, the symmetrical black curtains of his bangs covering his glasses as he did. "It is, as you
There were freshly-painted markings on the floor in the workshop that depicted bearings and
distances as measured from a fixed point—a point centered on the device they were testing. The
moment the Puca mage's long strides crossed one of the angular lines radiating out from that point,
the indicator crystal on the top of the device began shining a bright red.

"Forty-five," Grimlock read out, hands working in the air before him as he presumably typed in a
note-taking window that Agil couldn't see. After Sendak crossed another point on the floor, then
paced back the way he came from a greater distance, the Leprechaun nodded again. "And again. So
it works in a 45-degree cone. As I suspected, it is highly directional along the sensor crystal's facing."

"And relatively short-range compared to the spell it came from," Agil observed, pulling up his area
map and highlighting several friends and guildmates who weren't set Unfindable. "There's someone
about eighty meters in that direction, and it's not picking them up."

"Blocked LOS, perhaps?"

Sendak seemed to consider Grimlock's question thoughtfully for a few moments, rubbing at the
peach fuzz on his chin. A mischievous smirk touched his face. "One way to find out, I suppose."

"Now, Sen—"

There had been a caution in Grimlock's tone, but it went unheeded. Sendak took a few steps straight
back and away from the device, and threw out his arms to the sides. "Dotto zabukke plenalthe ralth
tepnaga buren."

A wall of elemental stone rose from the floor before him with startling suddenness and a loud
rumble, spanning the workshop from wall to wall; startled, Agil pushed himself off his work stool
and backpedaled for a moment before regaining his composure. The conjured wall stopped growing
everywhere it encountered a solid object, creating gaps beyond them like cast shadows.

The device's red light stayed on.

A few moments passed, just long enough to be sure. Then the wall collapsed in a voluminous puff of
short-lived dust; Sendak stepped through the cloud, waving his hands unnecessarily to help it
disperse back into nothingness. "Well?"

"It's range, not LOS," Agil said with a feigned cough that was a little too dramatic to be believable.
"And you're an asshole."

Sendak grinned, making an equally put-on show of brushing off the lapels of his patchwork robe.
"My work here is done. Need anything else?"

Agil gave the man a friendly clap on the arm. "Nah, I think we're good now. Got a few more tests to
run through, including seeing how long the battery lasts on this fancy flashlight. Grim, what did you
slot in there?"

"Standard Tier 2 white. Base draw from the functional components should give it up to an hour of
runtime—less if the enchantment increases the sensor's power load. We won't know for certain
without field tests."

Agil nodded; though his understanding of the mechanics of Constructs was secondhand at best, he'd
been spending a fair amount of time learning about them while working with Grimlock, and the
concepts were straightforward enough. He grinned over at his partner. "Then what say you and I
take a little field trip, my man? Slap a carry handle on that gadget and come with me."

"So long as this 'field trip' involves no actual combat," Grimlock answered, rooting through a bin of spare parts until he found a plain metal handle and affixed it to one of the connectors on top of the device. He gave it a tentative heft with one hand, then transferred it to the other.

Agil scoffed good-naturedly. Grimlock was a nice guy, and a real sharp one too, but a little excitement would do him some good once in a while. "Where's your sense of adventure, man?"

"I'm afraid I may have left it in Domnann," Grimlock remarked, slipping off his own seat and walking over to Agil while panning the device around. "Perhaps I shall send for it someday."

"Maybe you can invent a Construct that'll help you find it," Agil joked, giving Grimlock a slap on the back that all but staggered him. His partner bore it in good humor, taking the lead so that the device wouldn't pick up Agil while they walked. "Or maybe ask your wife? She seems to have plenty of adventure in her."

Agil regretted the comment as soon as he made it; he could tell it had been a poor choice from the way Grimlock suddenly stiffened, almost tripping over his own feet. "Hey, nothing meant by it, man. I know you worry about her when she's out."

"It is quite distressing at times," Grimlock allowed, stopping in front of the lift and waiting for Agil to bring it down from the upper levels of the Depot. The red light on the detector device lit up when Grimlock turned towards him, reflecting off his round-rimmed glasses. "I'm sure you understand, in your own way."

Agil tried not to show his discomfort at the sudden pivot to the all-but-taboo subject of the outside world. "I half-envy you, to be honest," he said after a pause. "At least you get to be with her in here, even if she's taking risks. Kathy's stuck back in riaru, and I ain't seen her for going on six months now. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad she's safe... but it wears on a man, not seeing or hearing from his wife for that long, or even knowing how she's getting by."

That response might have in turn been more than Grimlock had been looking for; they rode the lift with the awkward silence of strangers on a train until it let them off on the main Warehouse level. At first he ignored the notification that chimed for his attention and nagged at his peripheral vision; he had his map window open and was estimating distances to each new signal that Grimlock's invention picked up. But eventually he made the mistake of glancing at the icon—or more precisely, at the name beside it.

Agil held up his forefinger, bringing Grimlock to a halt with a curious rise to his eyebrows. "Can you give me a sec? I've been waiting for this message." It was a little surprising that Argo had gotten back to him so quickly, but he wasn't about to complain, timing be damned. The information he'd sought from her would help set his mind at ease about something that had been bothering him ever since the visit from the Undine clearer. At a polite tilt of the head from Grimlock, Agil turned his attention back to his UI.

「The answer to your question depends on how you define "blacksmith". If you mean a player who uses one «Smithing» skill or another to create, upgrade, or service armor or weapons for players, then the answer is no, there's no blacksmith in Arun named Nezha.」

If that had been the end of Argo's message, everything would've been fine. Agil was less than happy to see that there was more.  Britain is, however, a guy by that name who's gotta be doing a brisk little business in something. My next PM is gonna be some of the mats he's been buying and—where I could—the quantities he's been asking for. This is not a short list, and it took a fair bit of time today
to run down. You owe me.

It took a few minutes for Agil to receive Argo's next PM; he guessed she must have had to type it all up manually. By that point, he'd made his apologies to Grimlock and was already on his way up to Chellok's office, his long legs carrying him quickly up the stairs.

"Chief," he said as soon as he poked his head in the door. "Need to talk."

"Someone's always gotta talk about something," Chellok grumped, though Agil could tell from long association that there was no actual ire behind it. "What'cha got?"

Agil waited until he'd closed the door behind himself before going any further, and took a casual seat on the near corner of the L-shaped desk, leaning against the edge of the door to keep it shut. "I told you I was going to look into that report of Nezha doing smithing work, right?"

Chellok let out a frustrated sigh as he placed both palms on the chair's arm rests, leaning his head back with a look that suggested he wished Agil hadn't made the effort. "Aw, don't tell me you actually found something."

"Not sure yet," Agil admitted, drawing open his game menu and pulling up Argo's latest PM. "He doesn't have a smithy, but he's doing business of some kind in Arun."

"No law against that," Chellok pointed out. "We got no say over what he does there."

"No," Agil admitted, "there's not, and we don't. But it's still fishy, man. He's blacklisted from doing business with anyone in the NCC, and you told him yourself that if we ever caught him trying to work on player equipment again, anywhere, we'd go public with what he did."

"And?"

Agil set his menu visible and dragged out Argo's PM window, turning it towards Chellok, who leaned forward and squinted slightly while Agil spoke. "Look at what he's been buying up, Chief. Anything strike you as… I dunno, familiar at all?"

"Enchant mats," Chellok said after a few moments. "Some for what looks like Construct modules, too, but mostly enchantments." The other Gnome's eyes met Agil's over the edge of the holographic window. "Which isn't what he was doing before, so I'm back to my last question: what do you want me to do about this?"

"Maybe send someone to find out what he's doing," Agil said. "It still looks like he's back to working on player gear, and I doubt it's legit business."

"Why? Because the boy ran a scam once?" Chellok sank back into his chair with another sigh, one hand briefly coming to his face. "Look, if you've got any evidence that Nezha's up to something shady with Enchant mats, I'll gladly take it to Daizen—maybe the Proxies will stomp on him publicly this time."

"Then again, maybe they won't," Agil said. "We asked Thinker to Banish that little shit, and he wouldn't hear of it. I dunno what the boy said to his facelead, but kicking Nezha out of Nissengrof and putting him on the blacklist was the best we could get at the time. You think Yurielle's gonna contradict her leader—and let's be real, her boyfriend—even now?"

"Look, Agil," Chellok said with palms upturned, "this is not a political fight we can afford right now. We've already got grumbles from some of the Puca and Lepu feeling like junior partners in the NCC. We start throwing our weight around against some dumb kid of theirs who might not even be doing
"Maybe at least care a bit about protecting the rest of the player base," Agil remarked bluntly. "The boy's up to something. I told you I saw a weapon he'd crafted—it was recent work, not the halfassed fails he used to make. And now he's buying up a lot of mats for making enchantments and constructs. That doesn't make you suspicious, given what he did before?"

"Nah," said Chellok. "Honestly? Makes me think he's trying to find a way to get by."

"As an enchanter?"

Chellok shrugged in place. "Why not? Unless we get wind of him ripping people off again, I say we let him make what living he can." He poked a stubby finger towards Agil. "Now, I'm more interested in what you and your tinker friend have been up to. This detection gadget you've been promising sounds nice, but the R&D's costing us a lot of mats we can't afford to be burning right now. Got any progress to report?"

"Matter of fact, we were just testing the latest prototype," Agil said, shifting gears onto a more comfortable subject. "It's good stuff, Chief. This version's handheld, weighs about five kilos. Initial results look decent—45 degree forward cone of detection, unaffected by LOS, range of somewhere around forty-fifty meters."

He'd been expecting a more receptive reaction from Chellok than the grimace that he got. "Fifty meters is better than a kick in the teeth, but that still ain't so great," he said. "Edge of typical projectile range—by the time something's that close to a clearing group, it's gonna be too late. Won't do much for problems with invisible mobs if they can't detect them until they're already on top of the group."

"Not necessarily," Agil said. "In a dungeon you've got walls and rooms making the short range less of a downside, and ignoring LOS a huge win. And we still don't know if better mats or a more powerful charging crystal will make a difference to the range or cone." He tapped his first two fingers firmly against the cold metal desk. "Grim's on to something here, Chellok. We need more time and supplies to perfect it."

"Maybe," Chellok said. "But right now we got neither to give. What we do have is shortages on top of shortages. I'm not gonna tell you not to work on it, because it is promising—and if you can perfect the thing, and bring the cost down, I'll back you. But I got the Proxies breathing down my neck about the resources you're using up. According to them, Constructs are a fun gimmick for casuals, but the clearing groups don't think they're worth the weight or expense."

"And what do you think, Chief?"

"I think it don't matter one thin yen what I think," Chellok answered. "If Daizen and especially Godfree think Constructs are a waste of time and resources, then your Lepu partner needs to come up with something that'll wow them, not me—something useful right now, not maybe might-be-useful if we spend some more money." He glanced out of his tall office windows across the warehouse floor, eyes going to where Agil knew some of the mats under discussion were kept in bulk. "Until then, I've gotta ask you to stop pulling from NCC stores for your partner's Constructs. He can tinker all he wants, and he's welcome to keep sharing workshop space with you—but he's gotta fund his experiments himself."

"That's not gonna make Grimlock happy," Agil commented.

"Is it supposed to?" Chellok shrugged. "Sorry, son, but that's just the way the chips are falling right now. Tell him to look on the bright side—I'm real happy with the work his guild is doing for us. The
map data his wife and guildies are bringing back means we might be able to open some new farming zones soon, and they're getting first pick. Be sure and tell him that."

Agil intended to do so, but somehow suspected it wasn't going to do much to take the sting out of defunding Grimlock's experiments. He immediately regretted his haste in coming up to ask Chellok about Nezha—maybe, if they'd been able to get in another day or two of tests and refinement to the design, they could've produced something that was actually useful to the clearers. *Easier to ask for forgiveness than permission, and all that. Oh, well.*

He was halfway down the stairs, thinking about what he was going to say to Grimlock, when the idea occurred to him. Stopping for a moment to draw open his menu, Agil leaned against the thick steel frames of the warehouse superstructure and started a new PM. It was a long shot, but he knew the farmer would at least be in an overland zone and able to receive it—even if he might not be able to reply until it was safe.

「Hey Jargo, hit me up tonight at receiving and inventory. Got something I want you and your group to take with you when you go out tomorrow...」

"I give up," Sakuya said, allowing herself to sink into the high-backed chair of her office. "I need a drink."

"I could send someone to fetch refreshments for us, Lady Sakuya," Chimiro answered seriously. "But I suspect the alcohol would not produce the result you seek."

"I know," Sakuya acknowledged unhappily, plucking a glass from her desk and swirling its flavored bluish-green liquid with a disinterested hourglass-shaped motion of her hand. "Alfheim would be a much more bearable prison if the wine got you drunk."

Despite spending half the day with Chimiro, Sakuya felt barely any closer to understanding the economic side of running a faction than she had been the day before. The various data visualizations he produced with the Administration interface were very pretty, and on occasion she even had some grasp of what they meant—some of them resembled the financial charts that had passed over the desk of her real-world employer, charts that she'd needed at least a passing familiarity with in order to do her job.

But when it came to how they all fit together, she was as lost as ever. "Look," Sakuya said at last, slowly holding up a palm as Chimiro's explanation wound down. "It's not that I don't understand the basic premise, here. The game economy is part of a vast system—some of which is player-driven, and some which we have to assume is balanced by some kind of automated process behind the scenes." *Heimdall.* The name that Sigurd had given for the program that ran Alfheim sprang to mind as soon as she spoke, though she didn't dare reveal that detail to Chimiro. *Why not, though? Like so much of what's transpired in the last week, the details are harmless enough—right up until the point where someone asks how I know these things.*

"Substantially correct, if simplified," Chimiro said, reaching up to his visible interface and bringing one of its windows to the foreground. If her pensive thoughts reached her face in any way, he showed no sign of noticing. "This is only an aggregate of the vendor sales, but if you long-press on the header you can actually drill down—"

"Simplified is what I need right now, Chimiro," Sakuya said, regretting the need to cut him off. "No,
please. I get that what players buy from and sell to NPC vendors has an effect on what those vendors offer for sale. I get that the things we can source from vendors and players act as a gate not only to player progression, but to our ability to complete city improvements and other faction projects. And most importantly, I get that the mob rebalancing has left us scrambling to fix the faction economy. I've got the big picture, at least."

"Then what, Lady Sakuya, can I help you understand?"

Sakuya sighed as she met the older man's earnest gaze. "Perhaps nothing, Chimiro. I do not think that I am ever going to be able to visualize how all of these things are connected, at least not enough to make informed decisions. It's just too complex a web of relationships. Helping resolve disputes of fairness, making strategic and tactical decisions, inventory and organization—those I'm good at. The legal system, policy administration, player roles and permissions, city improvements—I'm getting a handle on all that too now, thanks to your help. But when it comes to the effects on Sylvain's economy, and knowing to run project X if we want to encourage NPC production of Y…"

Chimiro's deeply-lined face crinkled with a smile. "I want our people to succeed, Lady Sakuya. I will continue to serve to the best of my ability, as I did Lord Skarrip."

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Chimiro. What did you—?" Sakuya stopped herself there, realizing that she'd nearly asked him about his riaru occupation. In her experience, that sort of question was rarely welcome—least of all to larpers. She forced a cough to cover the awkward hesitation and decided on a different question, slow steps bringing her near the large windows that encircled the office. "What did you do with all this when Skarrip was leader?"

"Most of the time, very little," Chimiro admitted. "If there was a project I felt had merit I would bring it to Lord Skarrip's attention, particularly if it would add some kind of new service or improvement to the city. But it was rarely necessary to push the economy in any particular direction in order to make everything work out. It is only these recent changes that made previously-available items unobtainable."

"You can't miss what you've never had," Sakuya observed, leaning her head against the cool glass and gazing out across the city lights. "But when you've had it and then it's gone… people are going to notice. And then start looking for someone to blame."

"You've done well so far with the petitioner," Chimiro advised. "The most important thing right now is to make sure your people feel like they're being heard. I will do my best to select economic projects that will encourage vendors to provision the healing items now in short supply, but you must understand, Lady Sakuya: those projects will go nowhere without the raw materials to supply them. Those we must source ourselves."

Sakuya closed her eyes, one palm resting against the window. "And not all of those mats are dropping in the Ancient Forest anymore. I can't believe we're having this much trouble finding goddamn skeletons to kill in our own territory. There are plenty of undead in the Halls, from what I'm hearing, but we won't be there too much longer. If we're lucky, she added silently; progression in the new zone had been slow and dangerous for the clearing groups, especially with the distraction of having their best people pulled back to fight the Salamanders at home."

"We need to trade, Lady Sakuya. If not with other factions directly, then we at least need to ensure that independent traders can travel freely to and from our territory."

"I know," Sakuya said, eyes coming open just in time to see a cluster of bright green flight trails rise from the edge of the city and head northwards. At this time of night? Not clearers—they're all in the World Tree. Farmers? Militia? Or just a private group heading out for their own reasons? I hope..."
they stay safe. "I have half a mind to task the Militia with clearing a route to the Cait Sith border—there's an NPC wagon trail that goes most of the way, but it wasn't entirely safe before, and it certainly isn't now."

"You still have the option of ending the war by ceding territory to the Salamanders," Chimiro pointed out.

"No!" said Sakuya in a tone of voice that was just a hair short of aggressive. She moderated herself a bit with the next words. "I'm sorry, Chimiro, but that option is not on the table. We've discussed this—it would buy us temporary peace, with a predictable war a month from now when everyone votes for Sigurd to replace me. And if I reward the Salamanders with territory for killing our people, I'm not even sure I'd blame them."

"Lady Sakuya, I do believe that Sigurd frightens you."

Chimiro could not possibly know the secrets that Sigurd held over her now, but Sakuya turned sharply towards her advisor as if he'd made a threat. It was foolish and irrational, but she couldn't be sure that her panicked thoughts hadn't been plain to see. When she answered, she did so very carefully. "Sigurd was close to Skarrip—a man I killed. He hates me, and we both know he wouldn't hesitate to see me dragged through the streets while launching a war of extermination against the Salamanders. I would be a fool not to fear him." Sakuya turned her back on the older man again, gazing through her faint reflection at the world outside of her new glass bubble. She touched a finger to the window, as if to test its permanence. "If I could lead the clearing groups myself, I would, Chimiro. But I can't leave Sylvain anymore. I need Sigurd's skills where they are, and I need those who follow him to follow me."

"Do you?" Chimiro responded.

Sakuya had begun running her finger down the broad pane of glass, and the question stopped her in mid-motion, forcing her again to think deliberately about how she wanted to answer. In the real world her fingertip would have left a faint streak on the glass where oils from her skin were transferred to the cold surface; here there was no such effect. Alfheim's simulation was detailed, but little absent details like that were sometimes jarring when they finally drew notice. She forced herself to turn away from the irrelevancy and face her advisor. "For the moment? I'm afraid so. Long term, we shall see." She paused, and her next words were carefully calibrated. "Chimiro, I'm sure it has not escaped your notice that Sigurd can be… difficult to work with. You seem as if you have more to say."

"Perhaps," Chimiro said with customary polite understatement. "Shall I be frank, my lady?"

Sakuya extended an upturned palm.

"I have quite obviously not been privy to your interactions with Sigurd in the field. But I have been present for many clearing group meetings, and I have observed your verbal sparring many times in the past. There was tension, but rarely any kind of outright disrespect of the kind you've received in recent weeks. Colloquially speaking, it is clear to me that whatever game plays out in the words exchanged between the two of you has changed—has, in point of fact, escalated to a degree that is unsustainable. And if that much is apparent to me—"

"We can be sure that it is so to everyone else around us."

"Including, and especially, the other clearers."

Sakuya paused to digest the implications. She knew the Sylph clearers well, and many of the Militia
which overlapped with the clearers, but were not the same thing—almost as well. She thought she had a fairly good read on who her reliable supporters might be... and judging by the unspoken reactions in recent meetings, Sigurd's recent escalation of open hostility towards her was not going over well with them.

But Sigurd had his own supporters as well. And Sakuya did not fool herself into thinking she knew who they all were—or what they would do if forced to take sides.

"Go on."

Chimiro's head bobbed once. "Sigurd's openly-disrespectful behavior is an issue that must be addressed. Not only privately with Sigurd himself, but also with the clearing groups. His insubordination will be damaging not only to you, but to the morale of those groups." The portly older man made an expansive motion with his hands that collapsed the windows of the facelead interface he'd had open for instruction, clearing the air in a way both figurative and literal. "But the open and obvious way he seeks to undermine you is a sword bearing two equally dangerous edges, and one faces back upon him. The more aggressively he attacks you, the more petty and unprofessional he will appear in the eyes of anyone who does not already agree with him."

"You're suggesting," Sakuya said with measured care, "that I give Sigurd enough rope to hang himself."

Chimiro lowered his head. "Sigurd will seek out that rope whether you provide it to him or not. It is in his nature to be disagreeable when disagreeing. With utmost respect, Lady Sakuya, what I am suggesting is that you would do well to avoid responding in kind as he does. While you were subordinates competing for Skarrip's trust, your bickering was at best an uncomfortable sideshow. You are now the leader of the Sylphs. What do you suppose the clearing group leaders see when you and Sigurd fight?"

Disarray. Distrust. A pair of adults—their leaders, even!—who ought to know better, behaving like children in the midst of a life-threatening crisis. And all the while, those who will suffer most from it can only watch in horror.

Sakuya felt an involuntary grimace twist her face as she reflected upon her own behavior; the comparisons that came to mind were disturbing to contemplate. How often had she flinched from the nasty arguments between the parents of a close childhood friend? And if that unwanted and inescapable drama had been bad for Sakuya, it had been ever so much worse for poor Miyaka.

She could see much the same dynamic playing out between herself and Sigurd—except that their subordinates were not eight-year-old children who had little choice but to wait out the conflict in uncomfortable, desperate silence. They were—at least, many of them were—adults capable of making their own choices. Choices about where to direct their efforts. Choices about whether or not to continue putting their lives on the line for leaders they couldn't respect.

Choices about whom to support—and whom, perhaps, to oppose.

Sakuya was aware that she had not actually answered Chimiro's question, though it had arguably been rhetorical, and had in fact already done the work of getting her to think. She gave him a slow nod and an ambiguous noise of aizuchi to convey that she'd been listening. "The more I hear from you, Chimiro, the more I'm convinced that Skarrip could never have held on as long as he did without you."

She leaned back against the broad pane of curved glass; it did not radiate the chill outside, but was still cold to the touch, and her lips parted slightly with a silent breath of surprise. She quickly straightened herself and took several quick steps towards the center of the room where Chimiro stood, menus still open and visible. "Which, I suppose, brings us full-circle to my failure to
put my head fully around our logistics challenges. Put it to me simply: what do we most need right now, and why do we not have it?"

Chimiro hesitated before speaking; by now she recognized that the answer she was about to receive would not necessarily be complete or as asked. "I do not know that I can summarize what you're asking for in a way that does not omit essential—"

"Mats, Chimiro. Give me the names of mats we need in bulk, why we need them, and why we don't have them."

"I would say that the most essential are Dire Wolf Incisors, Treant Heartwood, and Corrupted Pixie Blood. I am not an expert on crafting of any sort, but the first two—"

"Upgrades for our clearers, thank you—I recognize those, at least."

"Quite correct, although I could not tell you who uses what, and they are used for projects as well."

Sakuya's fingertip traced a slow, vertical trail through the air as she scanned the ordered list hanging before her. "You would know the faction projects better than I, but in terms of upgrades… Incisors are for the longsword users, and mages need Heartwood. I don't know what the Pixie Blood is for, though."

"My understanding is that it is refined into Enchanted Blood, which is used extensively to both drive NPC production of Healing Potions and supply our own crafters for such. There are a number of provisioning projects which require Enchanted Blood in great quantities."

Sakuya winced. Having to delay equipment upgrades for their clearing groups was bad enough, but potions were an essential life-or-death dependency for anyone. The basic first-tier potions sold by virtually any alchemist or item shop just didn't cut it after around level 10, and if Sylvain's NPCs stopped producing the higher-quality versions, the city's players would have to craft or import them from elsewhere—if they even could, at any price. "We can only hope the Salamanders are equally challenged by the repop changes."

"My lady, it seems self-evident to me that they are. Else why take the chances that they are taking, farming in our territory?"

Sakuya's finger hesitated in mid-air just before one of the lines of text in Chimiro's list. Her mind was suddenly abler with thoughts that would not go away, all of them competing for primacy. Green eyes darted between columns of data, trying to corral those thoughts into a semblance of order before she spoke. "I need… I need a knowledgeable crafter in here," she said slowly. Then she spun to look at Chimiro, who jumped slightly at the sudden movement, all of his UI windows leaping away from her fingertips as he reacted. "No, not just any crafter—get me our Crafting Lead. Head Crafter. Whatever the hell we call him."

"Rolf, my lady. His title, as such, is—"

"I don't care; just get him in this office ASAP. And Granholm, I need Granholm in here now to speak for the farmers."

A seed had begun to sprout in Sakuya's mind, and while Chimiro hurried to send messages to the appropriate people, she did her best to nurture it. She drew open her game map and refocused it until the whole of Sylph territory spread out before her in the air, only listening with half an ear while she reviewed what she knew of the land she was supposed to be defending. Shaped somewhat like an overflowing ice cream cone with the top tilted to the northeast, the majority of the "ice cream" part of
the cone was dominated by the massive, sprawling zone of the Ancient Forest, which was the only part of their territory that shared a border with the Salamanders. To the southwest the thinner Fae Underwood formed a buffer between the deep forest and the newbie zones of Sylvain Environ, with the Sylvan Peninsula stretching out into the ocean from there, but those were all well beyond where the Salamanders were now.

In terms of actual number of zones, we have the fewest of any race except perhaps the Imps. But those zones are massive, and there is incredible variety within them—a wide spread of level ranges, spawns, and environments. We may be able to use that to our advantage. Manually-colored or annotated regions overlaid the map when she touched the «Custom Data» checkbox, but the notes shared from her clearing group didn't have what she needed to know—most of what she'd collected over the months had to do with the areas within the World Tree, and the usual routes for getting there quickly.

Rolf was the first to arrive; according to Chimiro he had already been in the administrative building when summoned. The blond boy had the kind of plain, round face that disappeared into crowds; the only thing Sakuya found particularly remarkable about him was how young he seemed to be for a position that demanded so much organization. His ordinary Japanese features radiated nervousness at having been summoned so abruptly by his faction leader, and he shifted from one foot to the other before sketching a bow when her attention fell on him.

Sakuya held up a hand to forestall any further ceremony or fuss. "Thank you for coming on short notice, Rolf. You're not in trouble, I just need information and I'm hoping you can help me without spending a lot of time checking records or going back and forth in PMs."

That approach seemed to dispel the boy's unease, he grinned awkwardly and straightened his posture a little. "That's a relief," he said quickly. "I thought maybe I'd screwed up inventory again. How can I help you?"

"Again?" Sakuya chose not to pursue that revealing comment; Chimiro probably knew more than she did anyway, and the boy was clearly doing a good enough job to thus far not need replacement. "Rolf, it's my understanding that we don't have very many players in our clearing groups or registered as Militia who use two-handed swords or polearms. Would that be an accurate statement?"

Rolf nodded quickly, giving Chimiro a quick glance to the side. "Yeah, pretty much. I'd have to check the books to get you numbers, but I can only think of what, about a dozen people offhand? Mostly Militia volunteers. Only a couple players in the core clearing groups with two-handers, and you probably know who they are. Even fewer with polearms."

"Thank you. What mats do those weapons require for upgrades?"

Rolf's fuzzy blond eyebrows rose expressively. "You needed me for that?"

Sakuya sighed. "Please pretend that your faction leader is stupid, Rolf, and answer the question. I wouldn't have asked it if I knew."

Rolf blushed furiously and stammered his way through replying. "I-I, I'm sorry Sakuya, I mean Lady Sakuya, it's—do I have to call you that? Skarrip always wanted to be called a Lord, and whatever, right, but—"

Sakuya was already holding out a hand to settle the boy's nerves before he got halfway through his first sentence; she immediately felt bad for the tone she'd taken with him. "No, I apologize—please just continue. Two-handed swords and polearms," she offered as a reminder to get him back on track.
"R-right," Rolf replied, smiling nervously as he looked between the two adults in the room. "Well, base upgrades for the Two-Handed Straight Sword weapon class need Drake Scales. For polearms it's Loper Spadetails."

Neither of which, Sakuya, knew, could be found in any great quantities anywhere in Sylph territory. "Do we maintain any significant inventory for these mats?"

Rolf scoffed so quickly that it was clear he didn't even have to think about the answer. "Why would we? We'd have to import most of it, and we mostly just keep a small stock on hand for the core clearers." At Sakuya's look of impatience, he hastened to clarify. "So no, not really. Funny you should ask, though—farmers have been sending me a lot more Drake Scales the last few days, and I've been meaning to ask Granholm what the deal is."

"Ask me about what deal?" The new voice belonged to the coordinator for their farming groups, a thirty-something man in medium brigandine armor whose entry into Sakuya's office had come at the tail end of Rolf's response. The riveted steel plates covering the heavy leather tunic gleamed as if new; Granholm had clearly either just put on his gear, or—more likely, given the time of day—had it serviced. The man turned emerald eyes first towards Chimiro, then Sakuya. "I was about to debrief a farming group from the conflict area, but Chimiro's message sounded urgent. What's up?"

"In a moment," Sakuya said. "What's this about the conflict area?"

"Nothing specific, just trying to get feedback from anyone who's been engaged by the Sals today," Granholm said. "I'm trying to decide if and where to shift our assignments around, but I need to know more about what's happening on the ground, where it's safe and where it isn't."

That didn't sound good to Sakuya, though she wasn't sure how deeply she wanted to pry at the moment. She'd called Rolf and Granholm here for a specific reason, but given how interconnected all of these subjects were, the risk of getting sidetracked was acceptable. "Is there anything I can do to help you get the information you need?"

Granholm's grunt was accompanied by a sharp nod. "As a matter of fact, yeah, you can tell the clearers to fucking communicate." He immediately looked embarrassed, as if he'd just realized that he was not only talking to his faction leader, but to someone who had herself been a clearer until very recently. "Apologies, uh, your ladyship. It's just that it's tough to know where I should send my farmers if I don't know where they're gonna be protected. Most of the Militia are just volunteers, so I don't count on 'em being around and it's a bonus if they are. I expect better from you and Sigurd."

"As well you should," Sakuya said, mentally tallying yet another subject to raise with one of her least favorite people in the world. "I'm sorry that we've let you down, Granholm. I know your people are at great risk right now, and you deserve to know that you're being supported. Would it help if I have Sigurd designate a consistent point of contact for you?"

Whatever burden was weighing on the farming coordinator seemed to lift momentarily; his shoulders lost a bit of their slump and a smile touched his face. "I'd really appreciate that, miss ladyship. But that wasn't why you asked for me, was it?" He glanced in the direction of Rolf, curiosity plain.

Sakuya made a beckoning gesture with both hands, drawing everyone closer to the wide open area in front of her desk. "It was not. I'd like to see your map, with the farming data overlays."

Granholm obliged, drawing open his map and setting it visible, then maximizing its size as much as possible before turning the window slightly; he was clearly well-practiced at sharing or presenting map data to others. "Keep in mind that I'm still updating the POIs," he warned. "We don't have enough info from the farming groups yet, at least not enough to get a total picture of what
"But you have some," Sakuya said as she walked up close to Granholm's map window, reaching out and miming a tap at the unresisting air. "The shin character here beside some of these notes, is that to label new data?"

"You got it," Granholm said, trying not to fidget too much so that his window would stay in place; he seemed to be having trouble juggling the need to stay still with the desire to turn and look at what Sakuya was doing. Peering at the spot she'd pointed out, he added, "And we're lucky we got that much before the Sals pushed us out."

"From Sigurd's reports, they've been up and down the east bank of the Willowbend, but their efforts seem to be converging on the north end where it wends westward towards Lugru and up into the foothills."

Granholm gave Sakuya a significant look; she was fairly sure he wanted to make another comment about Sigurd keeping him in the loop, but was held in check by her promise to do something about it. "Right. For now I'm having our farming groups avoid anything on the Sal side of the Willowbend, but we at least know some of what started popping there after the mob reset."

"From what I'm seeing here, it's a mix of Forest and River Drakes, plus Gazer and Spider variants."

"And a few other things like Hill Giants and a whole mess of Lopers coming down from the mountains, but yeah, that's about it for mobs worth farming. As you can see, it's like that on both banks of the Willowbend, from the east coast all the way up to where the river comes down from the mountains."

Sakuya's eyes darted quickly between different annotations, scanning thoroughly across the area they were contesting with the Salamanders. "We've got some curved sword users, but spiders are everywhere; they don't matter."

"Mages sometimes need the eyes for rare wand upgrades," Rolf answered. "Truesight pots too, if you're an alchemist. But that's all the important recipes I know of, and we don't really have trouble keeping that stuff stocked, even now."

"What's the point of all this?" Granholm asked. He then seemed to think better of the question or its tone, rubbing at the light green scruff on his jawline and looking a little sheepish. "I mean, don't get me wrong, it's nice to have someone up high actually paying attention to what's going on out there on the ground. But I might be able to help more if I knew what you wanted."

Sakuya carefully considered her words before responding. Granholm and Rolf were loyal Sylphs, she knew that much—but she wasn't sure how talkative they were, and the plan that was forming in her head would depend greatly on the element of surprise. "Pick your favorite logistics quote from all of history," she said. "The Salamanders are here because they want something we have that they don't. If we know what it is they want, we can make informed choices about how to deny it to them."

The non-interactive portions of ALO's UI were intangible, but the entirety of a map window was intended to be interactive and had collision—for the owner of the window. If it had been Sakuya's own map, she could've tapped her finger against it; since it was someone else's, her fingertip found only air as it traced a line along the river where it bent its way northwards from the southeastern coastline of the Ancient Forest zone. "I asked about polearms and two-handed weapons before because those are what Salamander clearers primarily use," she said. "I've dealt with them enough to be sure of that. Like us, their early-game equipment choices were probably driven by what was most consistently pops where."
readily available in their own territory."

"Makes sense to me," Rolf said, nodding along. Then something seemed to occur to him, his eyes widened a little. "The Drake Scales."

Granholm's map wobbled as he tried to turn himself to face it, then settled for turning the map halfway back towards him so that he could point. "But they can get those anywhere along the Willowbend now," he said with a frown. "Why keep moving north? All the low-altitude skylands near the hills are ideal for ambushes. It'd be better for them to find the most defensible area they could and stick with it."

"Because what they really need are upgrade mats for their polearms," Sakuya said with growing certainty. "That's what most of their melee DPS groups are going to use. Sals are big on formation fighting and hard-hitting two-handed weapons; it plays to their strengths." Her finger stabbed towards the map, plunging through the immaterial light just past her first knuckle. "We've always had a few Forest and River Drakes here and there, but I've never seen a Loper of any kind in the Ancient Forest. Now you've got a note here that says they've started spawning in numbers where the Willowbend comes down from the foothills. Is that accurate?"

Granholm nodded, frowning. "As far as I know. I don't have anyone assigned there today, though—it's not worth the risk of running into Sals on that side of the river; we don't give a shit about Lopers."

Resolve straightened Sakuya's posture and filled her with confidence in her decision. "We do now." Her eyes fell on Chimiro. "Get Sigurd in here."

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As he lay awake in his inn room, unable to sleep, Kirito reflected that his reputation for being late to bed and early to rise was well-deserved—but that the answer he gave, if asked, was not always the whole story.

Not that many people had asked; he could probably count them on one hand, and Argo had paid for the information. But the last time Asuna had remarked upon the way he usually seemed to be up before her, he'd simply pointed out that grinding well into the evening and getting an early start the next day were how he, as a solo player, kept his edge over the majority of the clearers. Parties were virtually always capable of clearing mobs faster and more efficiently; putting in extra time and work was the only way to keep up—let alone stay ahead of the pack.

She'd accepted the answer at face value. It had even been true. But it wasn't the complete truth.

A single candle burned at the bedside, but despite wanting to sleep, Kirito preferred having the light on at the moment. In a dark room, the ceiling became a black canvas against which his imagination and memories painted vivid images. Tonight, as was so often the case, they painted pictures of his victims and their faces at the moments of their deaths.

Some of them hadn't seen it coming; those kills were both better and worse because he felt especially guilty about taking someone unawares, but was at least spared the look of realization in their eyes at the knowledge of their imminent death. Zanzer, came the name now seared into his memory; the Salamander couldn't have been much older than Kirito himself, if that, and the multi-hit combo Kirito had used had dealt critical damage against the lower-level player, killing him outright before he even knew he was being attacked.
Others were harder. Kin’oh, the mage in Rosalia’s group, had worn real terror on his face, screaming as Kirito’s sword had torn through his avatar, and—in the very last moment before that human being had become a Remain Light—Kirito was sure there had been accusation, a dying man’s blame for his fate.

It wasn’t fair; both of these people had been preying on other players. A part of Kirito knew—as he’d told Mukensha—that by engaging in banditry, they were taking their lives in their own hands, gambling those lives on being able to do unto others before the same was done unto them.

*That was justice. They deserved what they got.* Words like these were easy to say in rational, even karmic terms. They were much harder to use as a shield against a guilty conscience.

Kirito rolled onto his side beneath the bedsheets, staring into the candle’s weak flame as if drawn to it, moth-like. The rest of his party had long since gone to their own rooms—all except Asuna, who hadn’t yet returned from her outing with Yuuki. He wasn’t worried about her; he could still see her HP bar in the upper left of his HUD, and the one time he’d checked his map to search for them, he’d been able to see both her and Yuuki in the same location. But thinking about what they were up to, what they might be talking about, was a useful distraction from the things that were keeping him from his rest. The room was a little chilly when his bare arm slipped from the sheets, but it only took a brief touch at the candle’s pop-up interface to turn it off, plunging the room into darkness.

*I've missed Yuuki*, Kirito thought. *It would've been nice to spend more time with her, but from the sounds of things, she won't be sticking around for long. She must've found something important, working with the Imps—something important enough to take her away from clearing. The thought almost prompted a physical shrug to himself, but the motion didn't really work the way he was lying on his side, and he rolled onto his back and tried closing his eyes. If it's about Prophet... I can't tell her not to try, but I wish she'd let it go for now. I don't want her to get left behind in the clearing progression... or worse, hurt somehow.*

The distraction of thinking about Yuuki and Asuna was no longer taking his mind in directions that helped him sleep; all roads seemed to lead, in some way or another, to violence or death. Kirito squeezed his eyes more tightly shut, but the act was pointless; doing so wouldn't shut off the HUD in his peripheral vision, and it certainly did nothing for his overactive imagination. Still, even needless worrying about his friends was far less anxiety-inducing than dwelling on the murders he’d committed, and eventually his thoughts began drifting to the point where he felt himself dozing off.

At first Kirito thought the sound was the beginning of a dream, but after this long in the game, his senses were far too attuned to the artificial perfection of ALO’s sound effects. Drowsiness sharpened to a single scintillating point of lucid awareness, and all hope of sleep vanished. *That was the door handle. Someone's trying to pick the lock.*

Lying on his back with everything unequipped, Kirito knew he probably had seconds, if that. He briefly considered opening his menu just long enough to select a weapon, but discarded the thought immediately. *I'm in a safe zone. Whoever's trying to break in here, they expect me to either be asleep or away. If I come at them, armed, I can't actually do anything except embarrass them, and they'll probably flee and disappear into the night. But if I lure them in...*

Kirito couldn’t pass up the chance to possibly trap one of Prophet’s cronies and get some answers. He remained where he was with his eyes closed, body still as death, and listened intently.

The door opened with a slow creak; through his eyelids Kirito could sense the room brightening from the orelight in the hallway, and then returning to darkness a moment later when the intruder shut the door behind them carefully enough that it barely made any sound. The footsteps that followed were so soft that it was blatantly obvious their owner was either sneaking or using some
kind of sound-muffling spell or ability, but Kirito could still just barely sense their slow progress across the room. *Just a little closer,* he thought. *Once I've locked that door, you and I are going to have a nice little chat.*

He was expecting the intruder to come within reach; if this was one of Prophet's people, there was a good chance they were planning on trying the sleep-PK exploit he'd heard about. He wasn't worried; that would only work if he really was asleep—and only if they could both correctly guess where the pop-up for a duel request would appear in front of his chest, and manipulate one of his hands to accept it without being able to see it. If they tried that, Kirito was just going to wait for the anti-harassment pop-up from the unwanted contact—one he'd never see unless he was awake for it—then make his play.

He was not expecting the quiet, very familiar voice that spoke next. *"Kirito? Are you asleep?"*

Asuna's voice was so soft that he was certain she was trying *not* to wake him if he wasn't already. It didn't help. He sat upright so quickly that he must've startled her just as much as she had him; he heard Asuna squeak slightly, followed by a thump that must have been her falling backwards. Eyes still adjusted to the dim light of the inn room, he could just barely make out her outline barely a meter away from the bedside as she returned to a sitting position.

*I'm sorry, Kirito,*" Asuna said, her silhouette dipping in a seated bow from *seiza.* "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"I couldn't sleep anyway," Kirito replied, though that wasn't *entirely* the case. At the moment, he didn't really care about the lost sleep. *"But I… I… how did you open the door? I thought you were someone with a really high «Lockpicking» skill trying to break in."* He tried not to imagine how this scene might've played out if he'd tried to ambush his supposed night stalker; that could have been *incredibly* embarrassing.

"You keyed me earlier when we were talking strategy, remember?"

*Kirito did* remember then; the recollection struck him almost immediately when she began speaking. *"Sorry, you're right. I guess I…"* He searched for the right words, thoroughly confused, and then decided to simply own up to that fact. *"I guess I was just confused. I wasn't expecting anyone this late at night."

*I know,*" Asuna said. "I'm sorry for intruding, I'll leave if—"

"No, please," Kirito said, sitting up a little straighter, and then drawing the sheet up to his chest against the chill. It was just as well that the room was so dark; despite having nothing equipped, there really wasn't anything for him to get self-conscious about. And with a distant part of his mind, Kirito wondered just how much even that mattered, now. *"You wouldn't have come to see me this late if it wasn't important. What's going on? Is Yuuki okay?"

There was a wiggle of movement in silhouette and a slight sound; Kirito realized after a delay that she must have been shaking her head. *"No, she's fine, Kirito. It's not like that. We spent a long time talking, and she told me about… some things that happened, early in the game. It's her story to tell you if she wants to, but after we talked she said she wanted some time alone… and I started thinking again."

"About what?"

Asuna was quiet then, almost long enough for Kirito to consider prodding her, but he gave her as much time as she needed. When she spoke next—he couldn't be certain it wasn't just his imagination,
but it was dark and hearing was currently his keenest sense—he thought her voice might've shaken just a little. "I thought I'd lost you earlier today, Kirito. When I saw your Remain Light sitting there, burning away… I felt something break inside me. I wasn't just afraid you were going to die… I was afraid that was going to happen, and I would've never told you how I really feel about you."

He couldn't clearly see Asuna's face in the blackness of the room, but Kirito could well imagine what he might see if he could. What's more, her words resonated deeply inside him; at the time, when he'd been watching the seconds of his life drain down faster than they'd had any right to do, he'd been consumed with thoughts of the people he'd leave behind, people who would be grief-stricken with the loss. His family of course, especially his younger sister, Suguha. The friendships he'd formed during his time in ALO for sure—most of them far deeper and more meaningful than any he'd ever had in the real world.

And foremost in his mind, burning brightly with her strength of spirit and the warmth of close companionship: a certain Undine clearer who was dearer to him than he'd allowed himself to ever acknowledge, even in the silence of his own thoughts. He still wasn't sure he was ready, even now, to admit to himself just how much she'd come to mean to him. But he supposed a close brush with death had a way of clarifying a person's priorities, bringing out what was truly important.

If Kirito lacked the social skills necessary even to maintain friendships with his own gender, that unfamiliarity and discomfort had always gone at least double for girls. The reactions had become so ingrained into him that at this point it was almost reflex, and if that meant that he sometimes pretended to be more oblivious than he actually was, he knew—in a moment of introspection that cut straight through the fog of denial—that this bull-headed habit was more about self-preservation than anything else. If he didn't acknowledge these things, didn't take the risk of dealing with them openly, that meant fewer chances to tread on dangerous ground and say the wrong thing.

Kirito knew that for some time now, he'd been walking a very fine line with his feelings towards Asuna—and in some ways, had been almost hiding from them, or rather, from what they implied. There was no doubt at all that she was precious to him. What he'd felt in the Sewers when he'd watched her and XaXa falling towards the water had been echoed, magnified, when Black had cut her wings and sent her plummeting to the ground. He'd been certain, especially the second time, that she was going to die. And the thought of helplessly watching her Remain Light disappear the way he had so many others… he flinched, even now, just thinking of it.

"You don't have to say anything," Kirito said suddenly, trying to ease her conflict a bit and make it easier on her—but also buying himself a little bit of time to think. He tried to dredge up memories of the few dating sims he'd played, tried to recall the kinds of things the smooth protagonists said when they were trying to console an upset girl, or—more to the point—deal with a confession. "It's okay—I know. Maybe you haven't told me in words, but your actions have said a lot more."

Silence greeted that statement. For a time Kirito tried to keep himself from panicking at the thought that he'd somehow misjudged the situation. After all, he could barely even see Asuna at the moment; he couldn't tell what her expressions were, and couldn't even attempt to read her body language. For all he knew, she'd been talking about something completely different—

_Don't be an idiot_, Kirito told himself. _Be as oblivious as you want to everyone else if that's what helps you not freak out every time a girl talks to you, but at least don't lie to yourself. You know what she's talking about. You know how she feels, and you know how you feel. This isn't some high school romance manga where everyone always has to misunderstand everyone else just to keep the story going._

_So why_, Kirito thought with considerable frustration, _is it so hard to just come out and pick the right
In the dead silence of the darkened inn room, the slightest sound drew Kirito sharply out of his thoughts; he could hear Asuna shifting position, and faintly see the motions of her hands before her, as if she was doing something with her menu; a small, tinny sound effect played. The dim slivers of light around the door frame occluded almost completely as she drew closer, then sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Asuna—"

Before Kirito realized what was happening, Asuna had slipped her arms around him and pulled him closely to her.

"I-I-I—" The words just wouldn't come out; Kirito was not even remotely putting on or exaggerating his flustered reaction just then. "W-what are you doing?"

Kirito felt those soft, warm arms tighten, her hands pressed against the bare skin of his back while she leaned her head against his shoulder. Without even thinking about what he was doing, his own arms came up in response, and panic nearly set in when he realized that she'd traded her clearing robes for what felt suspiciously like a nightgown. It was now the only thing separating them, and it was entirely too thin.

"Letting my actions speak for me," she said quietly, breath warm against his neck. "I-I'm sorry, Kirito, I know I shouldn't be this forward… but I… I want us to stay together, at least just for tonight. I'm afraid of what I'm going to see in my dreams. I need to know you're not going to disappear, that you'll be there when I wake up."

"I'll be here," Kirito assured her, though his voice had the dazed timbre of bewilderment. Reaching up to dismiss the anti-harassment pop-up that had finally showed itself, he worked up the nerve to then run the palm of his hand across her hair. His finger caught awkwardly in one of her braids, but a careful twist of his hand slipped it free with only a happy sound from Asuna. By some unspoken mutual consent, they both carefully reclined until Kirito's head came to rest on his pillow, with Asuna snuggled up to him under one arm while her own head lay on his chest.

Once he got past the shock bordering on incipient panic that had been threatening him, and allowed himself to relax, Kirito was astonished at just how comfortable a feeling it actually was to have Asuna next to him. Her warm presence and the gentle weight of her head on his chest were more reassuring than he ever would've imagined, and although the soft pressure of her breasts against his side was impossible to ignore despite the barrier of her nightclothes, it wasn't the all-consuming focus that it might've been on any other day. He was more hyper-aware of the places where her bare skin actually touched his; her left arm for sure where it lay across his chest and curled around to his side, but most keenly it was the feeling of her cheek and the curve of her jaw against him. It was difficult not to notice how that was affecting him.

"I wish I could hear your heartbeat," Asuna whispered, the puff of breath from her words warming his skin further. "Or feel your chest rising as you breathe."

Since she'd reacted well to it before, Kirito reached up with his right hand and dared to stroke her hair a bit more, which only caused her to try to nestle more securely into the crook of his other arm. "Just look in your party list," he suggested helpfully, reverting to the familiar ground of what he knew in lieu of further exploring this frighteningly new, unmapped territory of intimacy. "Our avatars don't have a breathing reflex or hearts to beat, but even with your eyes closed, you can always see my HP."
He'd been trying to be reassuring, but ever so briefly, Kirito was struck again by the feeling that he'd managed to say something wrong—something that completely ruined things. Asuna went still next to him, and for just a few beats he could swear that she'd tensed up, or was starting to cry. But then the twitch that he'd mistaken for a silent sob turned into what was very clearly, to the contrary, a slight giggle.

"Nerd," Asuna said in an even quieter whisper.

Having no idea how to respond to that, or even be quite sure how she meant it, Kirito made a best effort. "Well... yeah?"

Another giggle followed, this one softer than the first; Kirito had to assume that his response had been a safe one, especially when there was no further reply except for a slight tightening of the arm that lay across his chest.

"Thank you, Kirito," Asuna said finally. "It's embarrassing to say, but I know I'll be able to sleep better tonight, here with you like this."

"I feel the same way," Kirito admitted, not realizing until the moment he said it just how very true it was. "Like I said, I haven't been able to sleep at all yet."

Kirito felt Asuna's head raise just a little bit; when he did the same and opened his eyes, he could just barely make out faint reflected light in hers. "Something troubling you, too?" she asked.

Even in the dark, it was hard to meet Asuna's gaze now; Kirito let his head drop back to the pillow and bit at his lip before answering. "Same as always," he said. "Except now with the added weight of responsibility. I think about the people I've killed with my own hands. I think about their faces when they died. And now I wonder how anyone could ever take me seriously as some kind of civilized voice for the Spriggans, when I've done just as much killing as anyone else."

He felt Asuna's grip on him become almost painful for a moment, on the high edge of the actual discomfort that ALO's simulation allowed. "No," she said, voice muffling as she pressed her face into his chest. "Not as much as anyone else, and only when you had to."

"But—"

"Listen to me, Kirito," Asuna insisted, raising her head once more. "You're a good person. You make mistakes, but that's part of being human. The important thing is that you try to do the right thing, and you try to save people's lives if you can. If there's anything that anyone needs to know about you, it's that." The arm that had been curled around his torso drifted upwards until Asuna's hand came to rest on his cheek. "I know what it's like to be responsible for taking someone's life. I could never judge you for that. No one else in the clearing groups should either, if they knew what happened."

Kirito almost missed the last sentence; his brain had suddenly kicked into high gear, and the sudden flush of excitement he felt briefly drove everything else out of his mind. He needed to figure out what he'd just figured out; it was right there at the edge of his thoughts. "What did you say?"

Asuna stammered slightly, seeming taken aback by his reaction and sudden question. "I-I... Kirito, I'm sorry, I hope I didn't upset you, I was just trying to—"

"You didn't upset me," Kirito said, the feeling of epiphany very nearly strong enough to outweigh the still-surreal fact that there was a warm, soft girl cuddled up next to him. "But I need you to repeat exactly what you just said to me. It's important." He wasn't quite sure how it was important, but it
"I…" Asuna faltered briefly before regaining some of her poise. "I was just saying that I won't judge you for having to kill another player, Kirito. Even if it was technically falling damage that killed XaXa, I still feel responsible."

Her words stuck in Kirito's head, banging around like a pachinko ball thrown into a steel drum until he followed them through, trying to tease out what his mind was trying to tell him. *It has to be something that's been really bothering me, something I haven't been able to figure out. Something Asuna said helped me make some kind of connection, if I could just put it together—* "Kirito?"

"I won't judge you…"

"I'm sorry," Kirito said, frustrated with himself. "I feel like I'm on the verge of figuring out something important. It's like it's right there on the tip of my tongue, but…" While he spoke, Asuna let her palm slip away from his face, bringing it to rest on his chest now. In answer, he wrapped both his arms around her, and when she began to absently stroke his skin with her fingertips, it made it almost impossible for him to hold any other thoughts in his head.

Kirito went silent for a few moments after trailing off, but no more words were forthcoming. Whatever the idea had been, it was gone for now. He shook his head slightly, not wanting to move in any way that might disturb Asuna or risk interrupting the moment any worse than he already had. "Don't worry about it."

"Maybe sleeping on it will help," Asuna suggested, a notion with which Kirito was in no way prepared to argue, given the circumstances and company. *I feel like my world's been turned upside down. Being trapped in a death game, having wings and long pointed ears, being able to fly and use magic—those things have been completely normal to me for half a year now; at this point it would almost be weirder to go back to riaru.*

*Not only having a girlfriend who's amazing and beautiful, but having her crawl into my bed in the middle of the night? That I'm still having difficulty believing is actually real. A part of me is almost afraid to go to sleep; maybe when I wake up tomorrow, I'll be back in the world where I'm a hopeless hikikomori with as much chance of being loved by Asuna as I would've had beating Sugu at kendo.*

But it was tough to maintain any illusions of disbelief after she once again laid her head down on his chest, making a noise of contentment. His attention was acutely drawn to the all-too-real awareness of how her long hair had fanned out on his chest and stomach; every time she moved her head it dragged across him in a very gentle but distracting way that almost tickled. Securely ensconced in both Asuna's arms and the light blanket, sleep took Kirito more quickly than it had in a very long time.

His dreams, unsurprisingly, were filled with her.

It was a kind of dream that Kirito had often thought of as a *recursive loop*—a programming term referring to a kind of software glitch that caused a single piece of code to keep referring back to itself, often causing the program to freeze entirely. The same themes and scenes kept replaying in his mind, but each one varied slightly in the way it played out. In many of these loops, Asuna had come to his inn room just as she had that night, but he kept saying the wrong thing over and over in different ways, causing her to argue with him or storm out of the room. In one such replay it hadn't been Asuna at all; another of Prophet's followers had tried mimicking her appearance again in order to
trick him. Yet another dream sequence had a result that was far more graphically intimate than anything Kirito had dared entertain even in his imagination; he felt an intangible pang of disappointment when that ended far too soon, once again bringing him back to the moment where she'd entered his room.

"You're a good person," the Asuna in his dreams told him once more. "You make mistakes, but that's part of being human."

When she reached up to touch his face, he took her hand in his; that was what he'd done differently the last time through the looping dream, and the gesture of affection had seemed to push the scene in a direction he'd very much like to experience again. *All a dream,* he reminded himself distantly, thoughts adrift. *I know that. But if it's a dream, I can take risks.*

"I know what it's like to be responsible for taking someone's life," said the dream-Asuna next. "I could never judge you for that." As soon as she spoke, Kirito felt a sudden chill next to him, and opened his eyes.

In Asuna's place, gazing down at him, he saw the spectral face of a Norn.

Alarmed, Kirito rolled off the opposite side of the bed, reaching for a weapon but finding none equipped. As he came to a defensive crouch on the floor and tried to open his menu, he looked up just in time to see the Norn raise its gauntlet and speak with Asuna's voice. *Noruna domuru, uthan.*

Kirito awoke to the simulated feeling of an adrenaline rush, an icy sensation sheeting down the length of his body and a profound, jittery anxiety filling his mind. The shock of the sudden turn his dream had taken was extremely unsettling; the only thing keeping him from lurching upright in bed was a warm, soft weight on one side of him, and even then, Asuna initially flinched away when he cried out. "Asuna—!

With the dim beginnings of morning sunlight filtering through the curtains, Kirito was sure he must have slept through most of the night even though his alarm hadn't gone off yet. Either Asuna had already been awake or she was a quick riser; she seemed to be suffering none of the transient grogginess and disorientation he felt as he fought for calm. "Shhh-sh-sh-sh-sh," she said soothingly as they both settled back down, pulling him close to her. "You were having a bad dream."

"I was dreaming about—" Kirito stopped there, not sure he wanted to admit that his brain had been playing reruns of the previous night's relationship upgrade, let alone how many weird directions those dreams had gone.

Fortunately, Asuna seemed willing to give him time, and out of long habit he was quick to recover his wits. At some point before he'd awakened, another anti-harassment pop-up seemed to have occurred and eventually minimized itself; he could see it lurking in his notification column, and focused his attention on it just long enough to make it go away. That last distraction eliminated, he laid his head back on the pillow, stared at the ceiling, and tried to recall where his thoughts had been going at the moment that the Norn had finally killed him in the dream.

*I won't judge you…*

Asuna's words had kept ringing in his head ever since she'd spoken them, and now Kirito realized the connection he'd unconsciously made the night before. *The Norn debuff can't just be about who's killed Caretakers,* he thought suddenly. *Burns and I both took extra damage, and I'd never even seen a Caretaker before. Same for the veteran clearers from the Sylphs and the Sal/Imp alliance when they first hit the zone, according to Argo. But the Undines, Caits and NCC didn't have any trouble,*
and most of them have one important thing in common…

Kirito freed up a hand just long enough to palm his forehead with an abrupt slap. The pattern was right there in front of me all along.

"Kirito? What's wrong?"

"I know why I almost died the other day." Kirito said as he turned to look at Asuna, his voice filled with the steel of certainty. "I know what the Judgment of the Norns does."

Chapter End Notes

Five years, five hundred thousand words. Somehow that happened.

As longtime readers will know, I have a tradition of marking the anniversary of this story with a new chapter. After all, November 6th isn't just the story's anniversary, it's the in-universe launch date of the death game in both canon and this AU. The date has meaning to me, and I feel like it's a good thing for readers to know that there will always be a new chapter on that date.

Last year I missed the date by a day due to a need for last-minute polish; this year I'm doing it a few days early, mainly so that everyone on a weekday schedule gets the weekend to read. I'm excited to get it out there; this is a big chapter, both in terms of word count, and in terms of the events that are happening. I've long said that FDD isn't a "pairing" or "romance" fic, and it's not. But I've always felt a strong affinity for Kirito and Asuna as a couple, and it's very satisfying to me to finally progress their relationship a bit in the story.

The last few years have been rough for me both financially and emotionally, and that means they've been rough for my creative output. I tend to hide from the world when things are bad, and they've been pretty bad, so I apologize for my lack of responsiveness. But things are starting to look up now. I finally ended a toxic relationship that had gone on for far too long and worn me down to almost nothing, and once my ex moves out I'll have the home to myself again. I got hired on full-time, which means medical benefits that I need. It's likely to be a long struggle to get my life back to where I want it to be, but it'll happen.

Love and gratitude to everyone who's stuck with me all this time, and to all the new readers joining as well.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"A guild is a player-created, player-run, and faction-independent organization that allows two or more players to join together under a common identity in a structured way that is supported by game mechanics. Guilds can be created for a fee at the Guild Registrar in Arun, or in a player's home city if their faction has built that service. A guild member can be identified by their guild's unique graphic symbol beside their status ribbon, and a player who is a member of more than one guild can use their «Options» menu to customize which guild's tag appears there at any given time. Membership in a guild is by in-person invitation of its guildmaster or those with the correct invite permissions, and brings with it various benefits that depend on a member's role-defined privileges, the guild's relations with other factions or guilds, as well as properties or services to which that guild has gained access..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Guilds»

11 ~ 13 May 2023
Day 188 ~ 190 - Morning

Once Kirito was done explaining what he wanted to do, there was no immediate answer while the rest of his party digested the words, a variety of reactions playing out on their faces. Surprisingly, it was the least talkative member of the group—Mentat—who spoke first.

"A guild?" said their Salamander healer, stirring a little uneasily where he stood leaning against the wall by their inn table. "We just went out for the first time as a party yesterday, and you want us to form a guild?"

"That escalated quickly," Xorren remarked, sounding more amused than put off.

"And I just joined the party, so 'scuse me if this all seems a bit sudden to me," Nori said in what sounded like a wind-up to a good speech. The Spriggan woman leaned forward across the table and gestured with her fork as soon as she'd finished taking another bite of her omelet, her first few words muffled. "But forming a guild just so everyone else's cursor will be green, isn't that a bit of expensive overkill?"

"Not really," Kirito said, undeterred by Nori's fork-waving. "I'm handling the fees. More importantly, everyone here volunteered to be part of a formal clearing group, not just some pickup. In a way, we're all talkative representatives of the Spriggans when we're out in the field. It's not just about green cursors; we need to be able to be recognized at a glance for who and what we are—and so does anyone who works with us."

"The NCC does this extensively," Asuna added from where she sat at Kirito's side. "And not just with their clearers. They have guilds and guild relationships set up for different roles in their alliance, and they call those guild tags 'badges'."

"Which is basically a kind of group-based permissions schema," Kirito summed up.

"A what?" asked Nori blankly.

Kirito paused for a moment, mouth half-open, and tried the first analogies that came to mind. "Um. Have you ever worked with Active Directory, firewall rules, or ACLs in general?"
The looks that he was getting from everyone else—including Asuna—told Kirito that he had probably added more confusion than he'd relieved with his choice of comparisons. "Never mind," he said quickly.

Asuna, fortunately, stepped in where he'd stumbled; he doubted she'd understood his references any more than the others had, but she at least knew what he'd been trying to explain, since they'd already gone over it at length together. "It just means that using a guild tag is the best way for people to quickly recognize who's a member of our clearing group, or even someone hired to help out. That's going to get even more important if we take on more members who aren't Spriggans, because just like in the NCC, Kirito won't be able to use faction permissions and ranks for them."

"And it really is the only way to make completely sure that everyone else's cursors are green to us," Kirito said, giving Mentat and Burns both significant looks. "Guild permissions will let me set Ally relations as the default with other guilds or factions, and any guild member will inherit those settings as long as their cursor mode is set to Guild."

"And I'm guessing that's going to be a requirement going forward," Mentat said, his face and tone both carefully neutral.

Kirito met the man's gaze and held it. "Can you understand why?" He didn't think he had to give voice to what lay beneath those words, given the events of the previous day.

Mentat's head inclined just a little. "Yeah, I get it. And the reasons are good ones. Let's just say my only other guild experience in this game… well, it didn't exactly leave a good taste in my mouth."

Kirito wanted to inquire what he meant by that, but didn't get a chance. "To be honest," said Xorren, "Coper had been talking recently about some of us maybe pooling funds to guild up anyway. I think he even said something about it in his massmail after he took over." He turned up both hands in a shrug. "I haven't seen a tag on him, and he hasn't said anything about it since. I figure he meant to set that up when we came back from Penwether, but we've been in the World Tree most of the time and he's been busy."

"Which brings me to the other thing I needed to discuss with everyone," Kirito said, seizing on the opening Asuna had provided. "An important piece of the puzzle surrounding the Norn mechanics fell into place after our outing yesterday, and because of that, I've got an uncomfortable question I have to ask all of you."

Xorren let out a chuckle that was barely an exhalation. He tipped his chair back, hands laced behind his head, until his knuckles touched the wall. "Oh, this is gonna be good. Lay it on us, bro."

Kirito didn't want to beat around the bush, but some context was going to be necessary for what he had to ask. "We all know the Judgement of the Norns debuff acts as some kind of damage multiplier based on Caretaker damage or kills, but we also know it can't be just that—I took damage from it, and I'd never been in this zone before."

"They would've had to have come back to Arun to register as a guild first," Kirito realized. "Yoshihara never did the quest, or project or whatever, that opens that service in the faction city. His eyes caught Asuna's with a sidewise glance just as she spoke up. "Then this shouldn't be too much of a leap for anyone, I'd hope. We've fought and cleared together against some of the worst the World Tree has offered yet."

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Xorren's front chair legs settled loudly back to the floor as he sat up straight. The silence that fell then
was broken only by the sound of utensils on plates, and even that stopped quickly enough thereafter. Kirito waited before going on; he wanted to make sure the implications had time to sink in.

"It can't just be attacking or damaging another player that does it," Kirito continued after a few moments. "It would've affected a lot more people." His eyes went automatically to Asuna then before making the rounds of the rest of the party. "It can't just be from being in the same party as a player killer, for the same reason. But every single player we know of who's gotten the Last Attack on either a Caretaker or another player has taken extra damage."

It was Burns who finally spoke first. "Well, that explains a lot."

"It does," Kirito said, meeting the other boy's violet eyes. "I'm not a ganker or a bandit, but I've had to fight off both. Fair or not, that apparently means I have to be careful around Norns."

"And you want to know who else in your party does, too," said Xorren, stating the obvious.

"I'm not going to quiz anyone about the circumstances," Kirito said, though he strongly wished he could do just that for a few of them. "But it's something we all probably ought to be aware of. For the safety of the group, I need a show of hands if you've landed a killing blow on another player."

"Do duels count?" Xorren asked.

Kirito had thought about that, but it didn't make sense to him that the system would consider a duel a kill in this context, especially if the person was rezzed. And Xorren hadn't been taking amplified damage from the debuff, so if he was implying his only kills had been during duels, that explained why he didn't seem to have gone down as quickly as Kirito and Burns had. "Let's assume they don't."

Burns raised his hand; Xorren didn't. When several awkward moments had passed with no other takers, Kirito couldn't help but look as surprised as he felt. He hadn't expected Asuna to raise hers, and had specifically phrased his question so that she wouldn't, but Mentat—whom Argo had said was a former privateer—still had his hands in the pockets of his robes, which drew Kirito's lingering gaze. Nori's eyes went from one person to the next, looking for all the world as if she didn't know what to make of the whole scene.

"Just the two of us?" Kirito finally asked. After the nods of confirmation he got in response, he let his arm drop to his side. "All right. In that case, we should be okay as long as Nori's tanking; we have two excellent healers. Now that we know what to expect, I think Burns and I will manage." He'd been worried that they were going to have to go looking for yet another tank; there was no way they'd survive another Norn with a tank who was vulnerable to the debuff.

"I'm heading over to the Registrar as soon as we're done here," Kirito said. "I have some other business to take care of while I'm out, but I should be back here in about an hour." He struggled for a moment to find the right words, to put what he had to say next in a way that sounded welcoming rather than harsh. He felt like he was still treading a bit of a thin line with some of the group, but anyone who objected to guilding wasn't going to work out in the long term anyway. It was a question of figuring out how to say it.

"If you still want to be on the team then," Asuna said after Kirito didn't say anything else for a few more beats, "we'd love to have you on board. We'll do guild invites, party up, and head back into the Halls of Judgment."

Relieved, Kirito gave Asuna a look of gratitude, which she answered with a slight smile. Turning
back to the group, he spoke one last time. "Any questions?"

Nori waved her hand in the air as if trying to get a teacher's attention. "What's the guild called?"

"Because that matters," Burns added so dryly that it left some question as to whether he was being serious, or just taking the piss out of Nori.

"It does if we're calling it Kirito's Band of Merry Fairies," Xorren remarked, apparently assuming that Burns was being deadpan sarcastic. "Or using Hello Kitty as our guild tag."

"I can personally guarantee you we're not doing either of those things," Kirito said firmly in the wake of the laughter that went around the table.

The question had, however, been a subject into which Kirito had already put a great deal of thought. Possible snarking from Burns aside, Kirito knew that names had power, and he was keenly aware that whatever name he chose for the more-or-less official Spriggan clearing guild needed to be something that other clearing groups—many of which were led by adults—could take seriously.

The kind of credibility he was trying to establish didn't leave any room for in-jokes, anime or video game references, Internet memes, or other silliness. Nor was it something he could just pick at random from a laundry list of fantasy cliches and hope it sounded good. It needed to be something that communicated what he was trying to do, but making it something that sounded Spriggan-exclusive didn't feel right to him, either—not with nearly half the races in Alfheim represented in the lead group alone. He needed it to be something that brought people together, rather than driving wedges into all the cracks in the world.

The name did, in fact, matter. And apparently he wasn't the only one who thought so.

"I have a few ideas," Kirito said. "Let's talk it over and pick one."

Yuuki hadn't actually been sure what to expect from Argo—she'd never before had any reason to reach out to the notorious Cait Sith info broker herself. She hadn't even been sure that a PM would get through, or that she'd get any kind of reply if it did. She had no idea how Argo's business worked in the first place, but Yuuki guessed that the most likely thing was for the broker to get some employee or agent to find her and talk to her about what she wanted to know. She'd figured on needing to stick around Arun for at least another day or two to wait for all that to happen.

She had not, in fact, expected a personal response.

Nonetheless, to her surprise she had received exactly that, which was how she found herself weaving through the crowds in high-end market district where clearers usually shopped in Arun, trying to find one particular storefront with one particular yellow cursor in front of it. The city had no shortage of the latter; even though the population seemed to be overwhelmingly dominated by the white cursors of NPCs, perhaps a third of the people she passed in the street popped the diamond-shaped yellow icon of a neutral race above their heads, with the occasional flash of red in the midst of a safe zone startling her until she remembered that this was just how Sylphs appeared to her now.

Some of those Sylphs gave her ugly looks when they passed each other, which Yuuki tried to defuse with a smile. Few did more than glare, although one Sylph in mage's robes made what was obviously a deliberate attempt to jostle her roughly with his shoulder as they passed. The much-larger man seemed startled when his rudeness not only failed to even budge her due to their relative STR stats, but backfired as he rebounded off of her steady stride and fell to the ground.
"Watch where you're going, you little brat!"

Yuuki stopped there, half-turning to look at the man she'd just inadvertently knocked down. She could feel the eyes of more than a few curious bystanders on her, and when she faced the Sylph man she briefly bowed from the waist. "Sorry," she said, holding out a hand in an offer to help him up.

Hateful green eyes stared at her hand as if the man expected it to aggro him. He struggled back to his feet on his own, and towered over Yuuki as he got up in her face, forcing her to withdraw her proffered arm. She tilted her chin up at him and met the challenge in his gaze, stance loosening and fists balling up as she prepared to defend herself. "Don't patronize me, Imp," he spat. "You're just a monkey's lackey anyway. I've got half a mind to—"

The man's building diatribe cut off with a yelp as a blur of pale skin, black hair and purple clothing seized him by the robes just long enough to slam him face-first into the polished wood supports of the nearest NPC vendor stall. The impact was sufficiently forceful to punctuate the Sylph's shout with the purple flash of damage being suppressed by the Safe Zone, startling Yuuki with the suddenness of the violence. Kumiko's expression was cold as she kicked at the side of his knee and deftly threaded the length of her sheathed sword between the man's back and the crook of his elbow, using it to force him to the ground without actually laying hands on him.

Yuuki froze in place, watching in horrified fascination. She knew the man couldn't actually be in pain, but he still yelled with convincing distress while the Imp clearer used the sheath as a lever to twist his arm back and up in a direction it wasn't meant to go, kneeling on the leather-wrapped flat of it in the small of his back to pin him down. Kumiko's curly black hair fell across her cheeks as she leaned in close to the effectively incapacitated Sylph; Yuuki almost didn't hear her words over the crowd noise and the alarmed murmurs of nearby players.

"Sear this into your memory, you feckless frog coward," she hissed. "Next time you decide to bully a little girl, a bigger one might just come find you outside a safe zone." Kumiko jerked the sheath hard with one hand to twist his arm just a little further, drawing another yell from the man. "Or in one."

She glanced briefly up at Yuuki, then withdrew the sheath of her weapon, rising from her kneeling position and sending the Sylph tumbling with a hard kick in the ribs before he could scramble back to his feet. "Now get lost."

The man did so with great haste, yelling for help; Yuuki looked all around her, but didn't see any other red cursors anywhere nearby. The only NPC guards she saw seemed utterly oblivious to the altercation; she wondered if it had even broken any kind of law. Kumiko watched the Sylph's headlong flight through the crowd, then returned her weapon to her side, expression softening. "You okay, hon?"

"I'm fine, Kumiko, thank you." She gave another worried glance at the direction her assailant had fled. "Was it really necessary to go that far, though?"

Kumiko's dark violet eyes flicked to the side again to follow Yuuki's gaze, then nodded. "You were trying to be polite to him," she said. "That's not going to work."

"I was trying to calm things down," Yuuki replied. "I wasn't afraid of him—I'm way stronger. I just didn't want him to be angry."

"I saw what happened," Kumiko replied, beckoning as she continued in the direction Yuuki had been going. "He had plenty of room; he ran into you deliberately, then tried to use it as an excuse to bully you."
"I know," Yuuki said. It had been blatantly obvious even to her. "I just thought maybe if I tried to be nice to him, he'd realize he was being a jerk."

Kumiko gave Yuuki a smile that seemed faintly sad. "I forget sometimes how young you are," she said. "People like that only understand one thing, Yuuki: who has the bigger stick. You can't talk someone out of being a bully, and you can't win them over by playing nice with them. Sometimes… sometimes the only thing that'll show someone how serious you are is a fight that puts them on the ground—or in it."

Yuuki found the way that Kumiko had phrased her advice very uncomfortable, but something in it had the ring of truth nonetheless. She and Asuna had run into Salamander privateer groups before, long ago, and the only thing that ever stopped them from doing what they wanted was to beat them so badly that they didn't want to come back. And none of her words had done any good with Gitou; the man had been completely impervious to shame or reason—and had actually taken advantage of her reluctance to fight him. As for Prophet and Black—

That wasn't a direction Yuuki really cared to have her thoughts go. She didn't want to argue the point with Kumiko either, especially since she wasn't sure if the woman was even wrong. Instead, she rose up to her tiptoes for just a few steps, trying to see if she could spot the vendor sign that Argo had described. "I figured you'd be out clearing," she said, in a none-too-subtle attempt to change the subject.

"I will be soon enough," Kumiko said. "I need to pick up a few supplies, then I'm meeting up with the rest of my group. What about you?" The back of her hand briefly brushed Yuuki's arm, drawing her gaze. "I thought you were still down south, working with Rei."

She doesn't know, Yuuki realized. She's probably been in the World Tree, and hasn't heard what happened. That's assuming Rei reports to her at all, or that the Salamanders even complained to Haydon. "We ran into some trouble," she admitted. "So we decided to split up for a while and do some searching on our own."

"Curious," Kumiko said. "See, Rei's always been reliable. If she thought that was best, I'd trust her judgment. Do you need any help?" She stopped there in the street, eyes wandering across the displayed wares of an NPC alchemist.

"Probably not," Yuuki said, unsure if there was anything Kumiko could tell her that Argo couldn't. "I just… well, actually…"

One of Kumiko's slim black eyebrows arched slightly when she looked over her shoulder at Yuuki. "Hmm?"

Yuuki chewed on her lip for a few seconds. "If I wanted to find a guild, and all I knew was what their tag looked like… how would I do that?"

Kumiko appeared confused at the question; it clearly hadn't been anything close to what she might've expected. "I… I'm not actually sure. I've never needed to do that myself. Some of the Salamander clearers are in guilds, but we don't really use them when we've already got the faction rank system for clearers." Her eyes became distant in thought. "I know there's an NPC building that handles guild registration here in Arun, and I recall Haydon getting a branch added to Everdark a while back as well. Why?"

When Yuuki didn't answer for several moments, Kumiko spoke to the NPC vendor. "I need five Greater Healing Potions, please, and the same number and tier for MP." Thanking the NPC once the transaction was completed, she turned back to Yuuki. "Is this connected to your monkey problems?"
"Or to the PKers you were searching for?"

"It might be," Yuuki admitted. "There's a guild in Gattan that I think is doing some bad things, and I need to figure out who they are."

"Hm." That noncommittal sound was followed by a look of close scrutiny from Kumiko. "For someone who doesn't seem to want to resort to violence, you sure do end up setting yourself on paths likely to lead to it. I don't suppose you'd care to share any details about this guild, or what bad things you think they're doing."

Yuuki hesitated. There'd been no rising intonation or grammatical question marker in Kumiko's words, but she was certain she was being asked one nonetheless. "I don't think you'd know anything about them anyway," she said, not wanting to go into specifics about where she and Rei had been—or the lethal consequences of what they'd been doing. "Have you heard of anyone in Everdark going missing? Like, not dead, but nobody can find them?"

"Not dead?" That particular qualifier seemed to draw confusion from Kumiko once again. "Missing and dead is not so very uncommon. Missing and alive, though? If they're alive, they're not really missing, not unless they got lost in a dungeon somewhere. You can't stop someone from sending a PM if they truly want to be found."

Not unless you cut off their hands, Yuuki thought morbidly, remembering the numb feeling of her own being severed so long ago. But even then, if the player knows a healing spell, or has a crystal on them, I bet they'd be able to restore themselves. "So that's not really a problem in Everdark?"

"I can't say for sure," Kumiko said. "But it strikes me as unlikely. I know the anti-harassment code, and its limitations, very well. It makes taking prisoners more than a little impractical. If you want someone out of the way, it's so much simpler to just kill them." Before Yuuki could register her discomfort at that particular comment or its matter-of-fact delivery, Kumiko's eyes went left in the direction of her notifications. "That'll be my group," she said. "I need to get to the warpgate, so I'll be out of touch all day, but if you need anything, message me after 6pm, okay?"

"I'll do that," Yuuki said, bowing. "Thank you again for all your help, Kumiko."

Kumiko smiled warmly. "For you, of course."

Once the sound of the woman's wings receded enough to disappear into the ambient noise, Yuuki continued on her way, watching for a Cait Sith in a hooded cloak standing in front of an NPC blacksmith and making a point of avoiding any more Sylphs she saw. It didn't take her much longer to find who and what she was looking for; although Argo was facing away from her, the info broker turned when Yuuki drew within a few dozen meters, waving her over.

"How'd you know it was me?" Yuuki asked.

The first thing out of Argo's mouth lived up to her reputation. "I'll tell you for 500 Yuld."

The price was a pittance, barely more than the drop from a single trash mob. Despite being taken somewhat aback at the request, Yuuki looked at Argo long enough to make sure she wasn't making a joke, then handed over the money.

"For one thing," Argo said, making the coins disappear, "you don't exactly blend in. You're wearing clearer-quality gear, you match the description of Asuna's clearing partner—and that's on top of Imps being relatively uncommon in Arun to begin with. As for how I knew to turn around and look…" The info broker's feline ears twitched to her right as she nodded in that direction. "See those three
Sylphs over there?"

It was hard to miss the trio of red cursors; one of them looked in her direction just long enough to make a point of looking away. "Yeah?"

"All three of them started glaring daggers behind me about thirty seconds ago. Wasn't hard to figure out why, and I knew it was you as soon as I saw you."

Now that Argo had explained herself, it made perfect sense. "I've been getting a lot of that."

"Not surprised. Being at war will do that. Anyway, the answer I just gave you was worth twice what I charged for it. I'm more interested in the other questions you're asking."

"Well," Yuuki said, "I already told you what I wanted to know in PM, but you wanted to talk in person."

"Yep. Missing players, a Salamander guild with an hourglass tag, and anti-harassment mechanics. You were pretty damn specific."

Yuuki was about the same height as the Cait Sith broker, but the other girl had a forceful personality that she found a little intimidating. "Is that bad?"

Argo had a lump of something unidentified in her mouth; she sucked on it for a few moments before shifting it back into her cheek. "Here's the interesting thing about questions," she said finally. "They're answers, too. When you ask someone something, you're giving them a lot of information about what you're interested in, and telling them things they might not already know."

Before going on, Argo glanced briefly to the side; she waited silently while another player passed them in the street, not far away. Giving Yuuki a nudge, Argo led her off to a grassy nook with a tree between two of the nearby NPC buildings, and dropped onto one of the benches there, tail curling around herself as she sat. "In this case, what you're telling me is that you think there's a guild of Salamanders who're somehow circumventing the harassment code in order to kidnap players, and that you're trying to hunt them down for reasons. If I had to guess, you think they've got someone important to you."

The explanation was entirely too close to the truth for Yuuki's peace of mind. "Maybe," she said. "What if I do?"

"Don't quit school for a life of espionage," Argo said bluntly, looking up at her. "You suck at being evasive." Before Yuuki had time to consider whether or not to be offended, the other girl went on. "In other words, you gave me a whole bunch of useful info just by asking me questions. So as a favor, I'm gonna give you some info you don't know. Starting with the fact that yeah, there are a lot of players who've gone missing in Gattan, Sylvain, and Everdark. Most of them you could probably chalk up to the fact that there's a lot of bad blood going around in the south. No shortage of people who look for any excuse to gank someone wearing the wrong colors. Nothing new there."

"Most," Yuuki said, not failing to miss that one word. "But not all?"

One corner of Argo's mouth twitched upwards. "It so happens that I've already had some people looking into the spike in murders down in that area—an increase that started before the war kicked off again. Or more accurately: a spike in what everyone thinks are murders. Some of 'em, once I dug into it and interviewed a few worried friends, it turned out the so-called 'victims' weren't actually grayed on the person's friend list, so I didn't include them in the murder tally. Until you asked your very informative question, they were just dirty data."
"And you think these things are connected?"

"Thirty thousand Yuld. Up-front. Sources and methods, yadda yadda."

Yuuki wasn't sure what the last bit meant, but she'd been wondering at what point Argo was going to start charging for the information she was handing out. The amount in question was not insignificant, but although it would make a dent in her savings, it was still well within her means as a clearer; she only hesitated for a moment before opening a trade window.

"Several days ago, a source in Gattan passed along a request for info about two Salamander nobodies. One of them, it turned out, was pretty easy to find—he tells people he runs the city jail there." Argo's smile broadened. "Ran, past tense. He disappeared not long after that, no explanation. At least, not until today, when a different source passed along a very specific, very hush-hush request for the whereabouts of a pair of Imp assassins named Yuuki and Rei."

The only thing keeping Yuuki's feet on the ground was her recent experience suppressing a panicked fight-or-flight reaction—in this case, literally flight; she wanted nothing so much as to take to the air and get as far away from Argo as possible. Some of her sudden terror must have been plain on her face; Argo simply nodded calmly. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"They shouldn't know our names," Yuuki near-whispered, voice breaking. "They can't. Only two people knew we were there by name… and they're both dead."

"Well, someone does. And that someone really wants to find you." She smiled again in a humorless, uncanny way. "Someone who doesn't know that questions are also answers."

From somewhere within, Yuuki found the strength to stop shaking and face Argo directly. "Why are you telling me this, instead of them?"

"Well," Argo said, "for one thing, you're paying me more than they are." The smile faded from her face then. "And you're Kirito's friend. He doesn't have very many of those. Not sure what you've gotten yourself into, but I had to meet you before I decided what to do about it. And... I decided you needed to know."

Yuuki wasn't sure she wanted to ask the next question. "What happens if they offer more?"

"Person A buys info on Person B. B finds out, pays to keep that info from A. A finds out, makes a counter-offer. They go back and forth until their wallets figure out who wants it more." A pause. "That's how it usually works."

"But not this time." She wasn't quite asking a question; if Argo had any intention of selling her out, she would've already done so.

"Not this time," Argo agreed. "You wanted to find a guild, Yuuki. There's several ways you can go about doing that at the Guild Registrar, either here or in Gattan. Easiest is if you know the guild name, but you don't. If you know what the tag looks like, you can spend a few hours scrolling through the list, seeing if you recognize one. That's not so reliable; some tags look kinda similar, and the way the NCC abuses the system really bloats the list."

"You said 'several'," Yuuki pointed out when Argo stopped there. "That was two."

"The third way," Argo said, "is by searching the registry for the guildmaster's name."

"Which I also don't know."
Once again Argo donned that secret smile of hers. "Then maybe you should try searching for the guy who wants to find you… and find him first."

:::...:::

"I'm still not sure I like it," Asuna said once Kirito had closed his map window and gestured them both onward, satisfied that they were still headed in the right direction. "I can't put my finger on exactly why, it just sounds…" She trailed off, seeming uncertain how to put her thoughts into words.

"It's a good name," Kirito said, trying to bring her around on the choice the group had overwhelmingly voted for. "I didn't have the Internet to look up a translation, but I'm pretty sure I got it right, and everyone liked how the words sounded together. It's not a joke or a pop culture reference. And it's exactly what it needs to be: an agreement to work together as one, despite our differences."

"It sounds pretentious," Asuna said, stepping aside in order to go around a knot of players who'd stopped to talk in the middle of the busy street. "I know a lot of guilds have English-language names to make them seem cool or important, but I feel like people are just going to laugh at us. And even in Japanese, the name has nothing at all to do with clearing."

"Does it need to?" Kirito moved off to the side of the street, and when Asuna followed, he turned to her. "You were the one who pointed out that we need mid-level players for farming and patrol duty, Asuna. And you were right. Most of the people who've volunteered to work with us aren't clearers, and they never will be. But they still want to help. If they're going to be a part of this guild, is it fair to use a name that excludes them? Or any non-Spriggans who want to help?"

Asuna looked back at him for several long seconds, visibly considering his words. Then, to his surprise, she smiled, gentle teasing in her tone. "Watch out, Kirito. If you're not careful, someone might accuse you of trying to think like a leader."

"Anything but that," Kirito protested awkwardly, making an effort to keep a straight face while he said it.

It was wasted effort; Asuna broke into soft laughter nearly as soon as he'd spoken, leaning towards him and bumping him with her shoulder. They both resumed their previous path through the streets, still standing close, and at one point Kirito felt the back of Asuna's hand press lightly against his. Neither of them spoke, but it didn't take more than a few moments for their palms to touch, and then for their fingers to link together, arms swaying slightly in time with their footsteps.

They walked like that for the better part of several blocks, but eventually had to let go in order to descend down the steep set of carved stone stairs that cut down the side of the terrace wall towards the next street below. Kirito drew a vertical line in the air with two fingers to open his menu, and the game map that he'd previously pinned open immediately reappeared. "This should be it right up ahead," he said, a tiny circle of light echoing out from the map surface as he tapped his finger against it just below the marker showing a friend's current location. "If I'd known Yuuki was going to be there, I wouldn't have paid Argo for directions, but at least I don't have to set a manual nav point."

He couldn't be sure it wasn't just his imagination, but he thought Asuna might have been standing a lot closer than she'd ever seemed comfortable doing; she hadn't sought out his hand again, but they were nearly shoulder-to-shoulder. Things have definitely changed between us, he thought, a part of him still amazed. Or have they? In a way, I guess. We're the same people we were yesterday, we still have the same feelings. And she hasn't said anything about last night since we got up—to be fair, the way I woke up didn't really leave much opportunity, either. But there are little moments like that, with the hands.
Neither of us have brought it up outright, or used the words "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" out loud, but it's like a wall's been torn down... and something else built in its place.

In retrospect, it wouldn't have been difficult to find the Registrar from the air if Kirito had known beforehand what it looked like. It was a distinctively peak-roofed three-story stonework building, which was towards the tall end for Arun, but once they passed through the tree-lined courtyard and into the building itself, Kirito realized that the upper two stories had to be nothing other than empty space, given how high the conical timber and stone ceilings were. Immediately after entering they spotted Yuuki loitering against one of the structural pillars; there didn't seem to be any other players inside.

"Thanks for guiding us in," Asuna said after Yuuki let her free of the hug offered in greeting. "Did you already do whatever you came here to do?"

It seemed to Kirito that Yuuki's smile faltered for just a moment. "I'm all set," she said after only the slightest hesitation. "Did you two pick out a name for the guild?"

Kirito nodded and smiled over at Asuna, who rolled her eyes towards the ceiling for just a moment before smiling back at him. "We ended up talking it out with the rest of the party. Most of them actually liked my first suggestion anyway, so we went with that."

"I still think 'Clearing Pact' had a nice sound to it," Asuna said as the three of them approached the front counter.

"Except that aside from being clearing-specific," Kirito reminded her, "Xorren suddenly got really excited about changing it from 'Pact' to 'Blood Oath', and that was just taking us in the wrong direction." He spoke to the NPC behind the counter, a Leprechaun man in a robed outfit with shoulder silks that looked to Kirito like the Alfheim equivalent of a nice business suit. "I'd like to register a guild."

"The registration fee is 10,000 Yuld," the Leprechaun said in a bored, almost wooden tone. A typical interactive transaction window appeared in the air in front of Kirito, displaying the price of the service and allowing Kirito to confirm whether or not to accept the amount. As soon as his finger touched the «Pay» button, the transaction window closed, and a new window appeared.

Enter Guild Name:  

For a moment, Kirito felt and almost automatically tuned out a sensation of deja vu. The only times he ever had to type in the game were when composing a PM or taking notes in a window, both of which used a standard Japanese IME for text input. This was the first time, since the day he'd entered his character name, that he'd been presented with a window which accepted only Latin-alphabet letters. He'd known to expect it, but it still threw him off briefly, especially since it had been better than six months since the last time he'd had to use this keyboard layout.

It also occurred to Kirito that neither Asuna nor Yuuki could see his UI; both of them were standing patiently next to him, but they had no way of knowing what he was looking at. He gave a brief thought to the idea of trying to explain why it had struck him so oddly. "Sorry," he said out loud. "It'll let me type now."

It took longer than expected to set up the tag, which had also been the subject of some discussion. There wasn't an exact match for what Kirito had originally visualized, but after working with the different patterns available, he thought he'd arrived at something that was as close as he was going to get. The last step was apparently for him to optionally pick one other player with whom to form the guild, and his eyes went automatically to Asuna's cursor. One last pop-up window appeared in front
Kirito didn’t hesitate. Almost immediately after completing the process, he received a system notification; briefly glancing at it confirmed that it was exactly what he thought it would be: a mail with a bunch of information and game manual hyperlinks, which he immediately blinked closed; he’d review those later. He turned towards Yuuki and Asuna; Kirito couldn’t see his own status ribbon, but he was already Focused on Asuna’s, and while he watched, a rounded square white icon inset with a filled black nine-pointed star appeared there.

"What's the name?" Yuuki asked. "I couldn't see your windows."

"Unity Covenant." When Yuuki looked confused at the English-language words he’d chosen, Kirito back-translated them for her into the phrase he’d started with: "Danketsu Renmei. It means we're all making a promise to each other, a commitment to work together for a common goal."

Yuuki looked back and forth between Kirito and Asuna, her eyes going to a point just above and to the left of their heads. It was clear to him that she wanted to ask for an invite, but was hesitating to do so for some reason. Kirito decided to save her the trouble; there was no question in his mind that both he and Asuna wanted Yuuki to be a part of their team.

It was nearly a shock to him when she declined the invite.

"This isn't no," Yuuki said before he could ask. "It's not yet. I still have some things to take care of before I come back to clearing, and until I do, it's probably better if I'm not wearing a guild tag."

Kirito wanted to protest that she was welcome no matter what, but stopped himself. As far as he knew, Yuuki was still working with someone in the Imp hierarchy to track down Black and Wraith. He’d shared everything that he and Asuna had learned from Argo, but Yuuki was still insistent on finishing what she’d started; she obviously had some sort of important lead. And although Asuna hadn’t told him any specifics about the girl’s troubled past or what she'd been up to, he'd pieced together enough to be fairly sure that there was more to her quest down south than just seeking information on Prophet's group.

There was something personal going on here. Something serious. Kirito didn't know what it was, but if Yuuki didn't think it was a good idea to have a guild tag while doing it, then it occurred to him that it might be wise for him to take that at face value.

"You know you're always welcome with us, Yuuki," Kirito said, making sure to be clear that that door was open for her. "We're putting together multiple groups, and I have no problem moving someone to another group so that you can party with us." As he said this, he felt Asuna's hand touch his, then take it in hers.

"I'll come back," Yuuki said, her smile now seeming stronger and more genuine. "I promise. It's just really important that I finish what I'm doing. And when I'm done, I'll tell you all about it." Asuna's hand slipped away from Kirito's as Yuuki hopped forward and embraced her, both girls rocking back and forth in the hug for a few moments before Yuuki gave Kirito the same treatment. "I love you guys. Be safe."

"That goes double for you, Yuuki," Asuna said earnestly. "Don't even hesitate for a moment to message if you need help."

"And if we're in the World Tree," Kirito said, knowing that was more likely than not, "tell Argo.
She'll make sure we know as soon as possible."

Both Kirito and Asuna were quiet for a minute after Yuuki had left; Kirito had a vortex of his own thoughts to contend with, and he had no doubt that Asuna had her own share. His suspicions were confirmed when she finally spoke. "I'm worried about her."

"Me too," Kirito admitted. "But she's determined to finish her quest, and she doesn't want our help with it, or else she'd have asked." He turned to look at his partner and meet the concern in her eyes. "Yuuki's strong, Asuna. And so is her sense of justice. Whatever she's doing, it's got something to do with helping someone who needs it, or righting some wrong that she just can't leave alone." This time, it was he who reached out to Asuna, holding her gaze while their fingers laced together. "She's got work to do. And so do we."

The large, complex device that lay on the table before Grimlock would have baffled even the few other Leprechauns he knew who tinkered with Constructs. As he assembled the disparate parts into a connected whole, his hands worked almost absently, just this side of automatically. Here a twist, there a gentle push in just the right direction—and between each step, the slightest pause until he felt the *rightness* of the connection, a sense that was not the tingle of nerves, nor the crisp clicking of a mechanical keyboard, but something that felt much like both.

Any player could take these parts and fiddle with them until they found a tab A that fit into a recess B, or threads on one part that could screw into another. But only a Leprechaun, he knew, could feel when the connection was just right, and give it that little push that locked it in place.

*We could do so much with this craft,* Grimlock ruminated inwardly. *My inventions could save lives, given enough time and resources to work with. Defeat enemies. Overcome obstacles that a player could not alone.*

He shook his head in disappointment. *So much potential in this system, and in the things it could make possible. With enough investment and experimentation... they could even make it unnecessary for farmers to go out and do what they do.*

Teeth clenching suddenly, Grimlock's grip tightened too much on the part he was working with; the connection to the main assembly misaligned with an unpleasant *snap* and would not budge further. There was no give in the join between the two, no sensation of movement or *rightness*—the connection was non-functional, but also permanent. He could tell he was going to have to disconnect both parts from the chassis and make new ones of each; they were fused together, ruined.

Grimlock felt a momentary spike of resentment; it was there and gone in the time it took him to sigh. He rose from his cushioned metal stool and turned his back on the work in progress, clearing his throat to get Agil's attention.

The tall, dark-skinned Gnome glanced back over his shoulder and turned from the forge to face Grimlock. "Need something?"

"An escort," Grimlock said reluctantly. He resented the necessity of it, but the NCC took security very seriously at the Depot; it was the main warehouse for the shared inventory of all three factions, with millions of Yuld worth of mats and supplies. "I think I shall call it an early day."

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Agil could be far too perceptive at times for Grimlock's liking; the man seemed to pick up immediately on the problem. "Taking it kind of hard, aren't you? It's not like you're Banished or anything. They're still letting you use the workspace and the mats you already have."
"I don't think I'm going to get anything else productive done in my current state of mind," said Grimlock, sidestepping the question and pulling up his menu to make sure he didn't still have the unnecessary weight of modules or materials in his inventory. "I need a break. I'll take a walk around the city—I must go shopping for the mats I need now anyway, it seems."

Agil watched in silence as Grimlock dragged the shimmering outlines of a few partial stacks to one of the chests on the short part of the "L" of his workbench. After the tedious inventory management was done, his partner set down the quicksilver hammer with a deep _thunk_ and swept an arm invitingly towards the hallway leading to the lift. "Think you're coming back today?"

"Probably at least once," Grimlock answered, equipping his favorite hat before swiping his menu closed. "I don't want to carry around the contents of my shopping list any longer than I need to, so if nothing else I shall most likely stop by to drop them off."

"Bring back something tasty if you can," Agil suggested with a grin. "This might be a late night for me."

"I'll see what I can do," Grimlock said noncommittally. Agil seemed to get the hint that he wasn't in the mood for idle conversation, and most of the rest of their short journey through the restricted area proceeded in silence.

However, just as they were approaching the double doors leading to the lobby's connecting hallway, the sound of his wife's voice calling from behind Grimlock brought his head around sharply. She was just coming to the bottom of the stairs leading up to Chellok's office, and at a jog it didn't take her long to join him. The corner of his mouth tightened slightly as he took note of Yasuko's appearance; aside from having no weapon equipped, she was still in full field gear, and it had the undignified look of a day's use on it.

"You got him from here, Griselda?" Grimlock immediately realized what Agil had to be referring to; the four-color NCC badge she currently had set as her guild tag clearly showed that as a farming group leader, she didn't require the same escort he did.

After bowing deeply to Grimlock, his wife turned to Agil and gave him another bow, but appropriately left it just short of the one she'd given her husband. "I was just leaving, so yes. Thank you for being of assistance to him."

"Always a pleasure, Griz," Agil said with a wave. "Your man's having a bit of a rough day, maybe see if you can cheer him up?"

Grimlock broke in before the sense of humiliation burning at his ears could get any worse, faking a smile as best he could. "Thank you for your suggestion, Agil," he said. "I still have things that must be done today, and I'm certain my wife would be happy to help with them."

"Of course I would," Yasuko said immediately as Agil waved to them and started walking back the way they'd come. "We don't have to go back out right away. But speaking of which, I have wonderful news!"

Grimlock answered in a quiet voice while they walked through the hallway that led back towards the lobby. "Wonderful news would be that you are done with these overnight mapping tasks, but you just spoke of going back out."

"That's the good news," she exclaimed happily, lowering her voice and becoming more subdued in demeanor at a sharp side look from him. "Chellok gave us a new assignment to a different area!"
Grimlock stopped in the middle of the empty hallway and turned fully towards her now. "What of these Frozen Underways he's been so keen on having mapped?"

"He's sending another farming group down there, a full one." Yasuko couldn't keep the joy out of her voice as she spoke, and it was infectious; Grimlock smiled hopefully at the notion that she'd be coming home. "We've mapped enough for a single party to farm effectively in a day's time, but he needs us for something more important, and this time he's sending us overland."

"Overland?" Grimlock said, expression reversing just as quickly as it had come. "Where?"

"You know about the mobs re-leveling, of course." He'd barely nodded before she went on; it hadn't even been a question. "Well, that's happened everywhere. We need to be able to get traders safely through to the southern cities, but those are long trips through country that suddenly might as well be unknown, as far as what spawns where. We managed to send through a caravan just behind the clearers when they went back to Arun, but—"

"They want you to map the mobs between here and the other cities."

Yasuko smiled beautifully as she nodded again with clear excitement. "That's exactly it! We'll be going to Freelia, Penwether, and Parasel! I've only ever seen Freelia, and that was just when I was passing through on my way up here from Sylvain!"

"That," Grimlock began in a tone that wiped some of the excitement off her face, "sounds to me as if you are going to again be away for days at a time. Tell me how it is this qualifies as a good news?"

Yasuko bowed her head until he began walking again. "Shujin," she said demurely, "we're mapping trade routes. It's not like the Underways—the party is always going to be in overland zones, so I'll never be out of contact. We can write to each other anytime we want to."

"That is an improvement," Grimlock allowed, waiting for his wife to unlock the lobby door and hold it open, since he himself wasn't keyed. The rest of the guild, who had obviously been biding their time while she was in the Depot, looked up at the sound of the doors. "We'll discuss this later."

"Thank you for waiting, everyone," Yasuko said as she bowed to her party. "I've got good news, and better news. The good news is that we're not going back out today, so you've got the rest of the day for some much-needed downtime."

"If that's the good news, I can't wait to hear the better." As he said this the young Gnome boy, Caynz, exchanged smiles with Yoruko, their Puca bard and mage.

"The better news," Yasuko said with an almost-missed glance back towards Grimlock, "is that we have a new assignment. Starting tomorrow, we're mapping the trade routes between here and several of the southern cities. No more Frozen Underways!"

The rest of the party broke out in a cheer; Grimlock felt his hand involuntarily clench, and had to force himself to relax and smile. The others were too excited to notice, and when Yasuko turned to look at him, her expression of yearning was clearly seeking his approval. He turned a mask of a smile on her for just a moment, then back to the others.

"Where are we going first?" asked Schmitt, wearing his relief as prominently as his guild tag.

"I thought I'd leave that up to you guys," Yasuko said, panning her eyes across the group. "Anywhere in particular you've always wanted to go?"

"Home," said Schmitt, armor shifting noisily as he raised one gauntlet high in the air and grinned.
"I'm afraid that doesn't show up on the world map," Grimlock remarked dryly, drawing a laugh from
the others. Inwardly he was still fuming over the way Yasuko had been so casually given the
responsibility to escort him, let alone that she was going back out again on a multi-day trip—but he
was determined not to allow the others to realize how humiliated he felt.

"My dear husband is sadly right about that," Yasuko said with a laugh of her own as she opened her
own map and set it visible, touching the corners and drawing her hands apart to widen the window.
"Let me put it this way: we have at least three destinations, and we need to map the spawns between
here and there for all of them."

As she spoke, she touched three locations on the map, leaving a glowing spot just below three of the
starred icons signifying faction capital cities. "Freelia is here on the west coast, while Parasel is on
the East coast. Penwether is inland a bit on the way to Parasel." Dragging a finger south from the
Puca capital of Sondref, she continued. "Now, the route to Freelia has the advantage of being mostly
open country after we get through «The Frozen Weald» and «Chillsong Woods», much of it with
beaten paths. I'm told there may be Cait Sith patrols helping clear there as well."

"Sounds pretty good to me," said Schmitt.

Yasuko wasn't done. "However, there are reports of «Arboreal Cloaking Spiders» in Chillsong."

"What was the other route?" he added immediately.

Grimlock could tell his wife was trying not to laugh at the tank's transparent cowardice; he barely
smothered a chuckle himself. "The other route goes through Lesser Snjarholt," she said.

Schmitt groaned; now everyone did laugh. "So basically we've got possible spiders behind door
number one and door number two. Can we take the option that doesn't involve invisible spiders,
Griz?"

"I'm afraid we should be prepared for those pests no matter which way we go, Schmitt. I'll check
with Detect Movement as often as I can." Yasuko's finger traced another glowing line, this time
down the east coast of Alfheim. "We have two cities to hit on this side, and I'm thinking we can do
both in one trip. We can probably make it all the way to Parasel in a single day if we push hard, but
we'll have to move more slowly in order to map properly."

His wife's gaze, for some reason, went to Yoruko then; when Grimlock glanced at the girl, she was
squirming as if the fit of her clothes bothered her, looking acutely uncomfortable. "It's nothing," the
Puca girl said when her eyes met Yasuko's.

It didn't look like "nothing" from the expression on her face, but Grimlock saw no need to concern
himself with whatever was bothering Yoruko. Seeming to shrug off the girl's weird behavior, his
wife continued tracing a route with her fingertip. "I suggest we map the spawns along the trade route
to Parasel. We can spend the night there, then head just north to Penwether, and map our way back
until we rejoin the route to Parasel. After that, we can return as quickly as we need to, and we should
be back that evening."

"That seems like the bigger of the two runs," Caynz pointed out. "We might want to do the Freelia
route first, since it's pretty much a straight shot."

"Not a bad idea," Yasuko said with a look back towards Grimlock. "We might even get back by
dinner of the second day if we make good time. What say our guild leader?"

"I concur with the notion that Freelia will have you back sooner, and with fewer complications,"
Grimlock replied, refraining from adding that it scarcely mattered if they were going to have to do the second route afterwards anyway. Both options took Yasuko far from where she ought to be for the same amount of time.

After quickly taking stock of the nods from the rest of the party, Yasuko smiled and dismissed her map window with a graceful sweep of one arm. "Then it's settled. Go have fun with the rest of your day, everyone. Have a delicious meal somewhere, and get a good night's sleep. We'll meet up tomorrow morning at the mouth of the Boulevard, head west to Sondref, then south from there to Freelia."

The two youngest members of the party seemed anxious to run off and do exactly that; after a pair of quick bows, they left the Depot without a further word. Their tank followed not long after, and both Grimlock and Yasuko tarried a few moments there in the lobby before heading towards the door.

"Dear, you seem unhappy."

Yasuko hadn't exactly asked him a question, but it lay there beneath the surface of her quiet words nonetheless. "Of course I am. I trust I don't need to explain why?"

Yasuko's head was bowed as she walked at his side. "I wish that my selfish actions did not burden you so," she said softly, her speech patterns reverting to the politely convoluted inflections of keigo as she humbled herself. "I think this is a good change for all of us. And it's important work—even more important than what we were doing before."

Grimlock responded with silence to this reiteration of things he already knew; it was well-trodden ground that he did not wish to waste time or breath rehashing. Nor was he exactly keen to have this discussion in public, and the corridors leading deeper into Nissengrof were wide but busy. When he still hadn't said anything by the time they reached the broad cavern where much of the city's materials trade took place, she spoke again without prompting. "Please forgive my prying, but what did Agil mean in saying that you'd had a rough day?"

Stopping along the open side of the chamber and leaning against the stone railing that overlooked the next level down where the market floor sprawled beyond sight, Grimlock gave a sigh of frustration that was almost a growl. "The NCC will no longer supply me with mats to research Constructs for them. The clearing groups consider them a waste of time, money, and carry weight. And many of the mats that I need are in short supply now, so they cannot afford to support my research."

"Oh, Yuuji," said Yasuko from where she stood at his side, sympathy filling her voice. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Your creations are brilliant and promising. And you were doing such good work."

"That is why I was on my way here when I ran into you," Grimlock explained. "I have a large list of mats that I need to purchase now on the open market—if I can even get them."

He felt his wife's gloved hand on his. "Let me help," she insisted. "I'm here today, so let me get your list of mats." When he looked at her, she was smiling. "It'll be sort of like I'm going grocery shopping for you, don't you think?"

"That... would be most helpful, my dear."

"Then perhaps, if you like, you could go home and rest while I do that. I'll go get your shopping done, and I'll bring home dinner with me." Her other hand joined the first in covering his. "We can make it almost like a normal day at home."
Grimlock could tell how hard she was trying to please him, to make him feel as if nothing was wrong. He felt torn—wanting to point out that what she was doing didn't change the fact that she was going to be leaving again in the morning, but also wanting a taste of that long-lost normalcy with what was very nearly a feeling of desperate longing.

"Then let us do that," Grimlock said decisively, withdrawing his hand and opening the note window where he kept the list of what he needed, then copying its contents into a PM. "This list is somewhat longish, and some of the items may be costly. Do you need money?"

"I have plenty of money," Yasuko assured him, which drew a momentary frown that he didn't think she noticed, looking down at the ground as she was. "We get to keep whatever Yuld drops from mobs."

"Yes, well, you have bank access if that runs short," Grimlock said. When she looked up at him again, he gave her a nod of approval. "Thank you. While you are doing this, I need to take a walk and clear my head. I shall look forward to when you return home with dinner."

After saying their goodbyes, Grimlock watched her disappear into the crowd, considering where he might go from there. He now had no need to be where he was, but until he had the mats he needed, there was no point in returning to the Depot, nor was there any real reason to wander on foot through Nissengrof's many kilometers of passageways. He watched the crowd, cursors and status ribbons appearing and disappearing whenever his gaze lingered or moved on. He was trying to rid himself of the built-up frustration from a day filled with disappointments of one variety or another, but it was not as easy as it might've been on most other days—the day had been a one-two punch that still had him reeling.

But dwelling on that wasn't doing himself any favors, and Grimlock turned his thoughts to the device he’d been working on, trying to distract himself by reasoning through the puzzle-like system of Construct modules and how they behaved once enchanted.

The problem wasn't in making the thing move. Anyone who spent at least a few weeks going through the apprenticeship questline in Domnann would end up unlocking a variety of default recipes, and a few of the intermediate quests related to giving more complex Constructs a means of locomotion. No, the difficulty was in making it do what you wanted. For the most part, giving a Construct behavior required spell enchantments, and those he simply couldn't do for himself. In particular, he needed a way to have it automatically recognize mobs so that they could be neutralized and their drops gathered—

"Excuse me," said an unfamiliar voice, followed by a light tap at his shoulder. When Grimlock turned, he saw a plainly-dressed Leprechaun man a bit taller than him, whose iron-colored beard matched the ponytail into which his shoulder-length hair was gathered. He had strong features that crinkled when he smiled, and his blue eyes were sharp and intelligent when he met Grimlock's gaze.

"May I help you?" Grimlock wasn't feeling particularly chatty at the moment, but he didn't get the impression this fellow was a lost tourist looking for directions.

"Might be that you could," said the man, joining Grimlock at his side and looking out across the churning sea of cursors on the level below them. Most were white and unnamed, but here and there were clusters of green NCC players and the occasional yellow visitor or immigrant; the unfocused murmur of their conversations turned into background noise after a while. "Name's Richter."

Grimlock gave the man a look of surprise as the name clicked with discussions he'd overheard in recent weeks. "Richter... the agitator?"
"Is that what the NCC bigwigs are calling me now?" Richter laughed and shook his head. "They're giving me too much credit. I'm just trying to get our people proper representation, Grimlock. Respect for what we have to offer."

"You have me at a disadvantage, sir," Grimlock said with mild confusion. "You obviously know my name, but..."

"And you obviously know mine, so there we are," Richter said with a wry smirk. "No, we've never officially met, but I've actually had my eye on you for a while. You're one of the few Leprechauns doing subsidized Construct work in this city, did you know that?"

He hadn't, not for sure, but based on what he'd seen in his time at the Depot, Grimlock wasn't surprised. "I'm afraid your information may be somewhat out of date, Richter. My work is no longer being officially supported by the NCC. And if mine isn't, I doubt anyone else's is either."

"They kicked you out?"

"Nothing so dramatic as that," Grimlock allowed. "I get to keep using the workspace at the Depot, but I have to buy all of my own mats."

Richter snorted. "Doesn't that just figure. You know, when the NCC was first formed, we had a proper budget for exploring what each race's unique talents could do. But once the clearers moved on to the World Tree, they all stopped pretending to care aboutConstructs or Song Magic anymore. No surprise that most of them are Gnomes." His eyes went to Grimlock's hands as they tightened on the railing. "It burns, doesn't it?"

"It's unjust," Grimlock replied, willing himself to relax. "Imbalanced and short-sighted."

"It's all of that and more," Richter said, nodding with what looked like approval. "We and the Puca don't have the numbers of the Gnomish race, but we each can do things they cannot. The Gnomes have no exclusive talents of their own, yet ours are ignored—worse, dismissed as useless."

Grimlock knew little about the Puca, and even less about their magic, but it was hard for him to argue with anything Richter was saying. If anything, the man was giving voice to much of the resentment he'd felt from time to time ever since coming to work at the Depot. "It is the way of things," he said with a mild shrug. "I have done what I can to show them the potential of Constructs. Absent some miraculous breakthrough, I fail to see what else can be done. It's all out of pocket now."

"Sounds like you've run into some blockers in your research."

Grimlock only hesitated for a moment; it wasn't as if his work was any kind of official secret. "Of my two primary projects at the moment, in one of them I'm having difficulty finding the right method for getting a Construct to recognize a mob."

"For combat purposes?" Grimlock nodded; Richter rubbed at his bearded chin and looked briefly thoughtful. "Well, «Tracer» on an activator will get it to follow the owner, and I know it'll fight anything that aggros the owner if you give it a melee appendage." He grinned. "Not very well, but it'll fight."

"You are, I'm afraid, not telling me anything I do not already know." Grimlock made a vague gesture upwards, in the direction of the surface zones far above them. "I am trying to design a Construct that will autonomously seek out mobs on its own, collect anything that drops, and return to a bind point."

Richter's tight, guarded smile was tough to read. "Quite the ambitious goal. I'm unsurprised it has no
official support—such a thing might leave the farming groups with nothing to do."

"Good!" Grimlock said with more vehemence than he intended. "Why risk lives unnecessarily on busy-work like materials gathering?"

Richter absorbed this outburst in silence, eyes roaming across the ebb and flow of the crowds below. "I wish you all success in that endeavor, then," he finally replied. "If you do come up with a working prototype, I would take it as a personal favor if you'd share the schematics and process. With such a thing to demonstrate the potential of Constructs, no one would be able to deny that Leprechauns ought to be an equal partner in the NCC, or that our works deserve to be part of the clearing efforts. You could do much to advance all of our interests—yours included."

Grimlock couldn't help but show the excitement he felt at these words, though the feeling was tempered by frustration over his inability to make progress. "Perhaps so," he said. "But it all amounts to nothing if I cannot enchant a Construct to recognize something other than its owner. The solution still eludes me."

Richter nodded. "Then perhaps, as a gesture of good faith, I can offer a suggestion," he said. "Have you tried adding effects to a sensor module or a connected logic gate?"

"As a matter of fact," Grimlock said with some pride, "I have done so on my other project. A «Detect Movement» spell on a simple sensor will pass True if anything moves in front of it. I imagine routing that output to a logic gate connected in some way to the motivator for the legs would cause a mobile Construct to seek out whatever it detected if you pointed it in the right direction. Mob aggro would take care of the rest, I expect. But I need a way to distinguish mobs from players, to say nothing of collecting drops."

"Well reasoned," Richter said with what sounded like approval, a bit of surprise on his face. "I assume you've thought of «Tracer»." At Grimlock's quick nod, he went on. "Problem with that is, you—or rather, your enchanter—would have to keep the mob targeted while enchanting the module in the first place."

"As if the mob were a customer and you were binding ownership to it," Grimlock said. "Yes, I did consider that, but dismissed it as impractical and inflexible."

"So it is," Richter agreed, voice suddenly pitched lower. "I suspect that if there is a solution to your dilemma, what you're looking for might be in «Alchemy», not spell enchantments."

Grimlock considered the suggestion. He had taken Alchemy, of course; most who worked on Constructs would have to do so in order to not depend on a third-party alchemist to help craft the subcombines needed for module recipes. But he'd never heard of adding effects to modules using that skill; as far as he was aware there was nowhere in the crafting interface for such a thing. "Explain, please."

From the way Richter was suddenly acting, the topic at hand must have constituted some kind of trade secret for him; he leaned closer to Grimlock and spoke in tones meant only for their ears. "You know how when you're crafting a Construct component of any sort, there's a slot in your window for «Success Enhancement» mats?"

"Of course," said Grimlock, matching Richter's quiet tones but unsure of why it was necessary—after all, who would even care? "Most crafting and upgrade interfaces have that. It's where you put the stacks of whichever mat it is you're using to increase success chance."

"Aye," Richter said. "But that's not all that can go there."
It took a moment for Grimlock to make the connection, and when he did, he was sure his skepticism was audible. "Are you suggesting putting a potion in that slot?"

"Perhaps," Richter said vaguely. "Or anything else that occupies a single slot."

Grimlock stopped and digested the implications, pushing his glasses up on his sharp nose with two fingertips. "But without the correct mats to maximize success, your chances would be base-level for your skill at best. Trying to craft modules that way could easily fail as often as it succeeded—consuming whatever you tried to use. It would be enormously wasteful."

Richter smiled then, seeming to anticipate the response. "High risk," he said, "high reward. One hand counts the number of us who know about this little trick, Grimlock, and fewer still think it's worth using. But there are effects in Alchemy that simply don't exist as spells. Try this, and you'll have access to a whole new selection of possibilities. I'm interested to see what you do with them."

"Wait a moment," Grimlock said suddenly, a thrill running through him. "You said this uses the slot for success mats when crafting modules in order to add Alchemy effects." Richter's nod of confirmation only elevated his excitement. "But that... does that mean that you can thereafter also enchant the completed module using a spell?"

The only reason Grimlock's hands weren't shaking was because of his white-knuckled grip on the railing before him. Richter didn't answer immediately, and seemed to search Grimlock's face for something, the gaze of his ice-blue eyes sharp and penetrating. That approving smile never left his face. "I knew I was right about you," he said finally.

Grimlock's head was a blur of thoughts that wouldn't stop or wait their turn. Two effects per module—one alchemical, one magical. He'd already been of the opinion that Constructs had nearly limitless unexplored possibilities simply because of the various behaviors that spell effects could add when enchanted upon their parts, and the ways those different parts could interact as part of a complex system.

But if what Richter was suggesting was true... how might those behaviors change when using a combination of two effects on the same module?

"This will take some time," Grimlock said slowly. "I will need to experiment at length to discover which combinations are useful." He looked sharply at Richter then. "Unless you feel inclined to point me in the right direction. You seem to have some idea already."

"Depends on which recipes you've learned." Before Grimlock could respond, Richter gave him a friendly clap on the shoulder before turning to go. "I'm sure you'll see the truth if you look hard enough."

After Richter took his leave, Grimlock remained where he was for some time, unable to stop the parade of ideas and conjectures that kept barraging him. The roar of his thoughts was almost loud enough to drown out the noise from the market floor below, and for the most part his eyes were not seeing anything in his field of view.

I must try this out immediately, he thought, overwhelmed with the possibilities that lay before him. I must return to the workshop at once, though I'll need a considerable amount of raw materials—

It was there that Grimlock's thoughts ran into a wall. His wife was already off somewhere in the crowd below, shopping for the mats he needed. It might be an hour or more until she was done, and then she would be headed straight home. She had become disturbingly willful during her time in the game, but having told him she would do this thing for him, he knew she would keep her word.
Grimlock could have pulled her up on his map and gone to intercept her, and he considered that option. He could’ve even more easily sent her a message, telling her that he would be returning to the Depot instead of going home. He knew she would, if told to do so, bring the materials he’d requested straight to the Depot, and no matter the hour she would be keyed to enter and bring them to him.

But Yasuko had also told him she would bring home dinner. This was one of those rare days when she would be home where she belonged, and as much as Grimlock wanted to explore this new technique that Richter had given him… more than anything in the world, he wanted his old life back. In that life, he was a man of means married to the perfect wife. In that life, he knew what to expect every day when he came home, knew that she would be waiting there with kind words and a meal already in progress.

In that life, he knew who and what he was—as well as who and what she was. And both, in that perfect world that now seemed so far away, were exactly what they should have been.

These days, that distant world seemed like more of a fantasy than the myths and legends in which they now lived. Above all else, he yearned to return to it.

Grimlock was too far from the Depot for there to be any signs for it on the walls, but he looked in that direction anyway. Then, with only a little regret, he turned and walked towards the district where he made his home.

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The sweeping diagonal cut from Mortimer's claymore split the Serpentaur in two, sending a spray of sand away from where the blow's follow-through struck the floor of the underground temple. The edges of the cut glowed bright red for only a moment before each half of the horned beast's snake-like body burst into an evaporating mist of polygons, the echoes of its dying bellows barely outliving the mob itself.

A few beats after the Serpentaur's death, the Result window appeared, informing him that he'd reached level 16 and providing the usual increase in HP/MP and additional stat points. Once the freeze time from the End Frame of the heavy technique was over, Mortimer straightened and carefully slipped the two-handed sword through the looped belt on his back, dismissing the window and turning back to the rest of the group. "That's another level."

"Good kill," said Saiyuki, the clearer tank who led the group that had been power-leveling him in zones far too dangerous for him alone. "Your weapon skills should be coming along nicely as well, my lord."

"I hear a 'but' in there, Sai," said Mortimer with a wry tilt to his lips. "And I keep telling you, I'm not your lord anymore, at least not for the moment."

"Whatever you say, sir," Saiyuki responded, flipping up his visor to uncover his face. "But as to the first, well…" The young man scratched at the orange-red stubble that carpeted the line of his jaw down to the chin. "It's hard to avoid noticing that you aren't using your magic much."

"There hasn't been much opportunity," Mortimer admitted. "I have the basic spells down, and I've at least thrown out enough firebolts and the like in the last few days to raise my skill beyond what I already had. But I never needed magic as a faction leader, and I'm a melee build—that's the gear Eugene supplied me with, and I've been trying to focus on ramping up those skills first."

"Respectfully, sir, I think it's time we balanced out your training a bit. The General's always on us about that, as I'm sure you know."
The lone Imp in their party spoke up. "Nothing nearby on Searching for now."

Saiyuki glanced towards him, and nodded. "Primus, scout ahead. See if you can find another «Serpentaur Warchief»." Once the Imp was gone, he turned back to Mortimer. "Eugene told me you're trying to level up so you can join a farming group over in the Forest. You're probably high enough level to farm now, but sir—that's a war zone. You'll need ranged attacks to survive, and base-magnitude stuff and your low skill levels aren't going to cut it."

Mortimer had considered that angle, but reasoned that getting his core melee skills trained up was his first priority—if it came down to a head-to-head fight between a farming group and a clearing group, no amount of combat magic was going to let the farmers win. He trusted the advice of his subordinates, however, and Eugene had grudgingly praised Saiyuki and his group—which, coming from his brother, Mort took as enthusiastic endorsement. "You have a suggestion."

"Maybe," Saiyuki said in a bafflingly enigmatic way, beckoning with a curled gauntlet to the rest of the group and beginning to follow the tight corridor down in the direction Primus had gone. The way the man lowered his voice then struck Mortimer as curious; their group was the only one in this subterranean dungeon as far as they knew. "What's your opinion of exploits, sir?"

There were a few ways Mortimer could've interpreted that question; context strongly suggested the correct one to assume. "As in exploiting bugs or loopholes in game mechanics?" When Saiyuki nodded, Mortimer chuckled. "If it'll give us an advantage, I'm all for it—provided it doesn't draw unwanted dev attention, or make our diplomatic situation any worse than it already is."

"All the more reason for us to keep the audience for this little trick small, then," Saiyuki replied. "One of my besties is part of a group that helps power-level people's magic skills. You need at least some magic skill to start, which it sounds like you've got, and they charge a mint for the service—but it works."

"Money's not a problem," Mortimer said, intrigued. Eyes roaming around the environment, alert for traps or mobs that Primus might have missed, he pressed for more details.

"I don't know exactly how it works," Saiyuki admitted. "But it does. A day of spamming spells in their dungeon got me over 100 skill points in Fire Magic. At my skill level that might well be weeks of progress."

"Dungeon?" Mortimer asked, interest turning briefly to amusement. "They took over a zone for this?" He knew about all the zones in Salamander territory, and he was fairly certain he would've known if anyone had done such a thing.

Saiyuki grinned, stopping and leaning on the shaft of his naginata for a moment. "A joke, sir, but you're not far off. You'll see. What matters is you go in there, you do exactly what they tell you, and the skill points will roll in. You can AOE, right?"

Mortimer did, in fact, have at least two area spells at his current skill level that he could recall, though he hadn't used them much yet. "I can."

"Sweet. Then you should be good to go."

It was tough to argue with a deal like that, but something about the arrangement struck Mortimer as odd, and quite possibly too good to be true. Granted, the majority of his field experience was from the beta, and that was more than half a year in the past—but he was fairly certain that skillups didn't work that way. "You need a valid target to get skill points from casting attack spells, don't you?"
"Far as I know," Saiyuki said, resuming their forward march and ducking under a particularly short arched doorway. "I'm guessing that's where the exploit comes in, but whatever it is, my buddy won't even tell me. My guess? They buy a ton of Cait Sith tamed pets, and pen them up somewhere out of sight within AOE range." When both men straightened again, he looked Mortimer earnestly in the eyes. "I'll introduce you if you're interested, sir. Just don't ask too many questions, and keep it on the DL. Call too much attention to it, and someone else might figure out how to do it. Or worse, Kayaba might notice and nerf the hell out of it—and us."

That was sound reasoning if Mortimer had ever heard it. He glanced around at the other three Salamanders in the party, who'd remained curiously silent throughout the discussion despite being right at their sides. "You've all done this?" A chorus of nods and grins greeted his question; the DPS mage of their group was the most enthusiastic of all.

"I dunno what Sai's buddies are doing," said the mage, "and I don't care, because damn does it ever work. A few of us had started to fall behind the front-line clearers in magic skills, and the Sandmen helped get us caught up. Enough that Eugene's even talked about rotating us back in after we get you leveled up."

**Sandmen. Definitely not a guild or former privateer group I've heard of before. I wonder if my brother knows more? And if he does, why don't I?**

While Mort mused over this, one of the other party members made a clicking sound with his mouth; Saiyuki glanced down the passageway, and when he saw their scout returning he turned quickly back to Mortimer. "Let's pick this up later," he said, confirming Mortimer's suspicions that the group's secret had not been shared with their Imp member. "Primus! What's the sitch?"

"No repops yet," said the boyish Imp with a show of empty upturned hands. "Could change anytime, but I think we should move on. We've farmed this place out for now."

"It's getting late anyway," Saiyuki said, eyes going briefly upwards. "And we've been at this from dawn to dusk for three days now. How's everyone feel about taking a day off tomorrow?"

The sudden burst of good cheer from the party was unanimous, except for Mortimer himself, who would've preferred to avoid any unnecessary downtime. Before he could speak, Saiyuki caught his eye and winked while his back was turned to Primus, staying any questions for the moment.

Those questions were resolved by a PM Mortimer received later in the evening, after everyone had returned to Gattan. As promised in his message, Saiyuki showed up at Mortimer's residence first thing the next morning—without his party. It was just as well they'd decided to skip going out in the field that morning; the city was blanketed in one of the sandstorms that occasionally swept across the desert, and visibility was barely enough for Mortimer to tell where in Gattan he actually was after a few minutes of walking.

"I'm so glad these storms are just a particle effect," Saiyuki remarked, the first words either had spoken since beginning their journey through the city. "Can you imagine how much it'd suck if this shit actually got in your armor, or piled up in the streets?"

"The city'd be buried within a month." Mortimer nonetheless needed to hold up a hand to shield his face; the fact that the sandstorm wasn't real didn't make it any more enjoyable to be out in it. "Along with a bunch of very cranky players with sand in their waistbands."

Saiyuki's laugh barely made it over the sound of the wind. "You said it, sir. Don't worry, we're almost there."
"We're still in the Palace District," Mortimer observed, recognizing some of the administrative buildings they passed. "Are you sure we aren't going in circles?"

"Positive, sir. The place we're going is under the district. Don't want to say more out here."

No players with any sense were out in the storm if they didn't have to be; between the nearly-empty streets and the howling wind, Mortimer questioned the need to stifle discussion. But whatever this exploit was, it was Saiyuki and his friends on the line, so he reasoned he should probably follow the clearer's lead—for now.

Before long, Saiyuki led them to the steps in front of the blunt, practical architecture of Gattan's city jail; Mortimer frowned in puzzlement at the odd location, but withheld questions for the moment. It was enough of a relief simply to get indoors, and once there, the clearer wasted no time in making a beeline for a side office just inside, entering after a quick double-knock at the thick metal door.

Saiyuki stopped in his tracks immediately upon entering the room, nearly causing Mortimer to collide with him; they'd been walking quickly. "Mars? What're you doing up here, my man? Where's Gitou?"

Mortimer vaguely recalled the latter name, a low-level player who'd volunteered to supervise the city jail some months back. It wasn't really an essential role—the legal code that Kibaou had never bothered to learn handled anyone who actually needed to be jailed for some reason. But if some larper wanted to invent a job to keep themselves busy, and didn't need any resources other than a room of their own, it cost nothing to let them.

The robed Salamander whom Saiyuki had addressed as Mars was completely unknown to him, however. The man seemed as if he'd been busy in his menu; he gave a quick wave without looking up and continued poking at the air in front of him. "Got ganked, from what I heard. Everyone's kinda wigged about it."

"Sorry to hear it," Saiyuki said. "It's just weird seeing you up here instead of him. Any idea who did it?"

"From what Balthazar said, Imps." Mars snorted; the next few words were laced with heavy sarcasm. "Shocking, I know. Anyway, they've got me filling in up here for now until we figure out what to do. You here to train?"

"New client," Saiyuki said. "Got a special guest today."

Now Mars raised his gaze from his menu, seeming to notice Mortimer behind his friend for the first time. His orange eyes widened. "You're shitting me, right?"

"Not one solitary shit, bud. All good?"

Mars looked past the two of them, peering out into the entryway from his sitting position. "Were you followed?"

"Through that storm?" Saiyuki offered a light snort in answer; they were still close enough to the front door to hear the wind howling outside. "What do you think?"

Mars seemed to relax a bit, sweeping his menus closed and dropping his feet off the desk where he'd propped them, rising. "Alright. No offense," he said, addressing Mortimer directly. "It's just that you're... kinda recognizable. And we're all pretty on edge about strangers right now, considering one of our founders just got ganked. Now what did Sai tell you?"
"Not much," Mortimer admitted, becoming more intrigued by the minute. "Just that you gentlemen have a way to quickly train up magic skills, and that it might qualify as…" He paused for a moment, smiling. "Emergent gameplay."

Mars began laughing so hard that Mortimer wondered if he'd unintentionally said something meaningful. When the laughter subsided, the other man gave Mortimer a slap on the arm as he walked past. "That is the best fucking euphemism ever. I'm telling Mawari to use that the next time I see him." He grinned suddenly. "For what it's worth, man, I voted for you. C'mon. Smartest money you'll ever spend."

Mars led them down one of the branching hallways walled with dozens of jail cells; only a few were occupied, mostly by Imps, along with a solitary Spriggan. He couldn't pop their cursors while they were imprisoned, so it was almost impossible to tell if they were NPCs who were there for flavor or actual players—but he supposed it didn't actually matter; none of them called out to him, and a player wouldn't have been able to be imprisoned in the first place if they hadn't violated either faction law or a game rule like the harassment system. Mortimer knew those mechanics quite well; he'd had to use the legal code to send players to jail before, though that kind of enforcement power was usually delegated to the faction's salaried player guards.

The balance of factions did, however, strike him as a little bit odd—by the numbers, Imps made up a fairly tiny percentage of Gattan's permanent residents; most would probably be in the city on business of one sort or another. Mortimer would've figured on seeing more of his own people in the jail, if anyone at all; as far as he was aware, disturbances that required a guard to send someone to prison were actually fairly rare. "Surprised to see more Imps in here than Salamanders," he remarked to Mars.

Mars glanced back over his shoulder at the cells they'd just passed. "Seems pretty normal to me," he said. "They just cause trouble when they come to Gattan."

That didn't seem quite right to Mortimer; from everything he'd seen during planning sessions, the Imp clearers worked very smoothly with their Salamander counterparts, and those who weren't clearers usually stayed in Everdark. There was occasional tension, but that was to be expected given the mutual history of the two factions. *If only I still had access to the faclead menu,* he thought. *I miss having all that information at my fingertips; I could've just looked up the enforcement statistics and pulled a report on who's been putting whom in jail for what. Might be something I ought to be paying more attention to.*

The light level began to dim somewhat as they passed the last cell block on the first floor. After taking a few switchback stairwells down, they reached a level of prison cells that appeared to be almost entirely unused. Even the torches weren't lit; a few muttered syllables from Mars caused the environment to suddenly brighten as the icon for «Night Vision» appeared in Mortimer's HUD.

"In here," Mars said, manifesting a key from his inventory and using it on the door of a cell that seemed to have been arbitrarily chosen; it appeared little different than any of the others at first glance, though on closer inspection it might have been slightly less grimy, and had faint vertical claw-like marks on the walls. After hearing the *click* of the door unlocking, Mars and Saiyuki both stepped in, looking back expectantly when Mortimer hesitated to follow suit. Blindly stepping into a lockable room with strangers was what had gotten him trapped by Kibaou so many months ago; he wasn't keen to repeat that mistake.

"If I wanted to shut you in here," Mars said with a touch of impatience, correctly interpreting his reluctance if not the reason for it, "why would I be in the cell and you out there?"

It was a sensible point which Mortimer conceded; he couldn't think of any rational reason for one of
his clearers to conspire with a friend to trap all three of them together in a room with no exit—
especially not now that he had no more rank or power than anyone else in the faction. There was
clearly something he was missing. He joined the other two Salamanders in the jail cell, at which
point Mars turned the key in the lock again. "It won't work while the door's unlocked," he explained.

"What won't?" Mortimer asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"This," said Mars, reaching up to an unlit torch of which Mortimer hadn't taken any special notice. A
pull at the torch caused the sconce itself to tilt with a mechanical sound, followed by the gritty roar of
stone grinding against stone while the entire jail cell seemed to sink into the ground like an elevator.
Mortimer did his best to conceal his astonishment; he was unaware of any secrets like this in Gattan
—the only underground area he knew of in the city proper was the newbie zone of the sewers.

The cell's descent was slow but not lengthy; barely enough time for any kind of proper conversation
between the three of them to fill the wait. After what seemed like one or two floors, the open side of
the cell came to rest facing a brightly ore-lit square room with sandstone walls, occupied by two
Salamander players with polearms leveled meaningfully towards the dark cell at close range. They
both relaxed after seeing Mars with the small group, shouldering their pikes casually. One of them
swept his gaze past Saiyuki and settled on Mortimer's shadowed form. "New client?"

"You got it," Mars said, walking out of the cell and beckoning to the two men behind him. "No
doubts about this one's ability to pay, either."

"Solid," said the unnamed Salamander who'd spoken. He squinted suddenly as Mortimer stepped
into the light. "Wait a minute. What's the hell's going on here, Mars? I thought we were keeping this
off the official radar."

"I'm not exactly what you would call official anymore," Mortimer said truthfully. "I need training,
and I'm told you offer it."

The two Salamander guards exchanged unreadable looks. One of them shrugged. "Not our call to
make."

Agreeing, the other took a hand off his pike and jerked his thumb back towards the only door out of
the room. "You know the route, Mars. Trigger's in the blast zone. Watch for repops along the way."

"Don't have to tell me," Mars said in response to that cryptic collection of statements, beckoning to
his two companions.

Repops? Mortimer thought, following. His confusion lasted just long enough to leave the room; as
soon as they entered the long sandstone hallway beyond, he got a zone change notification in his
HUD for something called «Black Iron Oubliette».

They were no longer in Gattan's safe zone.

Mortimer drew his two-handed sword from his back at almost the same time that Saiyuki's naginata
came out. Mars nodded as he glanced back at them. "Good. I was going to suggest you do that. Let's
party up for now."

"What is this place?" Mortimer asked after accepting the invite, keeping his eyes and ears alert for the
signs of respawning mobs while they walked.

"I don't know," Mars said. "Not exactly, anyway, aside from the name. Buddy of ours found it a
while back, and at first it was just awesome because we had a zone all to ourselves that no one else
knew about." He smiled. "We outleveled this upper floor a long time ago, and it's something else,
now. Don't let your guard down, though—plenty of undead spawn here, and the mob re-leveling makes things dicier than they have been in a while. We try to keep it clear, but you never know."

"I doubt you get many tourists," Mortimer remarked.

Both other men laughed at the poor joke for about as long as it was worth, but no one answered. Mortimer could understand their reticence; he himself was fairly focused on his surroundings, having no idea what to expect from the zone beyond what had already been said—it sounded like it could be dangerous for someone at his level if a mob respawned at the wrong time.

Mars said they outleveled the upper floor. That means this zone goes further down still, and mobs presumably get higher-level. We could've used a place like this for training up farmers, maybe even clearers early on. Mortimer was a little bit cross at the fact that a group of his people—a whole guild, judging by the unfamiliar tag Mars and the guards all bore—had kept a secret like this for so long. But it wasn't worth getting upset about now, especially with how keenly aware Mortimer was of the fact that he was outside of a safe zone in the company of higher-level players, at least one of whom was acting as if he had something to hide.

Mortimer's thoughts stopped there. His instincts had always served him well; he listened to them whenever possible. The way these players were all acting—even Saiyuki, whom Eugene had trusted enough to put his brother's life in the man's hands—screamed that they were doing something they shouldn't be.

Aren't they, though? They've been concealing what sounds like a mid-level zone from the entire faction. And if they've really found an exploit that lets them rapidly level up someone's magic skill, is it unreasonable that they'd want to protect their secret, and be extremely careful about who they exposed it to?

Selfish, perhaps, but not unreasonable in Mortimer's estimation. Depending on what kind of exploit it was, in a worst-case scenario having it exposed might not just be the end of their ability to benefit from it—if Kayaba somehow learned of it, and was displeased at their cheating, they could very well find themselves punished in ways they'd have no ability to mitigate or defend against.

Mortimer resolved to keep his eyes and mind open, but proceed carefully. He needed more first-hand intel before he could make any kind of informed decisions.

Fortunately there were few repops, and despite their cursors appearing in a deep red to Mortimer, the undead trash mobs they did encounter were quickly handled by Mars and Saiyuki. At one point they passed another pair of players with the same guild tag; they nodded to his group as they met, apparently patrolling.

"Just dropped a couple skellies back there," Mars commented over his shoulder. "The usual spots."

_They've got this down to a routine_, Mortimer noted silently. _They've been doing this for a while. And right under our noses at that. What else don't I know about what's been going on in my own city?_

The side passage into which Mortimer's party forked off had nothing to distinguish it from any other aside from the light level; if he got lost, he presumed he'd be able to find his way back by following the player-crafted orelight lamps. The lamplight led directly to a pair of heavy iron doors; Mars stepped forward and knocked twice in quick succession, then three times after a pause, then five. Mortimer wondered with fleeting amusement if the Fibonacci sequence was intentional or not.

He didn't have long to ponder the irrelevancy. The heavy _thunk_ of mechanisms turning was followed by a metallic groan of protest from the double doors. The man beyond them looked a little older than
Mortimer could easily read the hard look the older man threw at the rest of his party; the sentiment of which one of you is responsible for this? was stamped on his features as his glance alternated between Mars and Saiyuki, eventually settling on the former. "Does he meet the prereqs?"

"I don't think our former faction leader is going to have a problem paying, Trigger," Mars commented dryly. "As for skill…” He glanced at Saiyuki, who in turn looked at Mortimer.

"If you're asking about my Fire Magic," Mortimer said, "I'd have to check exactly, but it's somewhere around 150."

Trigger gave an exasperated scoff and roll of his eyes almost at the same time that Mars palmed his face. Mortimer got the message just fine, but Trigger apparently had more to say to Mars. "You didn't think to check?"

"I thought Sai already had," Mars protested, giving his friend an ugly look.

"I'm sorry," Saiyuki said with a bow. "My magic skill was already mid-level when I came to train; I didn't know there was a minimum. I just thought you needed to be able to AOE."

"Next time ask someone who actually knows," Trigger said acerbically. Turning to address Mortimer directly, the mage gave him a long, piercing look before speaking. "Get your skill to 225 and we’ll talk. Until then, I've got nothing for you."

"Why 225 specifically?" Mortimer asked. "That's an unusual number."

"If it's Fire you're leveling, you need to be able to cast AOE Interrupt to get started," Mars said before Trigger could answer, earning another glare from the less-talkative mage. "Higher is ideal, but as you level the skill up you'll be able to run the mags and use Distress as well."

"If you're done running your mouth," Trigger said, "I have my own training to get back to." He gave Mortimer one last wary look before shutting the doors, practically in their faces.

"Charming," Mortimer opined tersely.

"Don't go making enemies," Mars cautioned as they turned and began back the way they'd come. "Trigger's not the boss, but he gets to say who trains and who doesn't." He grimaced, giving Mortimer a brief apologetic look over his shoulder. "He's not usually that salty to clients, things are just tense around here right now. He and Mawari went way back with Gitou."

"Understandable," Mortimer agreed. "Don't worry about it—I've got enough enemies as it is. Sai, it sounds like I'm going to have to spend some time in the next few days grinding my magic."

"Yes, sir," Saiyuki answered, looking a little shaken by the encounter. Mars didn't seem to notice; he was already a few steps ahead of them, and his pace was hurried.

I should ask Kenji if he knows anything about this, Mortimer thought, drawing his weapon again and watching for mobs. He's the one who recommended Saiyuki's group in the first place, and if our
clearers had some known way to power-level their magic, I'm pretty sure that's the sort of thing he would've mentioned at some point.

Then Mortimer quickly corrected himself. Not yet, he thought. I need to find out exactly how this works, and whether it's on the level. I know my brother—I love the man, but he has no subtlety. The moment I tell him about this, he'll march right in here and start asking questions, and that'd likely be the end of the whole thing. But he's got the roster access I'm going to need to look up names... so I have to tell him something, at least.

Mortimer was certain that he could turn this new information to the advantage of all Salamanders, given time. Perhaps even put this guild officially to work for him, once he was back in power. But something about the whole operation didn't smell right to him, and again he reminded himself to trust his instincts.

This wasn't just about training anymore.

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The children were in bed, and now it was time for Sasha to practice her magic.

It was, ironically, harder to do so now than it had been before the reward from Alicia that had allowed her to purchase the church property from the city outright. Up until then, Sasha always had a ready-made reason—not an excuse, when it came down to it, but a legitimately justifiable reason—to go out adventuring. Rent needed to be paid, and it wasn't right to depend on Sachi's friends to earn it for her, which meant that she had to go out herself. Sometimes she'd gone out with Sachi, sometimes with pickup groups, and on rare occasions she'd even gone solo.

No longer. Sasha was now the documented legal owner of the old church building at 17 Belltower Lane in the city of Arun, and had no essential expenses beyond the largely nominal costs of food and supplies for keeping the children in her care fed and educated. She had no need to go anywhere or do anything other than take the best care possible of her charges, and give them all the time and attention they required.

And as it turned out, a few dozen children required quite a bit of both—and their needs expanded to fill any available time and attention that she had. It had barely been a week, but already she was finding it increasingly difficult to justify day trips out to the overland zones, especially after the attempt on her life—and so she'd begun skipping out on sleep in order to practice while the children were getting their own rest.

Ironic, isn't it? Now I'm the one sneaking out at night to practice magic.

Not precisely out, to be sure—not anymore, at least. Sasha couldn't very well rely on finding a group in the middle of the night, and in any event she didn't dare expose her new skill to anyone, so she'd tried going out on her own again. Although her skill progress had been excellent, the last solo venture had very nearly ended in tragedy for her against the new mobs that were spawning. It was a risk she simply couldn't afford to continue taking, especially since she had no way of knowing whether Prophet and his group were still targeting her. For all she knew, they had someone watching, waiting for an opportunity to finish what they'd started.

Slowly and carefully, Sasha's quiet footsteps carried her up to the attic, the same sizable combination of storage areas and unallocated open floor space that she used for practical magic lessons with the children. The door was normally closed at this time of night, and she was a little surprised not only to find it slightly ajar, but to hear voices coming from within. She frowned slightly, then sighed at the thought that she was going to have to give some of the kids a scolding and chase them back to their
beds. It's understandable that they're testing their limits and seeing what they can get away with after what they've been through, but they've still no business being up here past bedtime!

Her hand paused at the door handle as she recognized one of the voices from within. Sachi.

Sasha leaned in just enough to peek past the gap in the doorway, reaching up to push one of her braids away as it fell across her face. Sachi and Silica were standing in the middle of the floor facing one another, and the Undine girl had her hands held out in front of her. "Niburalusu," she said in a near-whisper, repeating the sound over and over. "Nibralsu. Nibralu... nibral...

"You can do it, Sachi," said the Cait Sith girl, her voice bright and encouraging. "Just keep trying."

"I can't," Sachi said, tears almost choking her voice. "I've never been able to. Not even with any other spells that have that... that sound in them."

Indeed, Sasha thought to herself. But soft-th is hard for everyone at first, especially in the coda position, and you've always had trouble with it. So why fuss over this word in particular?

"Yes you can," Silica insisted. From somewhere in the room out of Sasha's field of view, she heard Pina's cry of what she presumed was support. "Miss Sasha can do it. So can hundreds of other people, and you're just as good as them. It's just practice."

"I'll keep trying. I have to. But I... I don't think I can do it." Sachi dropped her hands to her sides and began to pace around. "The sounds don't make any sense. They don't go together like that! And I can't seem to make them!"

"Sure you can," Silica said, tail beginning to lash vigorously behind her. "Like I said, it's all just practice. I bet you didn't used to think you could say the middle part—those sounds don't go together right in Japanese, either. Say it with me: nibralth." Silica's vowels weren't perfect, but Sasha couldn't help but be impressed at how well she managed the compound consonants that were giving Sachi so much trouble.

"Nibralth," Sachi said, then clapped a hand over her mouth. "I did it! It came out right that time! How did I—"

"Think about what your tongue was doing when it happened," said Silica brightly. "That's what Miss Sasha says in class, right? Make the shape with your tongue. Put it under your top teeth and hiss out, like you're a snake."

Sachi obligingly made a sibilant noise, which caused both girls to giggle and almost made Sasha do the same before she governed herself. I shouldn't be eavesdropping on these girls, she thought. But I don't want to interrupt them now, when Sachi's making progress! And Silica has clearly been paying attention, too.

"Thhhhh," Sachi said finally.

"That sounds right!" Silica chirped, drawing a cry from Pina. "Try it again."

"Thhh," said Sachi. "I think I've got it! Thhhhhh. Nibralusu—" She winced and grimaced. "No I don't," she added, voice falling into an intensity of despair that struck Sasha as out of place for such a simple thing to be practicing.

"It's okay, sis," Silica said, reaching out to grab Sachi's arm and pat it reassuringly. "You'll get it, we've just gotta keep practicing."
"I'm sorry to keep you up so late," Sachi said. "It's just really been bugging me, and I wanted to try to get it down once and for all today."

"Before we go back out, you mean."

Sachi looked down at her feet. "Yeah."

There was a long pause in which Sasha wondered if she oughtn't step in and do or say something, but before she could decide, she heard Silica respond. "It wasn't your fault, you know."

"Yes it was!" Sachi said with clear pain in her voice, causing Sasha to take a step back from the door. "I've never been able to cast that spell. Never. Never ever ever. It's too hard for me to say, and Robert died because I didn't have another rez for him."

Sasha's heart broke as she took in the sudden, pained silence from the two girls. Sachi hadn't said anything about it, but of course she would've blamed herself for not being able to cast a spell that could've saved Robert's life—just as Silica probably felt awful for being the one Sachi had rezzed. Neither of them were guilty of any actual wrongdoing, but it was perfectly understandable nonetheless.

Taking a deep breath, Sasha backed up a little and faked loud footsteps on the stairwell, then pushed open the door to the attic, trying to feign surprise at finding the two girls here. "Oh my goodness, why on Earth are the two of you still awake?" She made a shooing motion towards the stairs behind her, trying to strike a balance between being appropriately stern without adding further weight to worries that she shouldn't have any way of knowing about.

Silica squeaked, with Pina echoing that sound almost immediately as he flew in from the rafters and settled on a storage crate near Silica. Sachi bowed almost double at the waist. "I'm sorry, Miss Sasha! We just wanted to get in some practice before bed, we'll go right now!"

Sachi's sudden, disproportionately upset reaction gave Sasha an opening that she decided to seize. She smiled gently at Sachi as she approached the two girls, slim brown eyebrows raising. "Is everything okay? You two aren't up to anything you shouldn't be, I hope?"

Both girls shook their heads so vigorously that it nearly made Sasha laugh despite the tension and seriousness of what obviously weighed on the two girls. "No, no, no, Miss Sasha! Silica was just helping me practice magic before we take a group out again tomorrow. We'll go right to bed!"

"Well, it's good of you to want to practice," Sasha said softly, trying to moderate her voice to a lower volume and hoping the others followed suit. "I'm truly proud of you, both of you, for putting in so much extra effort. But you need to be well-rested just as much as you need practice." She opened her arms in a clear invitation for a hug; the two girls latched onto her so quickly that she came close to tipping over. Now she did laugh, and ruffled each girl's hair; Silica's feline ears flattened as she ducked away.

"Now off with you both," Sasha said, shooing them again towards the doorway with Pina close behind them. "Sleep well."

Sasha was struck again by a fleeting sense of hypocrisy; she was and had been doing the same thing for which she'd just scolded the two girls: shorting herself on sleep in order to practice. She waited until both were well and truly gone, then shut the attic door and locked it. Navigating to her «Zone Permissions» submenu, she enabled combat in the room, then walked over to a closet that had remained shut and empty for as long as the children had been around, but which she'd only recently felt a need to lock. Light spilled across the contents of the storeroom, raising a commotion from the
cages within until she dragged two of them out and shut the door.

*I'm sorry*, Sasha thought, knowing that it was irrational but finding it hard to avoid feeling empathy for the creatures she was about to destroy. They were just mobs—tamed pets that she'd bought from a Cait Sith vendor in the city, the kind of cheap, non-aggro pet that any Cait tamer worth their salt could supposedly collect in bulk, with little risk, from just about any overland zone.

It just didn't help that her targets were *cute*.

Sasha bent over and opened the latches, releasing the pair of «Arun Plains Caracal» mobs. The two feline creatures loped out of their cages, one of them sitting in front of Sasha while the other paced around nearby in an unfocused, seemingly random way. The one that had seated itself in front of Sasha looked up at her, one of its tufted ears giving a twitch before it almost pointedly turned to avoid her direct gaze.

Opening her game menu again, Sasha liberated the two pets one by one, releasing them from her control; as she did, their cursors turned immediately from green to yellow. She couldn't be sure it wasn't just her imagination, but it seemed like their behavior became more wary; the sitting feline got up and put some distance between itself and Sasha, and the other followed and stayed relatively near its companion.

Sasha had a wand, but didn't often use it unless she needed the stats; she preferred to learn and master the hand movements associated with each spell. That was especially true for new spells, and the one she needed to test today—although the motions illustrated in her spellbook looked similar—was one she had never actually cast before. It was freshly unlocked as of her last outing, and had an incredibly intriguing description which she'd spent the entire day longing to test. She extended one arm before her, wrist slightly canted so that she could sight down her fingers the way she would for any other unguided projectile, and took aim at the nearest Caracal.

The Arun Plains Caracal looked back at her briefly, lifted one leg, and began washing itself.

*I can't do it*, Sasha thought, closing her eyes and letting her hand drop.

She sighed. *This was a terrible idea. I thought maybe if I just bought some cheap pets and used them for target practice, I wouldn't have to go out as much in order to test out this new skill. But I've been getting very little skill increase from attacking them compared to the aggro mobs I've been fighting, and it's making me feel like some kind of unethical mad scientist, experimenting on helpless animals.*

"Go on," Sasha said, gesturing towards the door. "Get out of here before I change my mind. I'll let you out the back."

Neither mob took any notice of her words. The one cleaning itself seemed to be engaging in a remarkably lengthy, varied animation of doing so. They both looked up at the sound when she unlocked and opened the attic door, but neither did anything more than pace around in the area where they'd been released, their wandering clearly constrained in some way.

*I'm being silly*, Sasha thought. *They're mobs that've been taken away from their spawn, and I can't re-tame them. They're going to stay right here until the day the game shuts down. I need to just get over the fact that they look like cats, and get rid of them. It's not as if they're really alive.*

There was nothing for it; Sasha reasoned that she might as well learn something from the experience. She raised her hand again, resuming the somatic portion of the spell she was about to cast, and took a few moments to run through the new incantation in her head before speaking. *"Yavuk tokachikke mejuru jan."*
The energy that rushed down her arm and gathered at her hand was the sickly green of an advanced infection, and the projectile that came forth was the same vivid lime shot through with black streaks, leaving behind a trail of evanescent vapors that looked toxic. It struck the nearest Caracal dead on, instantly turning its cursor from yellow to red and beginning to decrement its HP gauge with the Damage Over Time effect.

*Wait for it,* Sasha thought.

Almost exactly one second later, the other Caracal—which, not being a linked encounter, hadn't automatically gone hostile when she attacked the other mob—suddenly yowled and went aggro as well, the green of its own status ribbon rapidly going down as a debuff icon in the same sickly green appeared next to the gauge.

The two mobs bounded towards her, but Sasha wasn't worried; she'd only bought pets that were just high enough level to ensure they'd survive a useful test. The first mob shattered before getting close to her; the second leapt at her with claws extended, but died in mid-air and left a small shower of particles behind to rain down over Sasha. It came close enough to make her flinch, but caused no harm.

*So the «Proliferation» side effect for Disease spells works just like the Imp-only spell of the same name: Malign effects will spread to nearby targets about once per second. I'll need a better test to see if the Proliferated effects get their full duration renewed the way they do with the Imp spell, but I'm betting they do.*

The «Result» window that appeared after the defeat of the second Caracal rewarded her with almost nothing, but she hadn't expected it to. The real reward was confirmation of the mechanics tied to the Secondary Element she'd just used for the first time.

Sasha was certain she had manifested a few Secondary Elements before, during her original testing of the mechanics of how elements could be combined grammatically. But those were only for combinations of elements she already had leveled up above 500. From what she could tell, the Secondary Element that her new spell listed as «Disease» seemed to be the intersection of Wind and Dark—the latter of which she did not have and knew only by indirect research, much of which had been provided to her by Argo.

From what she'd been able to test thus far, the Secondary Elements she'd previously discovered through combining Primary Elements, such as Water and Wind becoming Ice, still worked the same when using the «Elemental Synthesis» skill—except that they had new, unique spellwords associated with them and no longer required her to incant the two Primary Elements that formed them. That made a tremendous difference not only in MP cost, but in casting time as well.

All of which was exciting beyond words for a variety of reasons, and Sasha was sure that she'd only yet scratched the surface of what this new skill could do… but it also triggered a rush of regret and sadness every time she thought about the work that had been stolen from her.

A sound and a flash in the edges of her view drew Sasha’s attention to her notification column; she blinked in surprise—and no small amount of apprehension—upon seeing the name beside the stylized envelope icon of a new PM. *Speak of the info broker. Why on Earth would Argo be messaging me at half past midnight?*

The answer contained in that PM was intriguing enough to send her out into the streets of Arun at that witching hour. After checking to ensure that the children were asleep and secure, Sasha locked the door to the church behind her and waited expectantly just outside the low-fenced front yard, drawing her cloak more tightly around her against the night chill. An occasional NPC wandered by
One of those flight trails was headed her way from the general direction of the Warpgate. True to her word, Argo arrived a little over a minute later; the Cait Sith girl's amber-colored trail cut off in mid-flight so that she could glide in and land at a jog only a few meters away. When Argo turned and continued to walk down the street without a word, Sasha immediately joined her at her side and fell in step. She saw no one except NPCs in her sight; the thin collection of white cursors on the street at this time of night could scarcely be called a crowd, but for whatever reason Argo seemed inclined to hold her tongue even after Sasha greeted her.

"I'm sorry about what happened," Argo said finally, after about half a block. "You didn't deserve all the shit that fell on you for trying to help."

"The children deserved it even less," Sasha pointed out quietly once she realized what Argo's words meant, brown eyes searching the streets and skies for some sign of what had the info broker so on edge. "I don't make a habit of regretting things, Argo. It's a pointless indulgence that changes nothing. But if I could, I'd trade everything I learned and gained from that victory—everything the players as a whole gained—for one more day of Robert's life. I'd do it in a heartbeat even if it all it did was spare the survivors the awful thing they had to endure."

Awkward silence was Argo's only response at first; for all the girl's glibness when she was in control of a situation, she seemed at a loss for how to handle this kind of subject, or for what the right thing might be to say to someone who was still grieving.

Sasha hadn't intentionally been trying to put Argo off-guard, but she pressed the advantage anyway. "You didn't ask me to meet you in the middle of the night in order to apologize," she said. "Can you do what you said you could?" As much as she wanted to hope, and as much of a reputation as Argo had, she was automatically skeptical of fantastic claims. And this one was about as fantastic as she'd heard in a long time.

"I wasn't actually trying to get'cha out here; I figured you'd read that PM when you woke up and message me back tomorrow. But hey, seize the day, or I guess the night in this case." Argo glanced over and up at Sasha then; it was difficult to tell under the shade of her hood from the street lamps, but she thought the girl might actually have been giving her an offended look at having her abilities questioned. "Anyway, yeah, I can do it," she said emphatically. "I read every working note you had—every notebook, every scroll. Whatever you've forgotten, or didn't have memorized in the first place, I can dictate to you—or better yet, to someone with the «Scribe» skill. I can give you back what you lost."

"For a price," Sasha said, not entirely as a question; she knew how Argo worked by now.

"Everything in life's got a cost," Argo said. "It's just not always obvious. In this case, it'll cost me time to do this—a lot of time. Lot of money too, if we hire a scribe. I feel bad for what happened, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna spend days reciting majutsugo from memory gratis. I'm gonna do you a big favor, and that means I want one in return."

"Then perhaps we should end this conversation here," Sasha said, stopping in place and forcing Argo to do the same. "The last time I did a favor for someone at your behest, it didn't end too well for those I care about."

When Argo turned to face Sasha, she pushed back her hood and squinted briefly at the streetlights. "No more raids," said the girl, feline ears twitching towards the sounds of nearby NPC dialogue. "No more combat. I won't ask you to risk your life like that again, or anyone else's."
"Then what do you want, Argo?" Sasha asked, drawing herself up straight and placing her hands on her hips. "You clearly want something, and it's just as clearly not a trivial thing or else you'd simply come out and say it instead of trying to be coy. So let's hear it."

"I want you to do something you already like to do," Argo replied after a glance around her; Sasha could not imagine why the info broker was so concerned about who might be around to hear what she had to say. "I want you to teach what you know about magic."

"That is a very broad subject," Sasha pointed out, though she had her suspicions about where Argo was going with this. "And I already have classes for the children. Whom would you be expecting me to teach?"

Argo looked back at her with that even, unblinking stare. After a few beats of waiting that had to have been deliberate, a tiny needle-like tooth peeked out from the corner of a lip that rose in a smile. "Everybody."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note 2/8/18:

Sorry about the delay. I might've had this out some weeks ago, but my free time was unexpectedly consumed by two things: buying Stellaris during a holiday Steam sale, and an emergency move at the end of January to a new apartment. I should've known better about the former; 4X/GS games consume my soul almost as bad as MMOs, and Stellaris is pretty much "Every Sci-fi Franchise Ever: the 4X/GS game".

But the move is done now, and on the plus side, the inspiring Stellaris OST really helped me finish the remainder of this chapter. Look it up; it's fantastic, and the soundtrack's something like 7 bucks on Steam for many hours of music. The whole thing is good, but here's a Youtube playlist with some choice favorites:

http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLEOXCNX5MGsRuI3mBy5BntkoV-nVKCPKJ

While I'm in the mood to plug things I've enjoyed in recent months, I'd be remiss if I didn't direct you all towards another SAO fanfic called Monochrome Duet. I passed it up for a long time because I wasn't interested in the premise—and I should've given it a chance sooner, because it's very well-written and has excellent characters. Check it out: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11933222/1/Monochrome-Duet

You'll notice that this chapter actually advances time by a few days. That's going to be happening a bit more in some of the coming chapters, now that the pace of major developments has slowed back down. We've reached what I would consider a bit past the halfway point of Act 3, and as with the middle of Act 2, there's going to be some minor timeskipping to move things along now that most of the major plot threads are in play. I didn't intend this act to be quite this long, but there were a lot of events happening very quickly in the week that followed the Hrungnir raid, and I underestimated the word count it would take to properly cover them all.

For those who are curious, the original Japanese that Kirito used as a starting point to come up with the name of his guild was 団結連盟 (danketsu renmei). Fluent readers
will note that it is not a perfect 1:1 translation in either direction for Unity Covenant—but Kirito's command of English is itself not perfect, and aside from required classes in school, his vocabulary is heavily influenced by video games and programming topics. Thanks to Atreidestrooper for some extremely helpful advice on the translation.

Hopefully home life will stabilize, inspiration will rekindle further, and I'll be able to give my writing a lot more focus in the coming months than I have been. My goal is to finish Act 3 by the end of the year, but at a rate of a chapter every 2-3 months that may be unduly optimistic. We shall see. As always, let me know what you think.
"A «Phantasm» is a potent type of Illusion Magic effect that creates a temporary change to the mass and physical form of an entity or world geometry. Unlike subjective Illusion effects such as «Light» or «Night Vision», which are intangible and affect only luminosity or appearance, Phantasms affect all the senses of all observing entities—including their sense of touch and perception of cursor appearance—and are virtually indistinguishable from the original by any means other than «Truesight», although they can be «Dispelled» by an effect of appropriate magnitude. Please note that this can be both an advantage and a disadvantage: a player in the «Phantasmal Form» of a giant would have increased reach and a longer stride, but would still only do their equipped weapon’s base physical damage and be unable to fly, use their weapon skills, or fit through normal-sized corridors..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Phantasms»

13 ~ 15 May 2023

Days 191 ~ 193

Silence, for Sasha, was a luxury scarcely afforded. The foremost reason for that, of course, was the building full of children whose education and welfare she'd taken on; in her experience, children in this age range were rarely quiet for long—and when they were, it was usually a red flag telling her to check on them and see what mischief they'd achieved while unsupervised.

That was all the more true now that she was teaching them how to use magic; the incantation of a single spell was not an especially subtle thing unless you took pains to clearly enunciate a whisper, and even then it still came with audio-visual effects that themselves could make a fair amount of noise. A room or party full of players doing so at normal volume quickly became a cacophony. Even her own solo practice time, more often than not, involved filling an empty room with the sound of her voice at times when she wanted nothing more than to cast Muffle on herself and shut everything else out.

Moments like this are to be treasured, Sasha thought, sipping serenely at her cup of tea while she sat in the now-silent dining room of the church. The tea was as hot as the game engine would allow it to be made, and although ALO’s pain suppression took away most of the expected sting on her lips, the temperature otherwise felt about right. Her soft sigh of pleasure was almost loud in the stillness.

It also helps that the company is nice—and smart enough to possibly help me with a thorny puzzle.

Opening her eyes, Sasha took a long look at the large, silent man across the table, seeing him briefly through the veil of steam from her tea before she set it down carefully. Bourne raised his gaze to meet hers just as the cup touched his bushy reddish-brown beard; a few moments later he smiled. "It's good."

Sasha smiled at the obligatory compliment and waved at the air. "I can't take the credit; Sachi is the one who made it. I'm fortunate that merely heating up food that's already been crafted doesn't require the Cooking skill." When moments passed with nothing in answer but a wordless noise of acknowledgement, her eyes went briefly towards the windows set along one wall of the dining room, where hints of the morning sun were just starting to overtake Yggdrasil's shade. "I appreciate you coming by again. I hope I'm not taking you away from your duties."
Bourne shook his head slowly. "Not at all, my lady. I don't have a dedicated clearing group, and I'm... between jobs at the moment, as it were."

That came as something of a surprise to Sasha. Bourne hadn't spoken of any party or acquaintances at all during the Hrungnir raid, but she'd gotten the definite impression that he was a notable, well-respected player in the NCC clearing groups. "Well I'm sure that won't be difficult to sort out, for someone of your skill. Though if you don't have a dedicated group, I suppose that explains why you were free to help with the raid."

"In part," Bourne said, glancing down at his tea. "I'm not privy to the details, but Wizbang—that's the Puca who leads our mage groups—I gather he's friends with Lady Alicia from before."

After a moment's uncertainty, Sasha reasoned that before must have been Bourne's way of referring indirectly to the beta without breaking character. "He's the one who sent you to her for the raid?"

Bourne nodded. "Aye. I'd been bouncing from group to group a bit, and when Alicia contacted him for help with her little arcane conundrum, I didn't have an assigned group..."

"Making you the obvious choice," Sasha said once it was clear Bourne wasn't going to finish his sentence. "Highly skilled, but with no permanent assignment. But if you don't have a group now..." Her brow creased slightly. "I thought you mentioned having been to the new zone?"

"I have, a few times," Bourne admitted. "I've yet to encounter the dangerous foes of which other clearers have spoken, but I stand ready to face them." A pause, then he smiled. "So saying, when we sat down you implied today isn't just a social visit. You wanted my advice on an incantation, I believe?"

Finishing her drink, Sasha carefully set down the cup and clasped her hands in her lap, reviewing the words once in her head. "Noruna domuru, uthan." She paused to wait for a reaction. "Sound familiar?"

Something like recognition did indeed flicker in Bourne's eyes. Sasha was not the least bit surprised; from what Kirito had said in his PM, she imagined the words had made their way to every clearer by now, even if they themselves hadn't fought a Norn. "The Judgment."

Sasha nodded. "It has the sounds of a spell... but it's not one. At least, nothing a player can cast."

"Not so unusual," Bourne noted. "I've encountered spells that only mobs can use before. I imagine you have as well."

"That's different, though. The Miasma that some Pixie-type named mobs use when they hit low health, for example—it's still invoked using Dark. It's just that a player can't manifest the—" Sasha tapped a forefinger at the table. It took her a few moments to recall a word that she'd only seen a few times in her notes; it stood out in her memory only for being so unusual. "—zathroku spellword."

Bourne hesitated at length before replying, the furrow of his brow deep and pensive. "I may not be the best person to ask about this," he said slowly. "Your scholarship in this area surely exceeds mine."

Sasha chuckled softly, waving off another compliment. "Perhaps, perhaps not. But it never hurts to get a second set of eyes on a difficult problem, does it? Or a third, as the case may be."

One of Bourne's thick eyebrows went up. "Hm?"

"Kirito should be joining us shortly; it was he who asked me for help. Do you mind?"
"Not at all," Bourne said, rubbing at his bearded chin. "I just find it curious, if you don't mind my saying. Wasn't he—"

Bourne paused there; Sasha correctly interpreted his meaning and the reason for his hesitation, and nodded. "Yes, he was. But what's done is done, Bourne, and nothing will bring Robert back. Right now, Kirito thinks I could help save more lives without putting anyone at risk, and if he's right… well, I have to try, don't I?"

A smile slowly dawned on the Gnome clearer's face. "You have a kind heart, Sasha of Arun. I don't know that I would be so forgiving in your shoes." He spread his hands. "But I'll help if I can."

"That's all I can ask," Sasha replied, encouraged by the answer. It wasn't long before Kirito knocked and announced himself. The front door was only a few rooms away from the dining room, and Sasha didn't have to raise her voice much to beckon him in from the foyer. She wasn't at all surprised that he'd shown up fully equipped for clearing work; from what she'd seen, most clearers didn't seem to spend much time in casual clothing—if they even owned any. But aside from that ridiculous black longcoat she'd always seen him wearing, to her eye the rest of his gear was different than the last time.

Kirito gave a confused look around himself as he passed the threshold of the doorway. "It's… weirdly quiet around here."

Sasha laughed. "Sachi and Silica are out with the kids. Given the circumstances I'm a little worried, but…" She turned up both hands in a gesture of resignation that was more neutral than she really felt. "Children are resilient. They want to go, and I can't really stop them. The girls have promised to keep everyone in an overland zone close to Arun."

It was tough to read Kirito's expression; the only sign of his true feelings about this information was the thin set of his lips. "I see." His eyes then went to the Gnome clearer sitting across from Sasha at the side table they shared.

"Kirito, I believe you've met Bourne."

"Briefly," Kirito said, giving the man a tilt of the head. "NCC clearer, right?"

Bourne's deadpan expression could have been carved from ironwood. "What gave it away?"

"Aside from the heraldic guild tag?" Kirito gave the joke a half-hearted smile. "I might've seen you once or twice, I think, when I contracted with your clearing group leaders."

"Fair enough." Bourne's gaze went up and drifted slightly. "That's right, I'd heard there was a new Spriggan clearing group with a nine-pointed star tag. Are you the leader, then?"

Sasha got the distinct impression that Kirito looked uncomfortable for just a moment before he nodded. "Guildmaster of Unity Covenant. But we welcome anyone who wants to help, not just Spriggans."

There was a thick, notable pause before Bourne answered, during which he seemed to examine Kirito with intense focus. "How interesting." He glanced to the side and met Sasha's eyes. "I might like to hear more. But we're being rude. My lady, you obviously brought us both here for a reason."

"I did," Sasha said, unsure of what subtext or meaning had passed beneath that exchange, but certain that it had been there. She gestured back to Kirito. "Or to be more precise, he did."
Kirito's hands were already dancing in the air; within moments a small collection of note-taking windows spread out before him, clearly a saved layout pinned as visible to others. When he was done, he manifested a rolled-up scroll from his inventory and slid it across the table as soon as he'd sat down; Sasha unrolled it and flattened it out between herself and Bourne.

"This is every incantation that anyone we know—or anyone who's talked to Argo about it—has heard a Norn use. In some cases they're just pieces, or best-guesses from hearing them. Most are pretty well-documented at this point, though."

Serav. Yavuk. Yabrath. Sasha felt a mild shock pass through her as she scanned the list, doubling back to make sure she'd read correctly. These are all secondary element spellwords; I recognize them from the incantations in Elemental Synthesis. There are mobs using them now?

"You'll probably notice some weird stuff right away," Kirito ventured when her silence dragged on.

"I..." It was rare for Sasha to be at a loss for words; language was most of her life. She froze just then, almost as she had when Hrungnir had charged at her. "These spellwords..." She skimmed further down the list to confirm her suspicions, then glanced up to find Kirito looking at her oddly. "What do these incantations do?"

"Well, in some cases I was hoping you could tell me. The first few, we're pretty sure about them—the thing tries to keep its Lightning shield up all the time if it can."

Lightning. Sasha didn't have to consult the recent entries in her spellbook to know that was exactly what serav invoked. "I meant more in terms of how the spells behave. For the Lightning shield I see... six magnitudes of it, here. That at least gives you a baseline on its skill level."

Bourne was already nodding, but Kirito gave her a questioning look. "Any idea what that is?"

Sasha's fingers itched for something to make scratch notes with; she closed her eyes for a few moments while she thought it through. "To invoke serav and wemzul at this magnitude, you'd need a skill level of at least..."

"Six hundred and forty," said Bourne immediately.

Sasha nodded, eyes still tracking across the text on the scroll. "Or somewhere very close to that, yes. And here, further down it uses serav again, but this time..." She mouthed the words as she read them before translating. "Direct Damage, Strikedown manifestation."

"A lightning bolt from the ceiling, basically," Kirito said. "Yeah, that one hurts."

"I'd bet. But the interesting part is the magnitudes I see here for that spell, three through five. That fits with the skill levels from the Offensive Shield."

"Which means?"

Sasha glanced back down at the scroll again before addressing her guests. "Whatever the Norn is using to cast its Lightning effects, its skill level has to be roughly between 600 and 700. Any higher and it would have access to at least one more magnitude of each spell that I don't see here. Her gaze rose just above the rims of her glasses. "What level are these mobs?"

Kirito's only had to think for a moment. "Baseline trash in the Halls seems to be about 40 give or take, and we estimate the Norns at 41 or 42. Hard to be sure, since none of us are high enough to do a bracketing test on them, but the red of their cursor cons medium-dark to me. Why?"
Sasha's eyes briefly closed as she turned the simple formula over in her head. "Caster level and magic skill both act as straightforward linear multipliers to final spell damage," she said. "A level 40 caster with magic skill 640 is doing an extra 104% bonus damage beyond the base for that spell. I'd have to do the math with real numbers, but from that we can derive some approximate upper values for how much damage it can do." With a little help after-hours from testing my own Lightning spells, that is.

"That's useful," Kirito said, taking no notes of his own but almost certainly committing the information to memory. "Now speaking of mechanics, I'd like to pick apart the Judgment debuff, but first I'd really like to know how this one works." He highlighted an incantation in one of his windows and turned it to face them.

"Yavuk tomezal kezure mejuru tepnaga kwedan. That's… it's a Direct Damage, Point-Blank AOE concatenated with a DOT."

"We figured out that much. But it also… well..." Kirito gestured wordlessly in the air for a moment. "It doesn't look or act like a normal spell. It's a bit weird, actually."

Sasha suspected she knew exactly what Kirito was talking about. The problem was how to give him what he needed without inviting suspicions about how she knew. "Describe it to me."

"The visual FX for the yavuk spells looked greenish-black, and there were what looked like smoke or gas coming from it. It hits pretty hard with Judgment up, and seemed to bypass resists even without that debuff. The weird part is that it seems to somehow… spread, I guess, from one person to another. The first time it hit me, I backed out of the fight for healing, and it started killing everyone in the back ranks."

"Proliferation," Bourne said. When Kirito turned to look at him, he elaborated. "Imp-only spell I've heard of, only seen it used once. It makes Malign effects contagious. Excellent for clearing out large packs of trash minions."

Sasha had no words to describe just how grateful she was then for Bourne's addition. "That must be it," she said. "This yavuk spellword… the effects are contagious like a disease, right? And it bypassed resists… what about Poison Resist?"

Kirito gave her a satisfied-looking smile. "You think so too? That's my suspicion, but we haven't gotten a chance to test it yet. It'd make sense, though—I've seen Poison Resist used to mitigate different types of 'toxic' effects, not just actual poisons. I'm betting the reason all the usual resists did nothing was because it wasn't dealing magic damage at all—it's straight Poison damage."

Sasha knew for a fact that Disease spells did exactly that, and saw no need to disabuse Kirito of the notion that he'd figured it out himself. "If it really does behave like Proliferation, then it might well play by similar rules. Proliferation spreads any Malign effects to anyone within… I think it's five, ten meters of the target." She glanced over at Bourne for a moment for confirmation, but he simply raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Worse still, every time it spreads, it refreshes the duration—the spell effect essentially starts over on the new target. I wouldn't be surprised if these Disease effects work the same way."

"No wonder I almost wiped the party when I backed out," Kirito said as his smile turned to a grimace. "Well, that sorts out this so-called Disease magic. What about the one that starts with…" His eyes scanned back and forth in one of his windows before settling on their quarry. "Yabrath."

Necromancy, thought Sasha. Holy and Dark. Her Elemental Synthesis skill had only granted her a
few starting spells of that type, but she recognized the word—and the effect it had. Still, she feigned ignorance. "What did you observe it doing?"

"That's one of the first things in its casting cycle, from what we can tell. It wipes out our MP, big initial spike and then a slow drain to counteract natural regen. But that's the only spell that uses that word."

Bourne peered at the incantation as Sasha's finger slid down the list and stopped. "It's just explicit zuru concatenated with mejuru again," he observed. "This yabrath spellword must be causing these effects to damage your mana instead of your health."

Grateful again to Bourne for the unintended cover, Sasha made a sound of agreement. "That would follow. It looks like that's the only example of yabrath you've recorded. As for the rest of these…"

She spent what felt like nearly a full minute reviewing the list from top to bottom. "Aside from Lightning and Disease, I don't see anything unusual. These are all standard spells any player could cast with the right skill. Distress and Root using Dark, Silence and Delay with Wind, and Holy for Spiritual Armor and…" Sasha's mind blanked on one of the words; she glanced over to Bourne. "Jeflaktul?"

"Sympathetic Link," Bourne offered after a thoughtful pause. "Damage reflection buff."

"That's right," Sasha said with a snap of the fingers. "Yes, the rest of these are all player spells."

Kirito nodded. "I thought as much. Which leaves us with one unsolved mystery."

"And quite the mystery it is," Bourne responded.

Sasha was in complete agreement. "I haven't seen or fought a Norn myself, thank heavens. But to tell the truth, I'm not quite convinced this «Judgment of the Norns» debuff isn't some kind of innate ability."

"Then let's take it piece by piece," Kirito said. "That's what you did to learn the language, right? Pick a spell apart, experiment, figure out what the syntax is and what the words mean."

"That's the problem," Sasha said. "It might not even be a spell—I know I can't cast it as-is; I've already tried. I could see where domuru fits in, it's clearly a Malign effect-or at least, it has the correct -u stem to be one, and is in the right position in the incantation. The same with uthan—I don't recognize it, but it's the final word, and it ends with a moraic N like all manifestations." She paused there, tapping a fingertip against the solid wood of the table. "But noruna makes no sense at all. It's not an element."

"We've seen three other new elements in the Norn's casting cycle," Kirito pointed out. "Serav, yavuk, yabrath—could this be another?"

Sasha was torn on how to answer that question. On gaining the Elemental Synergy extra skill, her spellbook had been automatically populated with a collection of starter spells—at least one from each of the secondary elements the skill covered. The Norn clearly used Lightning, Disease, and Necromancy—the intersections of Wind and Holy, Wind and Dark, and Holy and Dark, respectively. There were twelve others in her spellbook, one for every permutation of any two elements…and not one of them was, or sounded anything like, noruna.

The way elements combine into pairs makes sense once you know it's possible, Sasha thought. Each of the secondary elements has an effect that follows in some kind of logical or thematic way from the primaries of which they're composed. The classic elements combine in ways that are roughly
sensible, like Wind chilling Water to become Ice, or Fire turning Earth into Magma. Holy and Dark seem to serve the roles of positive and negative energy in some fashion—Holy energizes Wind into Lightning, but Dark corrupts it into Disease. They all fit together in their own way.

But that's just the thing—there are a finite number of these combinations, and they're all accounted for in Elemental Synthesis. I know all of their names; noruna isn't one of them. And I can't for the life of me think of how else you might combine or inflect the known elements into anything like it—it's just a one-off that doesn't fit.

There just wasn't a way to point out why it didn't fit without exposing her new skill to both Kirito and Bourne. It wasn't that she didn't trust Bourne—she felt closer to him than to perhaps any other adult in Alfheim. But she still wasn't sure she was ready to reveal the special Extra Skill she'd received, even to him. And telling Kirito was out of the question; she was more than willing to offer advice, but she was wary of getting roped into doing any more clearing work herself.

This is going to come out eventually, Sasha thought, reproving herself for the anxiety-fueled urge to secrecy. It must come out eventually, if mobs are using the secondary elements as well. But what's the best way?

"It's worth mentioning," Kirito said while Sasha struggled with her thoughts, "that Argo also has her doubts whether Judgment is a real spell—she thinks noruna domuru is a Japanization of something that's supposedly Old Norse for Judgment of the Norns."

Sasha frowned. "But if that's so, then what's the purpose of uthan? It can't be a coincidence that it comes at the end of the 'incantation' and ends like a manifestation."

"I don't know," Kirito admitted.

Bourne made a sound of clearing his throat. "Could it not be both?"

Sasha looked back at him attentively. "Explain, please."

"Kirito is correct about the meaning of Norna Dómr. And I agree; it stretches credulity to think the name of the spell and the sound of its incantation are a coincidence." He smiled thinly. "But the gods are known for cleverness and wordplay. It is not unthinkable to me that the one who gave the Norns their power should notice that Dómr in Japanese phonetics sounds like a Malign effect, and crafted the spell to fit the words."

"That..." Kirito started to speak, then stopped there with his lips slightly parted. "That makes all too much sense, with what we know of Kayaba."

Bourne's face, once again stony, gave no further clue about his musings save for the slightest of shrugs. Sasha felt like she had the beginnings of some kind of insight, but it was still little more than a whisper at the edge of her mind. "Okay, so let's assume that domuru is, in fact, a Malign effect, and that it was intentional to also make that Old Norse phrase scan properly as an incantation. I'd have to experiment to see whether or not I can manifest any of those words, or if I even have the right skill to try. But I'd be very surprised if I were the first player to try doing so."

A thought occurred to her then. "Wait a minute. I want to try casting the spell again, but I'd like to do something else first." Sasha stood, stepped back from the table, and held her hands out before her. One by one she tried casting a few simple spells from each of the elements, keeping an eye on the gauge in her HUD. As she'd expected, as soon as she'd spoken a valid element, she saw a portion of her MP bar begin to glow with each new word to indicate the amount of mana that the incantation in progress would cost; rings of golden runes spun around her body with each syllable before locking
into place at the conclusion of the spell.

Most notably, the pattern repeated itself even with elements for which Sasha did not have the right skill, such as Dark: a failed spell and a loss of MP. She'd expected that; Sasha couldn't even begin to count the number of similar tests she'd tried before, but it had been some time and she'd wanted what it looked like fresh in her mind. Then, for the final part of the test, she spoke the full incantation for the Judgment of the Norns.

Nothing. Not a flicker on her MP bar. Not even when she equipped a wand to make sure it wasn't her hand positioning that was the problem.

"It's possible you just don't have some kind of flag or prereq that lets the system treat it as a valid keyword," Kirito said after she explained what she'd done.

"Or even that it's merely lore flavor and the spell is locked only to the Norn itself," Sasha pointed out, well aware that they could be wasting their time. "I understand the debuff is incurable?"

Kirito nodded. "Either that, or the cure requires something we don't have yet."

Sasha tapped the tip of her index finger at her lip. "Noruna can't be an element usable by players," she said. "Not even one for which I don't have the skill. When I tried casting a spell from Dark, the system still deducted the MP cost of the words I spoke. But when I tried to cast Judgment, it did nothing—my MP bar didn't even glow a little." The tapping at her lip stopped abruptly as something else occurred to Sasha. "And come to think of it, the incantation is ungrammatical as-is—if noruna were an element immediately followed by an effect, it should've been inflected to norunakke."

"So it's mob-only," Kirito said, almost half a question.

"The first word, perhaps, and maybe the second as well. If I don't begin with a valid element, the system wouldn't know to treat any of the words that follow as part of an incantation." She aimed the wand at a blank section of wall. "Yakke domuru—" Sasha cut off mid-incantation as soon as she noticed that uttering domuru put an end to the glow on her MP bar, cost her the tiny fraction of it consumed by the element alone, and produced no visible runes. "It's not part of Dark. I suppose I could run that test for all the other elements and magnitudes; it might take some time. That's what I had to do originally to figure out which effects were valid in which elements."

"What about uthan?" Bourne asked.

"Indeed," Sasha said. Then, mostly for Kirito's benefit: "most manifestations by definition have very broad, generalized meanings and usages—they determine the form in which the spell manifests, whether that be a projectile, or what have you. If uthan really is a valid manifestation… there's a chance it's less restrictive in its use, and I might have more success testing it with known working effects."

"Sounds worth a try," said Kirito, surprising her by following what she'd felt to be an inelegant explanation. "Every attack has a defense or counter, and every debuff has a cleanse of some kind. The more we know about how the pieces fit together, the better our chances of finding that solution."

Sasha considered her options. Judgment is a debuff that stays on everyone in a wide area. It should follow that however it is uthan actually functions, it ought to at least accept a Malign status effect. And manifestations are non-elemental—if the effect is valid, it shouldn't matter what the element is. It's an area effect, but the incantation doesn't include tepnaga, so while that might be implicit in the manifestation, it probably isn't required. She nodded to herself, satisfied she'd thought it through.
carefully enough. *Now, probably the simplest non-damaging debuff to try would be Distress, so at least Third Magnitude...*

More convinced than ever that she was on the right track, Sasha decided on an incantation to use as a test. "Is it okay if I turn on PvP in this room for a minute? I won't be using a damaging effect." She couldn't imagine that either player would feel threatened by her, but it seemed prudent and polite to ask.

Kirito nodded after what looked like a moment's thought, as did Bourne. After a few taps at her menu, Sasha reviewed the incantation she had in mind, then raised her wand. Just as the Norns apparently did, she added a half-*mora* pause before the manifestation, in case that mattered—if nothing else, it helped keep the vowels from bleeding together. "*Hitto zabukke tovslagu, uthan.*"

A part of Sasha had been expecting yet another failure. But this time the spinning runes and glowing segment of her MP bar didn't come to a premature end; the spell completed with a faint burst of flame rushing down from the tip of her wand until it briefly sheeted across her body, almost startling her into a small hop-step backwards. Noticing something change in her peripheral vision, Sasha glanced up at her HUD and saw a red status icon backing a white symbol that looked like a dot within a fringed circle. *Or a fuzzy hydrogen atom, perhaps,* she thought briefly. *But it worked!*

*Sasha noticed something else unusual, as well: a significant portion of her MP bar wasn't regenerating at all. Then she looked more closely and corrected herself—it looked like her maximum MP had actually been reduced; perhaps a quarter of the bar's total length was grayed out. She glanced over at Kirito and Bourne; both of them had a red «Distress» icon on their status ribbons rather than the curious new icon she had, and both looked somewhat alarmed."

"What do you see?" Sasha asked.

"It looks like a normal fire-based Distress debuff," Kirito answered, pulling open his game menu and poking at it as he came to his feet. "Yep, a bunch of my low-tier sword skills are sealed—weird, Distress is usually all or nothing. But yeah, just like Judgment, it doesn't have a duration."

Sasha gave the new icon in her HUD a second look; it, too, had no listed duration. "Then how do I—ah." When her gaze lingered on the icon, the usual context menu popped open—including the option to dismiss the effect.

"Bourne," Sasha said in lieu of canceling it herself. "Could you cast an M3 Dispel on me?"

"I'm not an Undine, so no. But I can do Fourth Magnitude."

"Please."

Giving her a nod, Bourne rose to his feet and lifted a hand. "*Zutto yojikke wejith shippura kwedan.*"

As soon as the spell completed, Sasha felt the energy rush over her and watched as the spell effect disappeared from her HUD—and after what felt like a delay of several seconds, from everyone else's status ribbons as well. "Yes!" she all but shouted then, catching herself only after the fact and making a show of smoothing out her dress to cover her embarrassment.

"What just happened?" Kirito asked.

"*Uthan* is a real word," Sasha said excitedly, suddenly anxious to spend some time teasing out exactly how it worked. "But that's not all." Drawing open her menu and navigating to her spellbook,
she scanned through the Fire spells until she found the entry that had just been added there. "Gentlemen, I appear to have just cast what the game calls an «M3 Distress Aura»," she read from the title field.

"Aura?" Kirito echoed.

"That's must be the 'official' name of the manifestation," Sasha said. "The system does this anytime you use a given incantation for the first time—it spits out a generic computer-generated name for it based on the words used in the spell, and adds it to your spellbook. It's curious, too—" She looked up again at her HUD, where a previously-grayed portion of her MP gauge was beginning to slowly refill. "It cost quite a bit more MP than I expected, but what it seems to do is reduce your max MP by that amount for as long as the spell is active."

"Reserved MP," Kirito said at once. "Not a mechanic I've seen before in ALO, but I recognize it from other games. You're setting aside a portion of your MP pool in order to maintain a spell—usually some kind of area or team buff."

"But in this case a debuff," Sasha said. "The caster gets a status icon that lets them cancel the 'aura', while every target in a certain radius gets the debuff itself on them." She was aware that she probably sounded very smug, but in that moment she felt like she'd earned a little of that. "Which must be why it can't be cured. The effect doesn't 'live' on the target at all, so to speak—it's being radiated out from the caster and sustained using the reserved MP; there's nothing to cure."

"But Bourne was able to Dispel it from you," Kirito said. "We can't do that to Judgment; we've tried. I've watched both Mentat and Asuna hit the Norn with every Dispel they have while keeping its shield down."

Bourne had been mostly silent for a time, but chose that moment to speak up. "Magnitude priority."

Sasha looked at him. "What?"

"Magnitude priority," Bourne said. "At least, that's what I call it. When you cast Dispel on a target that has multiple active effects, Dispel starts getting rid of the lowest-magnitude effects and works its way up until its magnitude is 'spent', as it were."

Understanding dawned on Sasha at once, and from the looks of it, Kirito had the same epiphany. "Of course," he said, smacking a fist into his palm. "The Norn always keeps recasting its Offensive Shield—and Spiritual Armor, if it can get away with it. If Judgment follows the same rules as the spell you just cast… that means it's not really incurable. It's just that the lower-level buffs get cleansed first, and Dispel isn't left with enough power to clear out Judgment, too."

"You'd need multiple healers to be certain of keeping it fully suppressed," Bourne put in. "Two or more with very high Water or Holy. Some luck wouldn't hurt either; at worst you'd have to both chain high-magnitude Dispels one after the other, keep it from recasting any other buffs, and hope that at least one of your Dispels is left with enough power to get rid of an effect whose magnitude you don't yet know."

Kirito frowned suddenly. "If that's the case, we still have a problem: I'm pretty sure Dispel has a long cooldown."

"It does," Sasha said. "For the highest-magnitude versions, as much as three minutes or more without cooldown reduction."

"Then we can't count on sustaining that for long," Kirito said. "It'll be useful to keep that in our back
pocket for emergencies, and Burns has good CDR, but it'll only help so much if the Norn just recasts it."

"Then it seems like the thing to do would be to seal its ability to use magic so that it cannot recast."

Kirito nodded towards Bourne. "We've tried. It's hard to get Silence to stick, and hearing Judgment being cast is usually the first sign that a Norn is even there—it's on before anyone has a chance to act." The boy began pacing around the table, absentmindedly sweeping away the crescent of note windows he'd left open and pinned visible. "But that's because Norns tend to show up when and where you're not expecting them to. We've been going about this the wrong way, and now I think I understand why."

Bourne was characteristically silent, leaving Sasha to ask the obvious question. "How so?"

"All of the major mobs we've encountered so far in the Halls are part of an ecosystem that forms an elegant trap for players," Kirito said. "You have to farm Graveworms for quest progression and XP; they're the most common trash mob and play a part in the early questline for this zone. But based on some of the things Klein saw, Caretakers seem to be drawn to where people have been killing Graveworms. Because Caretakers often wander around invis, it's very easy to pick them up as adds during a fight with something else—and now that we know they consume people's Remain Lights, that makes them even more dangerous to leave alive during a fight."

Kirito paused thoughtfully there. "In fact… now that I think of it from that angle… I'd be willing to bet Caretakers are drawn to any nearby death. If you're farming any kind of mob in one spot for too long, you're almost guaranteed to run into them."

"But then if you kill the Caretakers…"

Kirito gave Bourne's comment a nod and a grim look. "Exactly. All of these mobs are set up to make you want or even need to kill them—but if you do, it attracts the attention of something more dangerous. Something that's likely to show up and aggro your party at the worst possible moment, and that—in the case of the Norns—will ultimately punish you heavily for killing the others, even though you need to."

"All of which makes every kind of sense to me so far," Sasha said, a little uncertain where Kirito was leading with his revelation. "But I still don't understand what you mean by going about it wrong."

"It's simple," Kirito said. "Killing mobs is only dangerous because it draws Caretakers, and killing Caretakers is only dangerous because it makes Norns hurt you more. This entire ecosystem ultimately relies on the lethal threat of the Norn and its Judgment, slowing down player progression and putting them on the defensive, forcing them to be slow and careful about what they engage. As soon as anyone realizes that Norns are drawn to Caretakers in trouble, the obvious safe thing to do is to try not to attract Caretakers in the first place, avoid drawing Norn attention by harming them if you do… and in a worst-case scenario, focus on keeping vulnerable players safe from Judgment if a Norn does ambush your party."

Sasha nodded. "And?"

One corner of Kirito's mouth rose into a sharp, predatory grin. "Take away Judgment, and the Norn is just another HP sponge," he said confidently. "And I think we'll have a much better chance of doing that if we're the ones setting the trap."
Kirito ignored the Result window that appeared a few beats after the last of the Greater Graveworms had exploded into glittering blue clouds of short-lived polys, eyes intently scanning across the open burial room and lingering on its dark corners. He didn't actually think he'd be the first person to spot anything, but vigilance at this point was key, and there were more than a few crumbling stone pillars blocking LOS to the far ends of the room.

When a few seconds had passed with no visible sign of adds, he spoke quietly to Burns. "Anything?"

The Imp clearer's eyes glowed a vibrant emerald in the dim light of the barrow, the color different from the paler green of the Searching skill which Kirito had just used to look for cursors. "No movement yet, boss," said Burns as he turned slowly in a circle. "Just the Barrow Wight roamers we passed on our way—wait."

All eyes in the group of six turned to Burns when he stopped in place, pointing in what seemed to be an arbitrary direction. "Two signals just popped in there, man-sized. Either they weren't moving before, or they just spawned."

The boy's finger was pointing straight at a wall, and although it—like all the others in the room—was lined with the rough stone resting nooks of mummified corpses, none of them were moving. That wasn't to say that they wouldn't, just that these particular ones seemed to be inert decorations rather than mobs, and none of them seemed inclined to change that arrangement at the moment. Even with a brief toggle of Searching, Kirito couldn't see anything in that direction, but he still wasn't expecting to.

That was half the point of the test.

Kirito took his eyes off the indicated direction just long enough to glance to his side and find Asuna looking right back at him. The faint upward tilt of her lips suggested she wanted to smile, but the look on the rest of her face was serious. As soon as she returned the nod he gave her, he turned his attention back to the task at hand.

"Still no cursors," Kirito said quietly.

"Wait for it," Burns said. "Movement closing, should be right through that door—"

The mage's sentence cut off abruptly then, and it was easy to see why. The rough-hewn stone doorway at the far end of the room seemed to shimmer like hot air rising from summer pavement, and in the deathly quiet of the barrow Kirito could just barely hear a sound like the hiss of a snake carrying across the distance, or perhaps pouring sand. The waver in the air rapidly resolved into the hunched forms of a pair of Umbral Caretakers, who shuffled gradually in the direction of the party as they dropped their Invisibility buff. Gesturing wordlessly with both palms to order the rest of his group to back off behind him, Kirito and everyone else gave the Caretakers plenty of space.

After reaching a respectable distance of ten or fifteen meters, most of the group went as still as if they were trying to grind Hiding, but from the way Nori was fidgeting and slowly lobbing her staff from one hand to the other, Kirito could tell she was itching to lay into the pair of Caretakers. He wanted a piece of them himself, but for the time being he wanted to test his theory and see what they were going to do.

The temporary scars of battle in the game's surface layer made it easy to see where Xorren and Burns had been nuking down the last set of Graveworms, and while Kirito's party waited and watched in silence, the Caretakers slowly ambled towards where the battle had taken place. The two mobs stopped and faced each other, a subtle warm light suffusing their immediate surroundings while a
geometrically complex magic circle of some sort appeared below them where their ragged robes brushed the ground.

*Just like Klein said.* The Result window advising Kirito of what he'd earned from the battle, left unattended, had already minimized to his notification column. Kirito took his gaze off the Caretakers just long enough to focus the icon and bring it back to the foreground so that it wouldn't time out and auto-accept; the window hung in the air before him like a holographic pane of stained glass. It was a bit distracting, but for the moment it would do.

He didn't have to wait long. Perhaps ten or twenty seconds had passed when the glow faded from beneath the two Caretakers, and as their blotchy, emaciated arms disappeared back into the sleeves of their robes, the Result window in front of Kirito suddenly vanished as if he'd dismissed it. A brief check at his character stats confirmed his suspicions: he'd received the money and drops, but his EXP total was the same as it had been before the last fight. A player received their rewards upon completion of the battle, and the system didn't technically count the battle as over until they closed their Result window.

"Confirmed," Kirito said aloud. "Looks like the Caretakers are equal-opportunity vultures." As he'd suspected, the Caretakers—who seemed to be drawn to, and feed upon, player Remain Lights—treated mob deaths similarly. They'd effectively fed on the EXP he would've gotten from the battle in much the same way that they'd fed on his remaining time.

The two Caretakers still seemed to take no notice of the group at this distance, and began to shuffle their way back towards the far doorway from which they'd come. When they were almost about to leave the room, he spoke again, this time in a normal voice—there was no point in stealth now.

"Burns, overwatch; Xorren, control. Nori, pull."

"On it," Nori said, already in motion to execute the pre-arranged cast as soon as he'd started speaking. She dashed forward into the middle of the room until she had clear LOS on the Caretakers around the massive stone support columns, flipping the staff she called «Gemini Branch» into the level stance of a casting accessory. As soon as her thumb touched a certain spot behind one of the grips, the enchanted stone head of the staff spun in its frame and snapped into a lengthwise position.

"Ma tepnaga jan!"

Black smoke trailed from the surge of power that raced down the length of the staff and shot out towards the Caretakers. Moments after the AOE exploded at their feet and turned their cursors red, the Silence debuff from Xorren struck the mobs and stopped the spell that one of them had begun casting.

Kirito was right behind Nori as she switched her staff back to its melee form and charged in, and once the Spriggan woman clearly had aggro and had turned the Caretakers away from the group, Kirito arbitrarily chose one of the mobs and began cutting it down as quickly as possible while Asuna and Xorren kept the other one debuffed. The first Caretaker's HP was nearly down to half when the shout he'd been expecting came from Burns. "New movement!"

*There's mommy,* Kirito thought, evading a weak swing from the caster-type Caretaker in front of him and responding with a low-cooldown technique that would stun the mob for about half a second.

"Alright Burns, nuke down the other Caretaker now!"

Up to this point, Burns had been using his MP for nothing other than casting Detect Movement as soon as it was off cooldown; with his MP procs and CDR he had no trouble maintaining it continuously. A significant amount of that MP rapidly disappeared from the Imp's gauge in the party list as he began blasting the heretofore-unharmed Caretaker, running the magnitudes on Fire and Dark Magic as fast as he could speak the words. When both Caretakers were low on HP, Nori
dodged out of range to avoid the risk of getting the Last Attack, while Kirito and Burns dealt finishing blows in a shower of glowing tech tracers and violet-black projectiles, respectively.

Their Result windows hadn't even had time to appear before Burns was already recasting his detection spell. "Futto famudrokke hevatrul dweren." A pause, then: "Yep, one big contact, still coming this way. Shape is right."

Focusing his eyes and attention on a distant point for a moment, Kirito toggled on Searching. Through the faint emerald tint that overtook his vision he could see clusters of red cursors where aggro mobs with low stealth were located, with the occasional yellow of a non-aggro mob. Much closer and darker than the rest, one of those yellow cursors approached steadily from the same direction as had the erstwhile Caretakers.

It only took a moment of maintaining that level of concentration to confirm what Burns had called out; the green faded from Kirito's sight. He nodded in acknowledgement, although he doubted the gesture was visible in the low light. "Positions."

The members of his party scattered to pre-arranged spots in the room, the formation oriented in the direction in which Burn had indicated movement. Nori and Asuna hugged the wall to either side of the large arch of the doorway, while Kirito stood about twenty meters from the same, just enough off to the side so that he didn't have LOS down the dark hallway beyond—but also so that nothing in the hallway would have LOS on him until it entered the room. Burns and Xorren, meanwhile, stood back along the south wall with Mentat, well out of melee range and off to the opposite side from Kirito.

Then they waited.

Kirito spotted the spectral glow of the Norn Custodian just before the mob itself came into view. It coasted silently into the room just past where Asuna and Nori were holding position, and stopped there, gaze panning around slowly. Kirito was the closest player it found within its field of view; the Norn raised one of its gauntlets in the air and turned it over. "Noruna domuru—"

There was a brief pause in the middle of the Norn's incantation, right before what Sasha had flagged as an unrecognized manifestation spellword causing the Aura behavior of the debuff. Asuna's rapier struck the Norn in the back just then, and the «Interrupt» effect from the fast technique she'd chosen cut off the incantation, drawing a shriek of rage from the Norn and turning its cursor an angry crimson. No debuff icon for Judgment of the Norns appeared in Kirito's HUD or on anyone else's status ribbon, and before the thing could recover from the interrupted casting, he raced into battle with a blaze of violet running down the length of Phantasmal Dirge.

The Norn seemed to begin combat with its Lightning-based damage shield up, which started gradually eroding the HP of the three front-liners. Kirito was by this point inured to the uncomfortable sensation, and the effect on his health was mostly countered by the AOE HOT that Mentat already had running on the three of them. Nori was right up in the thing's face, pinwheeling her staff in order to deflect the Norn's melee strikes and whittle it down with freehand counters and taunt attacks to build aggro. Then even the Lightning shield went away the moment Mentat struck the mob with a Dispel; while Kirito's HP started ticking back up, the mob raised both clawed gauntlets in an obvious casting posture. "Yabrath tokachi zure meju—"

That spell, too, fizzled as soon as Nori recognized the start of an incantation and responded with one of the few techniques she had that inflicted Interrupt on the mob, canceling the MP drain that they'd all been expecting. The Norn hissed and laid into Nori with wild slashes of its claws, but without the amplification from the Judgment debuff, her medium armor and tanking buffs mitigated the few hits that she couldn't parry or avoid. "Switch!"
On cue, both Kirito and Asuna took advantage of the Norn's rebound from their Spriggan tank's successful parry, their weapons glowing with the power of the techniques they simultaneously charged up. Kirito's «Vertical» cut a glowing red rent into the Norn from shoulder to hip, and into its very short freeze time Asuna's «Linear» shot her forward a meter until the tip of her rapier plunged into the mob's body. The Norn, being a spirit-type mob, recovered quickly from being off-balance, but the half-second it spent re-evaluating targets was costly. Just as it was beginning to turn towards Kirito and Asuna, both of them leapt back out of immediate melee range, and Nori stepped back in with a taunt technique that brought her staff down in a heavy overhand strike. The blow slammed into the Norn's shoulder, decrementing its HP slightly and regaining its full attention.

*It's just like any other humanoid caster mob, once you know its patterns and capabilities,* Kirito thought while he watched for the next opening.

The threat it poses hinges on being able to hit everyone with the Judgment of the Norns debuff to amplify its weak physical damage and dangerous magic. That debuff is bad, no doubt, but if you're quick and don't let it finish casting...

As if on cue, the Norn seemed to reach a point in its attack patterns where it was ready to try recasting said debuff. It barely got through the first word before Asuna struck it again with «Stinging Barb»; the fast technique cut off the incantation in progress and drew another screech and surge of aggro from the creature.

Almost immediately, however, the Norn began casting something else. "Yavuk iotsutakke zure—"

"Disease!" Kirito shouted, recognition clicking on the first word.

All of the front line had used their Interrupt techniques or spells too recently for them to be off cooldown; Kirito heard Burns switch from DPS to casting an Interrupt of his own, but the Norn finished first. "—mejuru tepnaga kwedan."

A virulent greenish-black AOE blasted out from the Norn at point-blank range, but although it was cause for concern, it wasn't the deadly threat that had nearly killed him before—not now that they knew what to expect, not with the Judgment of the Norns still neutralized and the party's Poison Resist fully buffed. As the wave swept over Kirito, Asuna, and Nori, the initial hit took perhaps a tenth of his HP, and a second later the DOT started competing with the regenerative effect of the HOT that Mentat kept recasting on them.

Kirito wasn't worried about the damage now, and from the way that his tank and partner unhesitatingly resumed their assault, neither were they. The three casters, positioned a safe distance away and spread out, didn't pick up the contagious DOT from their party members, and within moments Mentat had it cured and their HP back to full—no one had even needed to take the precious seconds to call for recovery spells or use their own items. The combined onslaught of magic and melee that hit the Norn then was enough to deplete the last of its first HP bar; Kirito saw the icon for «Haste» immediately appear next to the remaining bar, and right as it did, the swirling ends of Nori's staff battered the mob with the neon red tracers of a powerful taunt to lock down aggro.

"Repops any minute," Asuna called out, switching back out to let Kirito unleash a hard-hitting multi-strike technique against the Norn's armored back.

Kirito figured as much, but appreciated the reminder; it had been nearly twenty minutes since they'd cleared the first set of Graveworms in the room, and if anything he'd been expecting *something* to pop long before then. The End Frame of the technique Kirito had just used incurred nearly a full second of freeze time: he'd been banking on Nori being able to hold aggro, and wasn't disappointed. In the moment the freeze afforded him, Kirito called out his own warning. "Burns, overwatch; Xorren on DPS! Everyone else, Interrupt rotation ready!"
In response to his call, magic DPS from Burns ceased abruptly, while Xorren stepped in to pick up the slack with his Illusion Magic skill; the melee attacks against the Norn were so frequent now that the fading effect of Illusion damage scarcely mattered. It slowed down their burn rate a bit, but the wisdom of the shift was made evident only seconds later when Burns called out and locked down respawning adds in a near corner of the room. With the benefit of the Haste effect dramatically reducing its cooldowns, the field boss finally managed to finish casting Judgment of the Norns, and as soon as the deadly debuff appeared on his status bar Kirito backed out of the main fight and raced over to deal with the Graveworms that had just spawned.

Debuffed and Rooted by Burns, the trash mobs—balanced for a level-equivalent group or over-leveled solo player—didn't stand a chance compared to the Norn he'd been fighting. Three of them spat corrosive projectiles; it had been a decent attempt at bracketing Kirito so as to leave him nowhere to dodge, but as one of the lightweight races operating well below his encumbrance limit, he had another option. Already running at his fastest burst speed, he leapt forward and to one side, his momentum and the game's mechanics allowing him to run up and along the wall just long enough to evade the sizzling crossfire. Kirito was already charging «Hurricane Slash» as he ran; he kicked off the wall into a flip, landing so close to the nearest Graveworm that he could've reached out and touched it with his empty hand.

The cone-shaped AOE of the Wind-based technique he released then didn't knock back the firmly Rooted mobs, but it did stagger them momentarily; taking advantage of the opening without hesitation, Kirito stepped into the middle of them and executed «Rising Archimedes». The swift 360-degree slashing AOE cut deeply into all five of the Graveworms in an upwards spiral, and before Kirito had even landed he was already casting. The point-blank Illusion AOE erupted into a billow of dense black smoke around Kirito; the cloud was translucent to the caster but would severely inhibit the ability of the Graveworms to target him.

The massacre that followed bore a passing resemblance to dropping an enraged badger into a small room with a group of blind sloths; Kirito's sword turned into a silver-edged blur as he segued one light technique into another, avoiding anything with a long freeze time. One by one the Graveworms died to the music of shattering glass, and when Kirito finally burst out of the smoke cloud with nothing left alive inside of it, he saw the Norn's final HP bar deep in the yellow.

Kirito risked a brief glance at his own status; his HP was still well into green and rising from the slow HOT, but the Judgment of the Norns debuff was still on him. With the adds dealt with and all of the DPS in on the Norn, he assessed the danger to be manageable, and sprinted in to rejoin the fight.

"Took you long enough!" Nori called out without missing a beat in the rhythm of her evasions and counters.

"I was gone for like thirty seconds," Kirito retorted, raising his voice to be heard over the noise of clashing metal and the incantations flying from Burns and Xorren. "I'd like to see you solo five mobs that fast."

The Norn lunged forward in a grab with its claws; Nori ducked under the attack and slid the heavy end of the staff forward like a pool stick, striking the mob just under where its solar plexus might've been. "Challenge accepted," she said after a brief but smug grin, snapping the staff into position to block the follow-up blow.

The whine of a charging technique and a streak of blue caught Kirito's attention just as he closed within melee range of the Norn. "Chat later!" Asuna said sharply, drilling her rapier into the Norn's back and inflicting a brief Delay status on it. For just a moment, a smile of satisfaction touched her face. "Focus, everyone, we've got this!"
"Five seconds on Root!" Burns yelled from afar. "I can't get Silence to stick; it's gonna start casting again!"

"Dispel's still on cooldown!" Asuna called out.

"Same!" Mentat shouted. "Be ready!"

Kirito had lost count of how many times they'd interrupted or dispelled the buffs the Norn cast on itself; by this point he immediately recognized the opening of the Lightning-based Offensive Shield it used. "Serav tozabukke wemzul—"

If Asuna or Nori had anything with Interrupt off cooldown, they weren't using it—and Kirito thought the latter very unlikely. Asuna instead used the spare moment to shout a warning over the sound of the Norn's incantation. "Back out, Kirito!"

*Oh no you don't.* Kirito thought with fierce determination, aware of the speed at which the Lightning shield was beginning to steadily eat into his HP but seeing the Norn's bar going down even faster. *This time you're mine.*

For most of the fight, Kirito had been avoiding using his biggest techniques; most of them had lengthy windups and dangerously long freeze times. One of the heaviest of those was a twelve-hit elemental tech called «Heat Revolver», and it had been a while since he'd been able to use it. While the Norn focused the majority of its ire on Nori, he gritted his teeth through the tingling numbness from the arcing Lightning damage and held *Phantasmal Dirge* out to the side at a particular angle, the tip nearly touching the floor while crimson flames erupted along the edges of the blade.

"Kirito!" Asuna shouted with increasing alarm.

The *kiai* that came from Kirito's throat then was louder still. *One, two* went the first two strikes in a streak of steel, tracing a flaming V in the air and leaving glowing red welts in a similar shape on the Norn's back. The next six were delivered three to a side, as the system assist carried Kirito through whirling the sword in one hand and then passing it to the other for the next few pinwheeling strikes. The onslaught was enough to seize the Norn's attention and divert it from their tank, but with the mob's HP in the red Kirito was beyond caring about aggro.

Four hits remained in the lengthy technique; as soon as the system assist brought the sword back to his main hand, Kirito adjusted the angles of the next two alternating upwards slashes just enough to turn them into an effective parry against the Norn's melee counterattack, rebounding it back and giving him the opening he needed to try and finish the job. The red sliver of the Norn's status ribbon went down just a little more as a high-magnitude projectile from Burns kept it in its stun-locked animation, but before any further attacks could come in, Kirito whirled in a 360-degree full circle, the assist bringing his longsword around in a crosscut that bisected the Norn at the waist and then flowed up into position for the technique's biggest hit, a final heavy overhand chop that trailed fire.

Kirito knew that mobs weren't truly self-aware. Even something complex like Hel, he reasoned, had to be just a more sophisticated version of the same heuristic engine that evaluated combat states and drove the relatively simple AI of the game's computer opponents—including the humanoid ones that were supposed to try to be more tactical and use skills. But even knowing that, in the moment that he brought the blade of his sword down on the Norn's hooded visage he could almost imagine that he saw in its spectral eyes a recognition of what was about to happen. The powerful follow-through force imparted by the system assist carried the blade all the way down through the Norn until the edge bit deeply into the hard-packed dirt floor, and Kirito knew it was over well before he heard the iconic sound of the field boss shattering into thousands of short-lived fragments.
Only then did Kirito spare the attention to look at his own status again. Everyone else in the party seemed to be in decent shape, but his own HP was yellow; a glance at the actual numbers told him he was somewhere just above 40%. Not a comfortable position to be in, but it hadn't been close, either—he'd taken a calculated risk premised on an awareness of his own damage output and how quickly he could burn down the mob's remaining health. As he watched, the latest HOT from Mentat brought his HP up into the green zone above 50% with a soft chime in his ear.

The extra EXP and drops from getting the Last Attack were welcome; the former would help him make up some of what he'd lost facing his first Norn, and as for the latter—his eyes returned briefly to the Result window—he was not about to argue with a surplus HP Crystal, which was a pretty rare drop from anything but gateway bosses, and a ring with the name of «Azure Promise» had to be worth something once appraised, even if it wasn't an upgrade. Dismissing the window, he turned back to Asuna and was surprised to find her glaring at him.

*What did I do?* Setting aside that conundrum for a moment, Kirito called over to Burns. "Looks like we have confirmation that Caretakers are drawn to both mob deaths and player Remain Lights. Any more coming in response to that Norn we just killed?"

It took a few moments for the Imp mage to recast Detect Movement and take the measure of their surroundings. "Nothing moving that shouldn't be," he said. "But it took us clearing three or four Graveworm encounters before we got this one. Probably not a guaranteed spawn."

That made sense to Kirito; if Caretakers spawned or were attracted to every single battle that took place, he would've expected to encounter them—and Norns—far more often than was the case. As it stood, his group had needed to go out of their way to try to draw out their quarry by repeatedly clearing one room. If he had to guess, Kirito figured that players focusing on farming a particular area would be more likely to run into Caretakers they'd previously spawned, while those who kept moving would be long gone by the time any Caretakers arrived at the site of a previous battle.

With at least one mystery solved, Kirito gathered the whole party around in a relatively safe corner of the room where no mobs appeared to spawn. "The first time we went up against a Norn, we almost wiped. This time we wiped the floor with it. Great job, everyone."

"Except for the part where you went berserk at the end and nearly got yourself killed," Asuna said, her tone cross.

"That Lightning shield does a lot of damage with *Judgment* active," Kirito admitted. "But at a fixed rate, with no spikes; Offensive Shield can't crit. At the rate I was taking damage, there was zero chance for me to hit red before I took it down."

"I had an AOE heal just about off cooldown," Mentat put in. "I think he'd have been fine."

The look on Asuna's face told Kirito he'd be hearing more about this later; the look on everyone else's suggested they knew he would. He realized now, with the benefit of hindsight, that she'd been worried about him—her own HP had never dropped low enough to cause him any concern, but the reverse clearly wasn't true. He smiled a bit abashedly, trying for reassurance. "I'm sorry. I'll try to be more careful."

That seemed to have been the right thing to say; the expression on Asuna's face softened noticeably, and after a moment she gave him a nod. He turned back to the group then to find Burns grinning at him. The Imp gave him a breezy two-fingered salute before posing the question that was already on Kirito's mind—and, it seemed everyone else's as well.

"We're doing that again, right?"
Even with the farming group leader's map window expanded to its largest possible size, Tetsuo still found himself struggling to see it past all of the taller people gathered in the clearing at the peak of the hill where they'd stopped to rest. He kept having to rise up on the toes of his boots in order to see anything at all, and even once considered just using his wings—but that was likely to draw more attention than he usually preferred to have focused on himself in the presence of so many older players.

He supposed it wasn't strictly necessary for him to be able to see; the farming and clearing group leaders were all gathered at the front, and they were the ones who needed to know how to navigate—Tetsuo himself, as his group leader was fond of reminding him, just needed to know who to follow. But it was still annoying to feel left out and in the dark. Sighing, he tried to make up for what he couldn't see by listening closely.

"Here, here, and here," said Ziegler, the leader of the farming groups that Heathcliff's and Pyrin's clearing groups were assigned to protect and the party leader of one of them. Tetsuo couldn't see the movement, but he assumed the man had to be gesturing at points on his map. "We've been fortunate the last few days; the bloody nose you guys gave the keroppi on Thursday must've gotten them to back off and stick to their side of the river. Initial scouting shows some nice, dense spawns today. If our luck holds, we should be able to clear all the Lopers that are spawning in this grid, and the next northwards as well."

"Luck is not a faithful ally," Heathcliff remarked, the much-taller group leader standing not far from Tetsuo. "That said, between Seven's Searching and Detect Movement from our Wind mages, we should have advance warning of any Sylph parties that might be sent against us."

Pyrin, the leader of the mage group paired with Heathcliff's melee DPS group, spoke up then. "It sure turned the tables on their last ambush attempt pretty damn well," he said in a voice filled with confidence. "The frogs all have «Transparency», and they love using it to hide their cursors, but even true invis can't hide movement. I'll alternate with Osha so we can maintain 100% uptime."

As harrowing as the aforementioned ambush had been at the time, Tetsuo had to admit that Pyrin's point was a good one. Not only had Osha's detection spell successfully identified the incoming Sylphs as a source of movement for which Seven hadn't seen matching cursors, the catastrophic failure of the ambush and the losses the Sylphs had taken from it had taught Tetsuo's people a valuable lesson: look up.

Almost as if summoned by the thought, Tetsuo's eyes rose to one of the gigantic skylands that hung serenely in the sky, the nearest casting a broad shadow across the forest canopy below. The majestic floating islands had long since faded into the background of Alfheim's aesthetics and lost any sense of wonder they'd once held, but for the first time Tetsuo—and, he suspected, everyone else—saw them as a source of potential danger.

Not paying enough attention to the skylands had been either fatal or nearly so. None of them would make that mistake again.

Fortunately, just as for the past few days, the number of red cursors reported by Seven exactly matched the call-outs of movement from Pyrin's group. Seeming satisfied by this, Heathcliff released the farming groups to start clearing their assigned grids; Tetsuo let out a held breath more from relief than any necessity of respiration. The farmers began putting distance between their groups and the clearers so that the presence of higher-level players wouldn't reduce their EXP gain, while Heathcliff led his people to an elevated position where they could maintain overwatch on all the farming groups as the others spread out.
Lacking any detection spells of his own—his Wind Magic skill wasn't anywhere near high enough to cast Detect Movement—Tetsuo resigned himself to the waiting game, looking around for somewhere to sit and settling on a fungus-covered tree stump. *At least this kind of boring overwatch duty is better than fighting the Sylphs directly,* he thought as he sat down, hand on his mace to keep it from swinging where it hung at his side. *The last week has been just horrible.*

Heathcliff’s voice cut across Tetsuo's uncomfortable ruminations, bringing his gaze up briefly. "Seven?"

"Nothing but mobs," replied the scout, eyes glowing green with the activation of his Searching skill. Seventh Sun slowly turned in a circle, then glanced up in the direction of the massive skyland around which the morning sun was peeking; after finally looking over in the direction of where the two farming groups were supposed to be next, he gave a thumbs-up. "Other than the twelve green from our farmers, there's just the same ten reds conning low to me, most of them near Ziegler's party."

"Player cursors don't change color to show level difference," Pyrin put in. "If the cursors are conning to your level at all, they're mobs."

The explanation was superfluous after so many days of the same duty, but Tetsuo and every other Salamander clearer had sat through many hours of instruction from the mage leader; he was like that—he repeated information often to drive it home and make you remember it, and this was their first watch of the day. Osha ignored the aside and gave his own report after casting the detection spell. "Size and shape of movement matches Lopers. Everything else looks like animal life."

Heathcliff nodded. "Good work. Both of you keep an especially close eye out along the Willowbend, but don't neglect the skylands. Things have been quiet enough, but I still want to know the moment any player approaches, even a solo."

In the absence of something to fight, Kagemune dropped himself into a sitting position on the grassy hill beside Tetsuo's stump, checking his equipment status out of the same habit they all shared. "I can't wait to get back to the World Tree," he said unprompted, rubbing at the decorative metal brace that framed the line of his jaw. "Every day we spend here on babysitting duty is another day we're not earning EXP or any decent drops. We're gonna fall behind."

Nodding, Tetsuo gave his teammate a sympathetic look. "Tell me about it," he said. "I mean, in a way it's flattering—they want our best clearers assigned to protecting farmers and fighting off the Sylphs, and I guess that's us. Still…"

"Yeah," Kagemune said. "Still. We're not gonna _stay_ the best if this keeps up."

"Dunno if I'd be in such a hurry to hit the latest zone," said Denkao, their group's healer. The older man sat down heavily on a moss-covered stone that poked out of the ground like half of a potato. "I don't like the sound of that mob that's one-shotting people who PvP. Not many clearing groups with more PvP experience than ours."

Kagemune nodded along with Denkao; they'd all heard the same rumors. Tetsuo happened to be facing Heathcliff at just the right time to see an unreadable scowl cross his group leader's face. It was there and gone in a flash, but whatever Heathcliff's thoughts, they couldn't have been anything good. "Sir?" The word brought the man's head around to face Tetsuo. "You're still getting briefings on the clearing work, right? There any truth to that?"

"Truth to what? The rumors about the Norn Custodians?"

Tetsuo had heard other clearers talking about that field boss, but hadn't been able to remember the
name of it offhand; as soon as Heathcliff spoke, the words clicked. "Yeah, them. Is that why Corvatz still has us out here? To keep veteran PvP groups away from those things?"

Heathcliff half-turned away from the rest of the group long enough to pan his gaze across the forested hills where the farmers—now out of visual range—were supposedly working. "We, specifically, are here for the same reason as from the beginning: because we have the most experience repelling attacks from other players. As for the rumors of the Norn mechanics..." The frown returned to Heathcliff's face again, with an intensity of expressiveness rarely exhibited by their usually-composed group leader. "Until we have more evidence, I would treat the rumor mill with the skepticism it warrants."

Kagemune gave voice to the same thought that occurred to Tetsuo. "I dunno, the rumor mill seems pretty damn unanimous about this one. I heard it came from The Rat."

"Spriggans," Denkao put in. "Bunch of Spriggans in a new clearing guild, that's who told The Rat. A buddy of mine bought that detail from her on the cheap."

Kagemune snorted. "Figures that Spriggans would know if something hurts PvPers. Maybe it's just as well we're getting a breather after all."

Heathcliff was silent for a short spell, long enough for Kagemune to return his attention to tapping each piece of gear in turn to bring up their status windows. Tetsuo, however, kept his attention on his leader, wondering what could possibly have him so unsettled.

When Heathcliff finally seemed to become aware of and acknowledge Tetsuo's continued scrutiny, whatever thoughts had bemused him seemed to fade from his expression—or at least were set aside in favor of stoic neutrality. "Does it make sense to you," he said slowly, "that an explicitly PvP game—one in which players are encouraged to be in conflict—would contain a barrier to progression that explicitly *punishes* PvP?"

When Heathcliff put it that way, it *did* strike Tetsuo as a little odd. "Maybe it depends on what kind of PvP," he suggested hesitantly, reluctant to contradict his group leader. "I mean, there's what we're doing here, right? And then there's messed up people who just gank for the fun of it." The thought of the people who'd attacked Sachi and the other kids in the Sewers came to mind; Tetsuo didn't envy her or Silica what they'd gone through.

"In other words," Heathcliff said after a few thoughtful moments, "there is fighting, and there is killing." He nodded, favoring Tetsuo with a slight smile. "Plausible. It will be interesting to see the truth of it, once we return to clearing."

Optimism rose suddenly in Tetsuo. You could never be sure with Heathcliff, but it almost sounded to him as if their leader was privy to information they didn't have. "I hope that's soon."

Heathcliff's gaze went to the southwest, past the rock-strewn white waters of the Willowbend and in what Tetsuo presumed was the direction of the Sylph capital. "That depends on them," he said. "The *de facto* ceasefire of the last few days is a promising sign. If this is the way of things going forward, Lord Corvatz's gambit would seem to have been successful. Once we're certain our farmers will be left to do their work in peace, we can return to the World Tree."

The statement struck Tetsuo as being built on more than a few assumptions and hypotheticals. Nonetheless, hope was hope, and he was more than willing to indulge that hope if it helped get through the day. Kagemune had already returned his attention to his menu; from the movements it looked like he was sifting through his inventory or another list. Heathcliff's gaze fell heavily back upon the Willowbend, and this time the group leader's silence felt like a dismissal. Taking it as such,
Tetsuo got to his feet again and walked up to the peak of the bluff where Seven stood with Pyrin and a few of his mages, conversing while they kept lookout.

"It's a spell," Pyrin was saying as Tetsuo drew close, in the assured tones he usually used when lecturing.

A hint of green showed in Seven's eyes as seen from profile. When he panned his gaze back in Pyrin's direction for a moment, the eyes fairly glowed; Tetsuo had always wondered how Seven managed the level of focus it took to maintain Searching continuously like that. He glanced at Tetsuo, and nodded to him before returning his attention to Pyrin and replying. "You think."

"No," Pyrin said, robed arms folded across his chest. "I surmise based on the data we have. Every spell in the game, every manifestation, has the same ending sound as uthan. It contains all the right pieces to be a spell. And now we know you can interrupt a Norn when it's casting."

"You've heard," said Seven; apparently verbose conversation was not something he could maintain at the same time as Searching.

Pyrin took advantage of that to press his argument. "From reliable sources. I'll be putting that to the test when we're back in the World Tree—and I'll be brute-force testing the manifestation tonight when we get back to Gattan."

The bright green glow faded from Seven's eyes as his Searching skill dropped; he sighed and turned to Pyrin. "The next reliable Spriggan I meet'll be the first. You want to spend your evening trying to cast mob spells, knock yourself out, but all I'm saying is, let's not put lives on the line based on info we can't confirm."

Osha made a loud clicking sound with his tongue; his shiny red mohawk caught the sun as he turned his head. "Ten seconds."

That was Pyrin's cue to pick up the Detect Movement duties with the next magnitude off cooldown. "And how do you think we confirm that info?" he demanded. "By trying it ourselves, using sound methodology. Futto wilnachikkke hevatrul dweren."

Tetsuo couldn't cast even the lowest-magnitude version of that spell, or else he'd likely have been put in the same rotation, as one of the few Wind users in the Salamander clearing groups. Nonetheless, he peered off into the distance as if he could actually see the farming groups that they were tracking. From what he understood, someone using Detect Movement could see the moving objects as colored cloudy shapes, even if they didn't have direct line of sight. And with Seven keeping Searching up, the motions of any player using Transparency or Invisibility would stand out like a beacon for their lack of a cursor.

Seven actually didn't have Searching on at the moment; he rubbed at his eyes a bit before gazing back across the wide but shallow creek that trickled down from the north and fed into the Willowbend. "Twelve greens," Seven said after a pause. "Eight reds near Ziegler now."

"Getting tough to tell one blob from another at this distance," Pyrin said. "But the ones still moving are Loper-sized." He turned back to Seven, and resumed the argument in progress. "Anyway, this isn't faith or guesswork—it's science. The strat sounds like solid game mechanics, and more importantly it's detailed enough to test. Interrupt rotations are a known PvP tactic that just hasn't been needed with mobs, and I'm kissing familiar with how Dispel prioritizes what buffs to drop." He slapped the back of one gloved hand into the palm of the other to punctuate his words. "It makes sense. Range the AOEsl, strip buffs, protect players vulnerable to the debuff, it's all standard stuff— we just didn't have the details on how the debuff worked and how the mechanics fit together. Maybe
Osha was nodding along with his group leader—and as far as Tetsuo was concerned, Pyrin's opinions on the subject of magic were the next best thing to Sasha's, but without her linguistic background. Seven wasn't a mage and rarely took part in raids; he shrugged and seemed to be largely humoring Pyrin, who liked to talk and explain. The scout turned his attention back across the Willowbend, calling out the lack of player cursors there, which Pyrin cross-checked with the movement sources he saw before going back to what he'd been saying.

Tetsuo found the discussion interesting; he would much rather have been in the new zone they were talking about—anything but where he was and what he was doing. Seven was nodding along, but then frowned once he turned back in the direction of the farming groups, eyes narrowing. When Pyrin stopped talking in order to recast his spell, their scout took the opportunity to speak up.

"Something's wrong."

Pyrin waited for the momentary distraction of spellcasting to pass, and peered off in the same direction. "No new sources of movement. You sure?"

"Pyrin," Seven said sharply, voice suddenly rising in a tone that turned heads across both groups. "I only see five green cursors in Ziegler's group now, and six of the reds near them are conning flat to me. What the hell's going on out there?"

"A bunch of the Loper contacts are—" Pyrin's reply cut off there; Tetsuo saw his eyes darting around while he assessed what he was seeing. "Heath! Ziegler's in trouble! I think some of those Lopers were Sylphs in disguise!"

Lopers are territorial mobs, Tetsuo remembered suddenly, as he and his group immediately begun rallying to Heathcliff. You don't usually see more than a handful of them in one spot, and never as linked encounters. That wasn't a lucky spawn, that was—

"A trap?" Heathcliff said in response to Pyrin, his gray eyes taking inventory of his own party before following the mage leader off the bluff. Tetsuo and the others dove off moments after he did, taking advantage of the drop to gain acceleration, and only once twelve streaks of crimson light were propelling them towards the imperiled farming group did Pyrin answer.

"Probably a trap, yeah. Six of the cursors that conned like mobs a minute ago are now player reds; they were shaped like Lopers before, and now they're not." Pyrin glanced back over his shoulder for only a moment. "My money's on Illusion shenanigans of some kind. Nothing else I know can change a cursor."

"Still feel like trusting Spriggans, Pyrin?"

Heathcliff's voice was sharp, and rose to carry above the blast of wind. "That's enough, Seven! How close are we?"

Their flight had taken them up a side creek that fed into the Willowbend, and Seventh Sun's arm pointed at what Tetsuo guessed had to be its source. "Overhang with the waterfall!"

Pyrin's mage group slowed as the air filled with the sound of chanting, golden runes spinning around each of them while they cast their buffs. Heathcliff and the rest of Tetsuo's party shot past them, by long habit ignoring the visual effects and sensations as buffs took effect, and pulled up just short of the deep blue pool at the base of the modest waterfall, ready for a fight.

What they found was the aftermath of one. Three Salamander Remain Lights burned at widely
scattered spots in the clearing surrounding the waterfall; one of them was dwindling so quickly that it was clear it was about to expire within seconds. A mage Tetsuo recognized from Ziegler's farming group was crumpled on the ground with the icons for Silence and Paralysis on his status ribbon, twitching weakly while he tried to make his hand move to a pouch at his side.

Pyrin's healer was already rocketing towards the fading Remain Lights just as the oldest flickered and went out; after a look at how widely spaced the two surviving lights were, Denkao made a beeline to get himself in range of the furthest stricken player. Neither needed orders to know what they had to do.

Heathcliff, however, had different concerns. Once it was clear the fallen players were being attended to, he gazed off into the dark treeline with his shield presented, clearly ready to repel an attack. "Seven, Pyrin, their attackers had to have been here seconds ago! Where are they?"

"No player reds now!" Seven called out, Searching in his eyes while he turned in a circle.

"Whole party must've gone Transparent," Pyrin said, his own eyes alight with the more vibrant green of Detect Movement. "Hard to tell from ground level, but I think I've got them moving—"

From the direction of Pyrin's gaze, no one needed an explanation to know where the Sylphs had to be headed. "Hit and run," Heathcliff said, already bringing his wings back out. "They hit one farming group, then left to hit the other as soon as they got our attention here. My group with me!"

They found much the same outcome there, though thankfully they ended up losing only one player due to the quick response from the clearing group healers. The Sylph ambushers, however, were gone by the time the clearers arrived, and everyone knew that with the innate flight speed bonus Sylphs enjoyed, they'd never catch them. Most of his party members were raging about that, but Tetsuo was conflicted, and remained so the entire trip back to Gattan.

"Is it wrong to just be glad I didn't have to fight anyone today? I wish just our being here could've driven them off and stopped anyone from being killed, or that we'd showed up in time, but... where does this end? Do we have to have a clearing group escorting every farming group now, raiding up with them?"

Heathcliff hadn't had an answer for him on the way back, but when they all reported in to Eugene, Tetsuo's group leader ended up posing the very same question to him in all seriousness. The question seemed to weigh unusually heavily on the General, and Tetsuo noticed the man's fists tightening at his sides.

"I want to say yes," Eugene said slowly, his gravelly voice drawing out the words until they built up momentum. "For a variety of reasons, not least that it pisses me the fuck off that we can't seem to stop the frogs from murdering low-level farmers." There was anger in Eugene's eyes when he turned back to them, but Tetsuo didn't feel like it was being wielded at him. The General's gaze flicked to the side, taking in the three survivors of Ziegler's party—none of whom were Ziegler himself. "You're certain they looked exactly like Lopers? Cursor, sound effects, animation, everything?"

"I would've sworn on anything you like that they were Lopers," said a young Salamander with a set of short spears on his back. "Right up until the point where some of them went melty and turned into Sylphs. Next thing we knew our mages went down Paralyzed, Ziegler got OHKed by a sneak attack, and multiple AOE's started going off in the middle of us."

"Like I said at the time," Pyrin said, "it had to be an Illusion spell. I know there's one that lets Spriggans make themselves look like mobs. But I thought they could only use it on themselves."
Eugene nodded. "I've heard of the spell you're talking about. Phantasy something-or-other."

"Phantasmal," Pyrin said.

Eugene waved a hand at the correction. "Whatever it's called, we have to assume the Sylphs have figured out how to use it on a whole party."

He paused for a moment, a look of distaste crossing his face. "Or hired someone who knows how to do that. And there's no way to tell?"

"Not without Truesight potions," Pyrin said. "They'll do the trick for the farmers, but Truesight doesn't affect Searching or Detect Movement."

"But any mob could be an ambusher in disguise," Tetsuo put in, drawing a ripple of nods from the players to either side. "They'd have to keep the potions running constantly. Won't that get expensive?"

"There's that, but here's the real problem, sir," said the farmer with the short spears on his back, stepping forward and tilting his chin up slightly as he spoke to Eugene. "It's not that I don't appreciate you guys trying to watch our backs out there. But if we have to party up with clearers or have them hanging out within encounter distance, it's going to screw everything up. We won't get EXP, drops will probably be nerfed too, and the clearers will aggro or drive off nearby mobs, disrupting all their spawns and roam patterns."

"At that point we might as well not bother."

Eugene closed his eyes and shook his head, reaching up and pinching at the bridge of his nose. "All right. I'll chew on this tonight with Lord Corvatz, and see what I can come up with. Heath, Pyrin, stay reachable—I'll want you and the other homefront clearing group leaders with me for that chin-wag. I'd ask for the farming leaders too, but with Ziegler dead…"

"You three, come with me. We'll find you a new tank and mage, and I have someone special in mind for melee DPS. I'll explain on the way."

General Eugene hadn't explicitly dismissed the clearers, but it was obvious the debriefing was over when he waved the farmers over and turned to lead them out of the room.

Not for the first time, Tetsuo wondered what it would take to corral all of his riaru friends and run off with them to form their own guild or something. Sachi probably wouldn't take much convincing, especially now with that Cait Sith girl, Silica, rounding out the party. Keita had a group of his own with the NCC clearers, but Tetsuo knew he missed everyone from the computer club. He heard so little from Sasamaru these days that the boy might as well be a stranger, but Tetsuo had always been closer buddies with Keita anyway.

Ducker, Tetsuo thought as he meandered numbly back towards the room he used when he was in the city. We need Ducker. The younger boy drove everyone in their school's computer club to distraction half the time, but his hijinks and rambunctious good humor had also been the source of half the laughter in their group.

He was also the only member of the group that had never shown up in Alfheim Online, and laughter was something in painfully short supply these days. At this point it was almost easier to assume that Ducker was dead, or had never logged in.

I miss you, bud, Tetsuo thought, unequipping his armor and sliding beneath the sheets. He reached out and touched the lamp by the bedside, using its pop-up context menu to turn it off. If you were here, you'd probably be making General Eugene tear his hair out, but we'd all be cackling the moment he was out of the room. Then he snorted at his own thoughts. Yeah, right. The General
would've drummed Ducker out of here so fast his head would spin. No room for funny business in this guy's army. You follow orders or you're out.

There were times when he wondered whether that would be so bad.

Tetsuo closed his eyes and tried to think of something else, something that would let him get to sleep quickly. Sleep would bring morning, and when morning came, it would bring new orders.

He hoped they were better than the last ones.

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For once, Yoruko found herself almost wishing that she could indulge in Caynz's larping tendencies without feeling extremely silly. She wasn't religious in any fashion whatsoever, but it would've been nice to have one of those colorful Norse deities to thank for the fact that Parasel's weather wasn't anywhere near as bad as it had been the night before when her party had arrived in the city, soaking wet and desperate for a warm room.

As bad as that deluge had been, at some point during the night the spring showers must have run their course; morning arrived with brilliant sunlight filtering in through the curtains of the inn room they'd shared, momentarily dazzling her as soon as she opened her eyes. She felt a brief twinge of disappointment that Caynz wasn't there—going to sleep snuggled up against his bulk and warmth had been a taste of undiluted happiness in a world where so many of those moments were bittersweet. Flushing slightly at the memory, she glanced left to her notification column, but no PMs or any other icons lingered there.

"He must've woken up before me," Yoruko thought. "I kind of wish he'd stayed, or tried to wake me up, or sent a message even... but I guess you can't have everything.

Squinting against the rays of bright light sneaking between the gaps in the curtains, Yoruko rolled over to her other side—then emitted a noise that was almost a squeak when she saw Penny already awake, sitting on one of the bedposts and looking at her. The little Navi-Pixie gave a start of her own when Yoruko did, hopping a centimeter off the polished round wood of the post head before settling more slowly back down with a tinkle of her wings.

"Exactly how long have you been watching me like that, Penny?"

The Navi-Pixie closed her eyes and tilted her head slightly. "Two hours, thirty-seven minutes—"

"A while," Yoruko summed up, flopping on her back and staring at the ceiling with her arms spread. "Sorry, still waking up. I forgot you don't need sleep." A few beats passed with no response, and it occurred to her that this might be one of those times when she was assuming more than she should.

"Do you?"

"Not the way you mean," Penny said after a moment, rocking slightly on the varnished wooden knob of the bedpost while she spoke. "I sleep when there is no one to help."

"So you've said." Yoruko laced her fingers on the pillow behind her head, then turned slightly to look over at her pixie friend. "What does that mean, though? Do you dream when you're sleeping? What do Navi-Pixies dream about, anyway?"

Penny was quiet for so long that Yoruko wondered if the little thing had locked up or something, or that she'd asked a question that had broken the language system. "When we dream," she said at last, in a voice that sounded like a scripted line rather than conversation, "our essence returns to the Source at Mimisbrunnr."

"The Source?" Yoruko could almost hear the significance laced into the otherwise ordinary-sounding
word that preceded the unpronounceable name; she didn't even try to repeat the latter. "Is that where you come from? You and your… sisters?"

Penny nodded, the blonde bob of her hair swaying with the motion. "We are all connected to it, but distinct. Part of it, but apart, like fingers spread. Navi-Pixies are bearers of knowledge, and all knowledge flows through the Source."

"That sounds interesting," Yoruko said, sitting up and wondering if she'd just inadvertently stumbled upon some hidden bit of lore. Penny had certainly never spoken of any 'Source' in the past, even when questioned about her sisters. *I suppose it was a matter of asking the right question, as usual.* Her mind racing, she tried to think of what other questions might pry loose the knowledge her Navi-Pixie held within it—or, from the sounds of things, was connected to.

Yoruko knew that Penny was certainly more than just a helper, a pet, or a source of game information. Her tiny friend was more even than just an NPC companion—more than once, she'd revealed deep connections to the game world and even the ability to sense mob spawns and quests. With a rush of excitement, she wondered if this Source of which Penny spoke was an actual in-game thing they could find and tap into—a place they could go—or if it was just lore flavor wrapped around the fact that the Navi-Pixie had access to so much game data.

When she asked, Penny's tiny face took on an unusually solemn cast. "You don't want to go there, oneechan. It's not safe for you."

*Probably meaning it's very high-level. The words fairly spilled out of Yoruko then, one excited question coming after another so quickly that she feared she'd confuse Penny. "Where is it? Why isn't the place where you come from safe? Can we help? Do we need to level up? Are there quests involved?"

Yoruko had no idea how to interpret the expression that then formed on Penny's face. She'd never seen an NPC emote anything like it—there was a brief flash in Penny's eyes, and if she didn't know better, she would've thought her little friend looked *distraught*. She'd nearly decided that she wasn't going to get an answer to the battery of questions when Penny finally spoke, but even then the pixie looked apprehensive, as if she wasn't sure if she should be speaking at all.

"Throughout every part of Yggdrasil, the great rivers of the Elivagar flow like blood. All knowledge in Alfheim passes through these arterial channels, drawn up to Mimisbrunnr through the roots of the World Tree beneath Arun, and down from the other realms through the Bifrost and the branches of the High King's city."

What Penny was saying sounded like game lore, or a description she'd read beside a picture in some encyclopedia—not conversation, or even an answer to the question asked. *Caynz would be eating this up. Oh, I wish he were here!* Yoruko almost opened her mouth to ask for an explanation in plain Japanese, but the Navi-Pixie wasn't done.

"In this place where the Allfather himself gave an eye for a taste of the Wellspring's wisdom, those who would pervert that knowledge to their own ends have slain its caretaker and imprisoned the Eldest. Only when he is greatly distracted can we risk—" Penny's body language stiffened slightly, then, while her face relaxed into fixed passivity. It took Yoruko a few seconds to realize that this wasn't a normal interruption; she snapped her fingers in front of Penny's blank eyes, but got no response. "Penny? Penny? Did you glitch out or something?"

The glitch, if that's what it was, only lasted a moment longer; with a rapid blink of her eyes the life seemed to come back into the Navi-Pixie's face and posture, and she looked up at Yoruko in surprise. "Oneechan, are you okay? You're upset."
"Me?" Yoruko's voice broke with the exclamation. "What about you? I want to know more about the Source."

"I'm sorry," Penny said with a scripted shake of the head. "I don't know what you mean."

"The thing you were just talking about! Some kind of Source, where you and your sisters and all the knowledge in Alfheim and something something…" Yoruko hadn't understood all the words Penny had been using to begin with, and the details were fleeing from her as she spoke.

Penny cocked her head in a particular way, a quizzical look crossing her face. It was an animation Yoruko knew very well—a catch-all reaction that the Navi-Pixie, and most other NPCs as well, displayed when a player asked something truly incomprehensible or out of the NPC's scope. Desperately grasping for straws, she asked, "do you even remember any of the stuff you were just telling me?"

The look Penny gave her in return had the uncanny blankness only an NPC could manage. "Remember what, oneechan?"

Yoruko realized in that moment that she wasn't going to get anything else out of Penny right now. She gave the Navi-Pixie a slightly annoyed look, and then let out a long sigh. "Fine. I don't suppose you saw where Caynz went?"

"He said he was going shopping for supplies," Penny answered, fluttering up on dragonfly wings and landing in the purple waves of Yoruko's hair. "That was only a few minutes before you woke up."

That probably meant he was still shopping. Drawing open her menu and navigating quickly to her friend list, Yoruko pulled up Caynz's location and found his marker in the city's player trade square. Satisfied, she made quick work of equipping her gear and waited for Penny to slip down her blouse before heading out to find her boyfriend.

Finding someone Gnome-sized in the NPC-heavy crowds of Parasel oughtn't have been as difficult as it turned out to be; Yoruko found herself wishing she had the Searching skill so that she could see all the cursors in the area at once, not just those of the people she looked at directly—she was pretty sure that was how it worked, at least. By the time she got to the spot she'd marked on her map, Caynz wasn't there anymore; his marker had moved somewhere two streets over.

She couldn't take the risk of asking Penny to direct her, so after failing to find him there as well, and then running into things several times as she tried to jog with her map open, Yoruko finally stopped and dashed off a quick PM. 「I'm awake and looking for you. Follow the music.」

That done, she sat down on the nearest bench, raised her flute, and began to play.

Yoruko often used one of Bach's Partitas in A Minor as a solo warm-up; the wide range of notes it covered from low to high was a good exercise for her fingers, and the slow start at the beginning let her work herself up to the rapid-fire melody of the second movement. This time, however, she'd barely finished the sustained high note at the end of the first before Caynz found her, and when he did, he had the rest of the party with him.

"Hey sleepyhead," Caynz said, sweeping his cloak out of the way before sitting down heavily on the bench beside Yoruko. He gave her a mischievous grin that she caught out of the corner of her eye along the length of her flute, and she felt his arm settle around her shoulders. "Sorry I wasn't there when you woke up; I was hoping to be back before you did."
"It's my fault," Griselda said, rocking back and forth on her botheels slightly with her hands paired at the small of her back. "We got delayed by a few things—would you believe there's a guild of Spriggans at the LFG wall, getting ready to escort low-level players to Arun?"

Yoruko blinked slowly. She hadn't actually ever met more than a tiny handful of Spriggans in passing, but from everything she'd heard they were basically PvP mercenaries and treasure hunters. "That's… new?"

"It's something all right," Schmitt said. "Not sure I'd trust a bunch of them to watch my back, but it ain't my back they're watching, so."

"I don't know," Griselda said. "It kind of made me wish we were heading that direction today. Wouldn't it be interesting to travel with a group like that?"

"Maybe," Yoruko said, thinking that it just sounded like a bunch of players trying to do a nice thing. "Anything else exciting?"

"Well," Griselda said, "we did sort of pick up a quest, but it shouldn't take us too far out of the way."

"A quest?" Yoruko asked, lowering the flute from her lips and perking up with immediate interest. Quests were usually much better than the boring (and often dangerous) work of grinding mobs, with a big dump of EXP at the end and sometimes even unique rewards. "Tell me more!"

"A quest," Schmitt said, grinning with his own hint of mischief; that alone made Yoruko very suspicious, especially after what he said next. "Sort of."

"What he means," Griselda explained, seeming to stifle a giggle, "is that the NCC provisioner we shopped at asked us to do him a favor, and it's not far out of our way."

"I guess that's not so bad," Yoruko said, a little disappointed at there not being a real quest with a real payout involved, despite her words. "So why do I feel like I'm not in on the joke?"

Caynz looked up at Griselda, who in turn exchanged a glance with Schmitt. "It was a little weird," Schmitt said, which was probably the least surprising thing anyone had said on the matter so far. "He couldn't even tell us the name of the player we're supposed to be delivering to. In fact we're not even supposed to ask them who they are, or anything else. Just go to this house, knock on the door, and give this package to whoever answers."

"And that doesn't sound fishy to you?" Yoruko asked, since no one else had posed what seemed to her an obvious question.

"Of course it does," Griselda said. "But the Puca provisioner—Metro was his name, yes?—he let me examine the contents of the bag he gave me. It's just foodstuffs. Enough to feed all four of us for at least a week, looks like, but still just ordinary food. High-quality goods though; Metro must have a high Cooking skill and some very good recipes."

Caynze gave Yoruko's shoulder a squeeze, which got a smile out of her. "His colors were legitimate, my dear lady—full endorsement, so we know his guild is good for the fee once we get back to Nissengrof. He in turn must have given us his trust based on the colors Griselda displayed on her own tag."

Griselda clasped her hands before her and nodded. "It's all on the up-and-up. So you might say we're just helping out a fellow NCC professional with a delivery job... but isn't it a lot more fun to think of it like a quest?"
"At least we're getting paid for it," Schmitt pointed out. "We have to swing east to hit Penwether on the way back anyway, and the Forest of Ruin isn't too much further east of there."

Yoruko raised an eyebrow at Schmitt. "Well, if you're not afraid to go somewhere called the Forest of Ruin, I guess I shouldn't be."

"Hey!"

She knew she shouldn't tease Schmitt, but he spent so much time whining about one worry or another that it was sometimes difficult not to reach for the low-hanging fruit. Fortunately, Griselda opened her map just then and managed to distract him with a well-timed question about a choice between routes to Penwether. And as they began to make their way towards the northern gates of Parasel, Caynz revealed why he'd gotten up before her and spent the morning running around the market.

"I spotted it last night while the vendor was closing up shop," Caynz said as she gazed open-mouthed at the absolutely beautiful new flute that he'd bought, which he manifested from his inventory while they walked and flourished before her with a grin. He was clearly trying not to be smug about his find, and just as clearly failing. "You were busy talking with Griz and didn't see, and I didn't have the chance to get it then… so I was hoping he'd have his wares back out this morning."

"Oh Caynz, it's lovely!" And she wasn't just saying that; it truly was a gorgeous piece of work. Its context menu didn't list a creator, so it had to have been a mob drop or purchased from an NPC. Based on its appearance and flavor text, Yoruko would've guessed it came from a mob or dungeon; the white steel of the flute's joints were accented by deep blue lapis on the keys and barrel, as well as around the embouchure hole, which was delicately carved into Norse knotwork patterns.

Yoruko wanted to ask how much he'd paid for such a unique thing, but she knew that wasn't the sort of thing you were supposed to ask—and there wasn't much demand for playable instruments, so they tended to be on the expensive side. Instead she briefly brought out her wings to lift herself high enough to throw her arms around Caynz, planting a kiss on him in a way that was drawing far too much attention. She dropped back to the ground, face burning even more than his was.

"So I did good?"

The kiss that Yoruko had delivered was likely answer enough, but she gave him one anyway. "You did really good." She tapped the flute's context menu to make sure she wouldn't be taking a hit to her stats by equipping it—because it was too pretty to not play, darn it!—and nearly gasped out loud. It was not only an upgrade to the flute she'd been using for the past few months, it was a significant upgrade—and she almost met the requirements to equip it.

Almost.

Level 26, Yoruko thought. That's not so far away—a week with the new higher-level mobs, a few days maybe if we make good EXP on the way back home. "I'm going to have to level up to equip it, but now I can't wait. Thank you so much!"

Caynz was practically glowing with pride for the next hour; Yoruko was certain she could've used him as a beacon if she got separated from the group. Fortunately no such thing happened, and once they left the main route that had brought them across Undine lands, she was too busy taking notes on mob and harvesting spawns between pulls to worry about anything else.

It wasn't difficult work, not out in low-level overland zones like these, but it was mentally exhausting. It became even more so after she saw the zone change notification where they left the
Bonemoors and passed into South Kingfall Forest; it came at the peak of a hill where the land began to rise from sparsely forested marshland into a much thicker arboreal environment, where in some cases they literally couldn't see the forest for the trees. It forced them to slow their progress while Griselda and Penny watched for aggro mobs or other players with more than just the naked eye.

They hadn't encountered a single Spriggan during the lonely journey south—in fact, no other players at all within that faction's territory. The Kingfall Forest seemed just as empty of player life now as it did then, though under the thick, dark canopy it was just as possible that any nearby players were keeping out of sight, staying still, and concealing their cursors.

Yoruko had found it highly unnerving then, and it was just as much so now; the eerie silence, magnified by the way the dense forest blocked LOS and played tricks with acoustics, reminded her far too much of Snjarholt and its population of spiders. The creep factor was not helped by the frequent overgrown ruins that seemed to emerge from—and in many cases, support—the foliage in every other valley or clearing, dark entrances sometimes teasing at possible dungeons beneath the surface.

Caynz, of course, was having a blast with the ambiance. "I had a look through Parasel's library last night," he said, lifting an arm to push a thick branch high enough for him to duck under it. "They call it Kingfall Forest because thousands of years ago the Alf that lived in this region—"

"Alf?"

"Elves, basically," Caynz explained. "In this area they were divided into two warring forest kingdoms, each conspiring to assassinate the other's ruler. Legend has it that they both succeeded on the same day, and both kingdoms—now leaderless—fell into chaos, their people scattered. One of the books suggests that's what kicked off the Fall of Alfheim over a thousand years ago."

Yoruko had no idea what that was, but it sounded like typical lore to her; the usual sort of stuff that came from quests or item flavor text. "Pretty simple backstory, but I guess it's as good of a handwave as any for why Spriggan zones are full of crumbling ruins," she said, taking her attention off of her open map while carefully stepping over moss-covered rubble. The debris was the only sign some sort of small building had once stood where she did; heavily weathered orange rocks jutted from the ground in a right-angled shape that was just a little too neat to be natural. Once sure of her footing, her amusement caught up with her, and she couldn't help but smile. "You're talking about these things like they really happened, you know."

Before Caynz could respond to the gentle jibe, Griselda held up a hand in order to halt them all. "Detect's on cooldown," she said. Her eyes still shone with the visible effect of her Searching skill while she looked around in all directions; seemingly satisfied, she shifted her shield to her back and sat down on one of the nearby piles of rock. "Nothing aggro nearby. How about we break for a few?"

"Just as well," said Yoruko, finding her own seat and brushing some dirt away from it in an effort that was more token than meaningful. "I need to go back over my scratch notes and fill them out."

It was easily the most boring part of the mapping process for Yoruko, and she'd been putting it off all morning. Since she usually only had moments to add a new point of interest or label to her map, she'd fallen into a routine of quickly tapping a spot on the map, accepting the default icon, and typing a single character in Japanese that represented the kind of thing that spawned there, followed by a number indicating the quantity that they saw spawn.

By now she could do it in a couple of seconds while walking with her map open in front of her, but the tradeoff for that efficiency was having to take the time later to go back and edit all of these
"scratch notes", as she called them, to properly label the POIs and choose icons that allowed anyone else using her data to quickly distinguish visually between mobs, crafting nodes, or anything else of interest.

The mats they gathered on this trip were incidental; the party was well within their rights to keep whatever dropped. This rich set of data that she was building was what the NCC was really paying them for. It wasn't even a big deal that they were deviating east of their planned route; Chellok might even consider info on a relatively unknown NPC town to be as valuable as what they'd initially had in mind. It'd be worth the delay.

At least, that was what she said out loud. Privately, she had to wonder how Griselda and her husband managed to tolerate so much time apart, or why the woman didn't seem bothered by taking longer to return home.

They barely spent longer in Penwether than it took to top up their supplies and get directions to their next destination; given the dreary atmosphere they found in the nominal Spriggan faction city, it was a blessing. Even so, it was getting near to lunch by the time Yoruko received the HUD notification that she'd entered «Jan's Folly». It was an unusual name for what she thought to be an equally unusual-looking town—or village, or settlement, or whatever the correct term was for the modest collection of functional-looking wood structures in the steep-roofed vaguely Nordic style. The ancient stone foundations beneath those newer structures appeared to be all that remained of a small town that had once perched at the top of a sparsely-forested rocky slope.

A much larger ziggurat of the same orange stone was half-set into the base of that slope, buried by rockfalls and nearly overgrown by the thick forest canopy below. No stairs or ladders connected the town with the ruin below, but the bare timber frame of a large block-and-tackle pulley system overlooking a deliberately cleared area filled with crates and barrels suggested the necessity of bringing heavy materiel up from below.

It's an excavation, Yoruko realized as the took in the scene, eyeing a collection of digging tools being serviced by a Leprechaun service NPC in a thick protective apron. And there isn't any way to get up or down because everyone can fly, but they still need equipment to lift heavy things.

If it truly was an excavation or dig site, it wasn't one that seemed to welcome outside help. Most of the NPCs they passed—the majority of them Spriggans—gave the players suspicious, narrowed-eyed looks as they made their way through the wide streets of unevenly packed dirt. None offered them quests, or had any visual indicators that a public one was available.

Normally, entering a neutral town would be a relief for any player. Visiting another faction city like Parasel was exciting, but never far from anyone's mind was the fact that as visitors, they displayed yellow cursors to the players and NPC guards, and were not protected by the safe zone. Yet despite being in a safe zone now, Yoruko had to wonder just how safe the party truly was.

"Weird," Schmitt said after returning the stink-eye one of the NPCs had been giving him. "Usually NPCs don't give a shit about players unless you talk to them."

"That's not necessarily true," Caynz replied, his voice drawing Yoruko's gaze back up to him. "Anywhere you go, townsfolk will call out to offer one service or another, or to advertise some easy quest. Guards follow you with their gaze when you pass close enough. There's probably a reason for it that we'd know if we'd done the quests—every town has its own flavor and subtle differences if you're watching for them."

"Which of course you are," Yoruko said with a smile. She'd never really taken any special notice of NPCs or their behavior herself until she'd begun spending time with Caynz. He actually spoke to
NPC shopkeepers and thanked them for their services, even tried to make what sounded like small talk with them sometimes. The answers he got occasionally sounded to Yoruko like they were carefully phrased to be generic enough to pass for a valid response to any number of things, but there was no denying that they had more personality than she'd been assuming.

Schmitt seemed less confident than Caynz in their ability to trust the NPC residents. "You ask me, it's still weird. And I haven't seen a single service vendor yet other than that Lepu." He gave a derisive snort. "No wonder everyone in Penwether we asked for directions told us there was nothing here worth bothering with."

"Perhaps not," Griselda said, smiling at the NPCs they passed in what Yoruko thought to be a vain hope of thawing their reactions. "But we agreed to make a delivery, and I think we can weather a little local color long enough to complete that."

"Okay, so where's this house at?" Schmitt asked.

Yoruko looked around her, hoping to catch sight of any guideposts or other signage. Griselda seemed to have some idea of what she was looking for. "'End of the main drag,'" she said in a tone of voice that sounded like she was quoting someone, "'right by the foreman's office.'"

Caynz turned to the nearest NPC, an older Spriggan man in shabby sleeveless overalls. "Excuse me, good sir. Could you point us towards the foreman?"

The NPC stopped in place and carefully set down the crate he was carrying. "The foreman?" he echoed before pointing at a side street. "Can't imagine what you tourists would want with him or his useless layabout assistant, but you'll find him down yonder near the staging area. Big sign. Can't miss it."

Caynz gave the NPC a courteous bow. "My thanks."

The NPC snorted softly. "Yeah, anytime." Squatting low just long enough to lift the crate again, he continued down the street without a further word.

Griselda gave Caynz a brilliant smile. "Well done!" she said as they started in the indicated direction. "Makes me wonder if I shouldn't try talking to them more, myself."

Schmitt snickered. "Sure, if you like conversations that end with awkward silence and puzzled looks."

"I thought that was your social life?" Yoruko said after an impish smile, pre-emptively ducking behind Caynz.

Schmitt turned red. Caynz started laughing so hard that he actually stumbled and had to lean against a fence for support, providing no cover to her whatsoever. Griselda looked like she really wanted to join in, but wasn't sure it was right to do so at the expense of one of her party members. There were a few moments where Yoruko started to question whether she'd crossed the line, until finally the red-faced expression Schmitt was wearing dissolved into the stifled snorts of someone who was trying really hard not to laugh.

Once they knew where to look, the NPC was right: it was impossible to miss the foreman's office. They would've found it sooner or later just by wandering through the small town; it stood out by virtue of being the only building that was more than a single story tall—as well as being the only one they saw with a sign out front proclaiming what it was, printed in English block lettering.

"Foaman," Griselda carefully sounded out. "Metro said 'shokuchou'. Is that what that means?"
That confirmation drew everyone's eyes to the small house to one side of the larger building. It was modest for a stand-alone dwelling in Alfheim, but by Tokyo standards it looked about the size of a 2DK apartment; Yoruko would've loved all the extra space when she was growing up. Penny was fidgeting a bit within her tunic, but she didn't dare let the Navi-Pixie out—not here in a town, especially not when they were about to meet another player.

Yoruko tilted her head slightly. "Is this it?" she whispered, figuring Penny could probably tell if there was another player in the building.

She'd been expecting confirmation; what she got was silence and more fidgeting. Puzzled, she lightly tapped her tunic where she could feel the Navi-Pixie's lump. "Penny?"

Griselda was already ascending the few short steps of weathered cedar to the door, tapping at her menu. "Let me set my badge and we'll find out. If it's an NPC, we can just walk away." Her gloved knuckles rapped at the door with a thick sound.

There was no answer at first; glancing back to the others with a shrug, Griselda knocked again. Penny's fidgeting resumed in earnest, and Yoruko leaned her head down towards her collar once more with a sigh before whispering. "Penny, I know you're trying to be subtle about telling me something right now, but we're in a safe zone. Short of invisible spiders, can it wait?"

Yoruko felt Penny squirm her way up to the tunic's collar. "Oneechan, there's no danger but something you really should know—"

Penny didn't get a chance to finish before ducking down and cutting off in mid-sentence. There was the sound of bolts clicking from the door just before it opened a handspan, revealing a suspicious gaze peering out from the other side under shaggy ash-gray forelocks only a few shades darker than his skin. The Spriggan boy's ice-blue eyes went up to where Griselda's status ribbon was; whatever he saw there made him visibly relax slightly and open the door a little more; a yellow cursor popped as soon as he came fully into view. He made a circuit of the party with his gaze then before looking back at their leader, still clearly nervous. "So you're legit. Okay. What do you want?"

Knock on the door. Give the package to whoever answered. Don't ask any questions. Yoruko remembered the curious instructions the other party members had mentioned; Griselda clearly did as well, for she bowed to the boy and asked nothing. "I'm Griselda, with the NCC farming guild Golden Apple. Metro hired us to make a delivery."

"Oh good," the boy said in a more friendly tone, opening the door a little further. He rubbed at the back of the simple woolen cap covering his unruly hair, grinning. "I'm starving. NPC food tastes like ass."

Schmitt snickered. Griselda held her bow for a moment longer and then began working in her inventory, manifesting a large bag. While she handed it over, Penny crawled up and hid in the back of Yoruko's hair. It was ticklish; she had to fight not to squirm. Danger or no, whatever the Navi-Pixie had to say was important enough for her to risk discovery.

"Oneechan," Penny whispered, so close to her ear that she was almost touching it. "That player has a Navi-Pixie."

Of course Penny would know, Yoruko thought, unable to stop herself from staring at the Spriggan boy in shock. The boy seemed to notice the weight of her gaze, and stared back. After a few
moments, his eyes widened. An awful realization struck her.

*If my Navi-Pixie knows, his does too.*

Before Yoruko or anyone else could speak a word, the door slammed shut.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note 12/1/18:

That took so much longer than it ought to have done, and I really blew it this year on the anniversary thing. There's not much I can say that hasn't already been said. I'm sorry for the wait. I could have published all but Yoruko's segment on time, but that's a very important part of the chapter, and I didn't want to release without it.

Life is getting better. I have hopes that will lead to a rekindling of my creative energies. But that's been enough of a struggle for the past few years that I'd rather not make any promises as to timeframe for the next chapter, other than that it won't be anywhere near as long as the last.

Love and gratitude to all.
"«Delegation» allows leaders of a guild or faction to grant elevated permissions to any individual or role group (q.v. «Roles»), allowing other players to perform administrative actions in their stead. Delegated permissions can be inherited by the other player's role-defined subordinates, or further granted to anyone else on an ad hoc basis by a player who has also been granted the «Delegation» power itself. Most powers can be delegated, and at a granular level once «Expert Mode» is enabled—from relatively harmless privileges such as the ability to send group announcement messages, to core functions such as law enforcement, alliances, and city/faction projects (q.v. «Projects). Because of the potential risks, newly-elected «Faction Leaders» are automatically prompted to approve all permissions directly delegated by their predecessor, and are strongly encouraged to review who is inheriting which permissions from whom in turn..."

—Alfheim Online manual, «Power Delegation»

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Griselda jerked her head back as the heavy wooden door slammed shut centimeters from her face. The thick, loud sound was still echoing off the walls of nearby buildings when she felt the tip of her ponytail settle back to the nape of her neck, and for several long seconds she could do nothing but stare stupidly at the simulated wood grain as if she was expecting to find meaning in its flowing lines.

The sun was still bright where it hung in the sky, but irregular drops of light rain had begun to fall straight down from the scattered clouds above sometime in the last few minutes. One of them kissed her forehead with a chilly pinprick, jolting her out of her stupor with a stray thought: I've about had my fill of this soggy east-coast weather. Freelia was so much nicer—really, at this point even northern snow is better than being wet half the time; at least I'm used to that.

Pushing aside the distraction, Griselda refocused and found herself still staring at the closed door in front of her. She wasn't hurt, nor even upset; confusion reigned over all other possible reactions. Just moments ago, the young Spriggan boy who'd answered the door had been grinning affably and making off-color jokes about how uninspiring most NPC food was—which if nothing else was a completely fair observation, and one with which she could sympathize. Then he'd seemed to glance at something behind her, and suddenly looked like he'd seen a ghost—

Griselda turned, eyes tracing the path the boy's gaze had taken. Yoruko, standing behind her, looked nearly as shaken as he had; the Puca girl was staring wide-eyed, frozen like a rodent who'd just sensed a fox. Griselda caught a subtle motion in the wavy purple hair behind one of Yoruko's pointed ears, easily mistaken for the work of a momentary breeze. No wind blew; the rain was still coming down as straight as a bamboo forest. Did he catch a glimpse of Penny or something? If so, that reaction seems a little... extreme.

Schmitt clapped his gauntleted hands together with a sharp metallic clash that was loud in the quiet street, and made both Griselda and Yoruko start slightly. "Welp, cha-ching. Now that our delivery's done, how about we get the hell out of this creepy little pocket of nowhere?"

Griselda was, for once, inclined to agree with Schmitt's earnest desire to be elsewhere in a hurry. Caynz was hunched over so that he and Yoruko could whisper to each other, which ceased when they noticed the other two party members looking at them. Yoruko lifted her chin and looked back
up at him with a defiant set to her lips.

"I won't go, my dear lady," Caynz said, looking pained. "This is unwise."

Schmitt, unsurprisingly to Griselda, interjected immediately. "What is?"

"Caynz," Yoruko said, a slight edge sneaking into her tone.

The pained look on Caynz's face redoubled. "Yoruko, please. You can't ask me to just leave you here alone with some strange Spriggan."

"I'll have Penny," Yoruko said in a smaller voice, looking down at her feet.

Caynz looked away from her gaze; Griselda could almost read the words he wanted to say to her, so bold were they on his face before he turned: does Penny really count in this case? Uncomfortable with the tension she could feel in the group, she made a slight throat-clearing sound. "My friends, is something the matter?"

Yoruko's eyes met Griselda's for only a moment before she and Caynz looked at each other meaningfully again. When she turned away from him more fully and faced the rest of the group, her expression and voice were filled with determination, and she bowed deeply. "I need all of you to please... do something else for a few minutes. Somewhere else. Explore the town or something, just... please give me some privacy."

Griselda reached out and laid a gloved hand on the younger girl's shoulder, which brought her gaze up. "Of course, dear. Schmitt, Caynz, why don't we go see if we can scare up some easy local quests? There's bound to be someone who needs a bundle of wood chopped or some mundane errand run to another NPC in town, and I wouldn't say no to a little extra coin or EXP."

There was a building not too much further along the cliff-edge street that looked like it might have been an inn in a former life; despite the cold and ramshackle exterior, warm illumination bled from the two streetside windows and spilled out over the shaded veranda, and the fuzzy movements of cast shadows behind the curtains suggested more than a few inhabitants. She began heading in that direction, as it—and more specifically, the bar or innkeeper—was the most likely starting point for any local quests.

Stay safe, my friend, thought Griselda with a glance back over one pauldron, ostensibly to make sure everyone else was following her. Yoruko and Caynz held hands by the fingertips as he slowly backed away, then turned to follow Griselda. Understandable worry creased his young face. I'm not sure what's going on, but I have to trust that you know what you're doing.

Thus she wouldn't have admitted it out loud, in the privacy of her thoughts Yoruko was at least able to acknowledge to herself that she had no idea what she was doing.

Okay, that's not literally true. I'm standing in the rain on a doorstep in an NPC town in the middle of nowhere, hoping that the guy who freaked out when he realized we both have Navi-Pixies is willing to open the door and talk now that I've shooed away my entire party, including my boyfriend. I just don't have a real plan for what comes after. What if this Spriggan's a total creep? Or he has PvP set in his home? Either—or worse yet, both—were far too plausible possibilities. She hadn't met many Spriggans until visiting Penwether and didn't know any personally; they weren't all that common in Nissengrof.
Just stay out here and everything’s fine, she reminded herself. He can’t grab you and drag you in without going to jail, and out here you’re in a neutral safe zone where nobody can take damage. Just stay calm.

Several minutes passed with a gradual darkening of the sky, dissonant with the sunlight she could still see in the distance where it fell on the lower-altitude forest covering the coastal flatlands. A fuzzy terminator made the sunlit canopy look like a shaft of light cast across a dark green shag carpet by a half-open door; from the darker sky directly above her the rain intensified, spurring her to pull the hood of her traveling cloak up over her head. After what seemed like no time at all it relented again, then resumed the leisurely sprinkle that didn’t seem to do much other than keep most of the roaming NPCs idling under cover.

Yoruko had no such shelter; the steps rising from the muddy street were bare to sky. A lumpy roll of canvas stretched between twin jutting structural beams above the doorway, pulled tight against the edge of the roof—as if the makeshift awning it had once been was too ashamed to come out and do its job. Dirty water ran down the spine of the roof to the ends of said structural beams; from one of those it fell in a thin trickle just past Yoruko’s shoulder and dug insistently into the weathered wood steps with a staccato rhythm like a soggy woodpecker. Her fingers went to her flute where it hung from a chain at her neck, nervously fidgeting at the keys as if to play a silent song to comfort her nerves.

No one understood—not even really Caynz, though she knew he tried. Yoruko didn’t think anyone truly could. She loved Penny, but being the only person she knew to have something precious was also a terrible burden. Part of her, sometimes, wanted to go to the middle of the market in Nissengrof and let Penny out for everyone to see, endure the days or weeks of questions—just so she didn’t have to live with the near-constant anxiety that came with keeping the secret. Being able to tell Caynz, and then Griselda and Schmitt finding out—at first that, too, had been a burden of worry, but that burden had quickly transformed to relief at no longer having to hide Penny from the people closest to her. They knew. She trusted them. They just couldn’t understand what it was like, the craving to talk to someone else who shared the same burden. Nor could she explain it to them—not without betraying this boy’s secret, which when it came down to it wasn’t even hers to tell. It would be so much simpler if she could, but even though she didn’t even know the boy’s name, it still felt like a breach of privacy. She trusted her friends, but would she trust someone else’s if their positions were reversed?

The chill she felt at the mere thought told Yoruko the answer without having to think about it very hard. The way she shivered then might’ve been that, or it might’ve been the way some of her clothing was starting to feel damp in spots where it wasn’t covered by her traveling cloak. For all she knew, the Spriggan boy was never going to open that door as long as she remained.

"He’s still there," Penny said in her ear, unprompted. "He's just as scared as you are."

"I know," Yoruko said quietly, miserably. Or rather, she felt like she knew, and couldn't be sure whether that was real or just her empathizing with him. She imagined the boy standing just the other side of the door, with no peephole to peer through, whispering uncertainties anxiously to his pixie the way she was with Penny. "I just wish I knew what to say, or could at least get my foot in the door."

She reached out and gently rattled the handle, a wan smile touching her lips. "Kinda wish I knew how to pick locks right about now."

"The door is sealed by player ownership, not rental," Penny said, reverting to more NPC-like neutral tones. "It would require a «Lockpicking» skill of at least 800 to even attempt entry."

"I'll get started grinding that right away," Yoruko said without any bite behind the sarcasm. Then another thought occurred to her, more out of frustration and curiosity than seriousness. "What about
She could feel Penny's little headshake stir the hair behind her ear before she went on in the same sterile tones, as if she were a recording in an encyclopedia entry. "Completing Laegjarn's Locksmith generates a successful Lockpicking effect on the target equal to 50% of your «Song Magic» skill level. That places an upper limit on the level of locks it can affect, even buffed."

Yoruko hadn't really expected to play her way out of her situation, although the thought made her absently finger her flute again, lightly tapping out the fingering for Takemitsu Tohru's *Air* to settle her nerves. In any event, all this nonsense about picking the lock was beside the point: if the boy didn't want to talk to her, she wasn't going to change his mind by breaking into his home. And even if she succeeded it would be an act of stupidity worthy of a side character in a horror movie. She gave a heavy sigh. "Never mind."

She'd almost given up and decided to rejoin her friends when she heard a sharp *click*, barely distinguishable from the wet patter of the roof runoff hitting the steps. The door cracked open, once again just enough to reveal a single wary eye underneath unkempt light gray hair. The gap expanded, small fingers in open-tipped black gloves slipping around the edge of the door and pulling it further open while their owner looked around the empty streets furtively before stepping up to the threshold. "Awright, copper," said the boy after having determined that they were alone, not looking much more relaxed despite his breezy manners. Yoruko almost had to double-take when she realized what he probably meant; she'd never heard anyone refer to a policeman as *ohkami* outside of her father's *yakuza* movies. "Ya got me. Who sent you, and whattya want for your silence? 'Cause I gotta say, I don't exactly have Yuld falling out of my pockets." He plucked at the lining of one, trying to turn it out for demonstrative effect before discovering that the game engine didn't really model the fabric of inner pockets that way.

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Despite the tension in the air, Yoruko couldn't help but let out a nervous giggle at his reaction once she felt Penny squirm out onto her shoulder. The pixie was still mostly concealed by the hood of her cloak, but had to be clearly visible to the boy right in front of her, who calmed down quickly but didn't shed much of his visible trepidation. "Kari was right," he said so quietly it was barely more than an exhalation; he might not have even known he was talking aloud. His eyes went briefly upward in the direction of his HUD as he spoke. A pair of shining eyes peeked briefly out from under the boy's wool beanie, but they were still standing at the threshold of an open doorway, and the pixie who was almost certainly hiding under his equipped headwear didn't venture further.

"I didn't believe her at first, ya know—she told me she's got some sisters, right, but I've never met any of them."

"Have you looked?"

He grimaced. "Not really. No offense, but I kinda… avoid other players. In this game, anyway."

There was a catch in the Spriggan boy's voice when he said that, and the tones in which he spoke the words were thick with some flavor of sadness. Yoruko could well imagine why. "I avoided parties for the longest time myself," she admitted, reaching up and brushing a wet lock of purple hair away
from her face. "I was so paranoid someone was going to find out about Penny, once I read the system message that explained how unique and special she was. But the guild I travel with, my three friends—they all know about her."

At the boy's look of panic, Yoruko hastily reassured him. "I didn't tell them about your pixie, though. Her name's Kari, right?" When the boy nodded, it occurred to her that she hadn't properly introduced herself, and she bowed slightly at the waist. "My name's Yoruko. My Navi-Pixie's name is Penny. It's nice to meet you."

The Spriggan boy chuckled nervously and looked down, shifting from one foot to the other before giving a matching bow, one hand needlessly held to his cap to keep it in place. He had to be a teenager somewhere around her age. Maybe a little younger; the grayscale tones of his faction's hair and skin gave him a deceptively wizened appearance, but his wide face still had the roundness of baby fat that hadn't quite fled from adolescence yet, and his voice threatened to break in one of the strong breezes that occasionally channelled down the street. When a few moments passed and he still hadn't given her a name, she struggled with her confusion, and then just looked expectantly at him with raised eyebrows.

Yoruko had never seen someone give so much visibly turbulent thought to what name to offer in a simple greeting. "Um. Well, Kari calls me niichan, but I'm pretty sure you're older than me and uh... ooookay yeah that's a no." After correctly interpreting the look on Yoruko's face, he looked down and shuffled his feet for a moment. "Uh... maybe Makoto? I mean, that's the name my mom gave me, but nobody except her ever calls me that."

Yoruko didn't respond immediately, struggling with an awkward uncertainty of whether the strange boy was making some kind of joke or even trolling her. "I guess you can, though," Makoto said after a few beats, covering his own palpable awkwardness with the faux-lofty air of someone granting a great concession.

"You'd... rather I call you by your riaru name that nobody uses, instead of your character name?" It wasn't out of the question; she knew players who'd used their actual names for their characters—it just struck her as a very confusing, almost backwards choice for someone so obviously desperate for privacy, and her curiosity got custody of her mouth before her wits could have their say. "Why go to the trouble of picking a pseudonym if you're going to go by your given name anyway? What's wrong with using your character name?"

She'd been worried the nosy question and her big mouth would put an end to her acquaintance with this very strange boy, who sounded like he'd been going out of his way for a very long time to minimize his interactions with other players as much as possible. Makoto seemed surprised in the first moments after she'd spoken, and Yoruko was certain he was going to duck back into the house and slam the door shut again.

What she hadn't expected was for him to break into snore-like snickers, and then to full-body laughter that left him leaning against the door frame in a stagger, hand going to his cap to keep it in place. "Oh gods," he said in between hitches of his chest. "You have no idea. Also, fuck Kayaba sideways with the World Tree. You hungry?"

"What?" Yoruko wasn't afraid of indulging in Kayaba-bashing on general principles like some players she'd met; she didn't buy into silly paranoia like thinking that the man was actively eavesdropping on what everyone in the game said about him. The string of apparent non sequiturs, however, threw her even more off-balance than she already was. Instead of answering, Makoto glanced towards one of the protruding support beams that was piddling rainwater past his shoulder, then reached up and gave it a sharp smack with the butt of one
gloved hand. The brief, shuddering creak of wood against wood heralded the deployment of the heretofore-retracted awning, which unrolled at the tips of hinged supports that swung out from the door frame. The whole rickety assembly bounced once, a spray of droplets fanning out across the street in a spectacular particle effect, like a dog after a bath. It sagged in the middle, but did a fair job of shielding half a tatami mat's worth of the front steps from the light rain.

It also changed the course of the runoff from the roof. Yoruko, her gaze drawn high by the sound of the awning chunking into place, had the opportunity to watch the game's fluid physics simulation conspire against her in realtime. Visually persuasive rivulets ran down the edges of the canvas at the beck of gravity and met at their lowest point, welling up there for a moment before depositing a stream of rainwater atop the hood of Yoruko's cloak, which she wielded with a flinch and a duck just in time to avoid getting it right in the face.

*Be cool. I will not scare him off by making a fuss about this.* Yoruko could feel the water running down the back of the cloak, but her gear was well-made for northern weather, and she could tell the dampness wasn't going to penetrate. Still, she squinted one eye shut and looked up with the other, pulled a screwed-up face, then made a bit of a show of stepping just far enough under the awning to be safe.

Makoto, face half-covered with one palm, laughed nervously. His hand dropped, and he sank to a sitting position on the top step, slouching against the now-closed door. He made jerky menu-provoking motions with his fingers; momentarily a wrapped bundle of food appeared in his hands. When he unwrapped the package, Yoruko thought she recognized some of the provisions they'd just delivered.

"I need noms," Makoto said when Yoruko didn't immediately react, raising a sandwich to his mouth and proceeding to attack it as if afraid it might despawn. It took far less time than Yoruko would've thought, even for someone with a mouth as wide as his; while she waited she pulled the rim of her hood down a bit to better conceal Penny, then turned around so that she could carefully take a seat beside him on the steps.

"Did you ever," the Spriggan boy said between aggressive mouthfuls, "get the urge to do something really stupid, just to see if you could?"

*If you only knew.* Several examples came to mind that she wasn't about to share with a boy who was still basically a perfect stranger. What made it out of her mouth was far more discreet. "Yeah?"

"Suppose," Makoto said slowly, after the sandwich had been decimated down to a few bites held freehand. "Just suppose you wanted to see how much the game's censorship filter would let you get away with in text boxes, even if it got you a tempban."

"I, uh… wouldn't?"

"Heh. Well, I did. On launch day, just for lulz, right? Y'know… before anyone knew we were stuck with all our choices." The boy made a stupid face and mimed flailing his hands, limp-wristed and feckless, at an invisible keyboard. "So what's the first thing the game makes you pick after you calibrate and log in?"

"Your n—" Yoruko cut herself off there; she'd been led by the nose to something so painfully obvious that she couldn't finish the sentence. Instead she asked the first thing that came to mind, voice a bit softer now. "What did you type in?"

Makoto gave her a look of uncomfortably direct scrutiny, and when she finally looked back at him just as directly, his plump cheeks darkened and he averted his eyes. "Never mind," he said. "It's
freaking humiliating and no one else is ever, ever gonna see it. But it was there every time I looked up, 'til Kari told me how to turn off my status bar. Worse, it's on any invite I send—*bam.* He smacked the back of one hand into the other's palm with alarming suddenness. "Right there, like you just went slumming on 2chan."

Yoruko hadn't the first idea what the last comment meant. But she had quite an imagination, and the kinds of things she could imagine fitting in the character length allowed for a player name—even with only *romaji* allowed—were bad enough already. "You couldn't just… you know, make a new character? Before everyone got...?"

Makoto shook his head. "Nope. Dunno if you ever tried to log out for a snack or something on the first day, but we were all mega-boned as soon as we logged in. It was a roach motel—once you're in, you can't leave. So I couldn't reroll a new toon, and none of the GMs were responding. Sooooo... I basically checked out."

"Checked out?"

A plosive, zooming sound accompanied a sharp motion from the boy's right hand as he gesticulated past Yoruko's face. She ducked back slightly to avoid getting smacked by the ballistic swoop of his hand and bumped her head on the door; he seemed oblivious to the near-collision. "*Pow. Ran and hid from everyone—even the buddies I was supposed to be meeting for launch shenanigans. Then came the big teleport, and well...*" He pursed his lips, raspberried ridiculously, and made an expansive gesture with the upturned, spread fingers of both hands, fanning them up and out like the toadstool of a nuclear explosion. "I mean, have you *been* to Penwether? It's basically the smoking butthole of Alfheim."

Yoruko had seen the dreariness of the Spriggan faction city for herself exactly once, earlier in the day in fact. She winced in sympathy—living there must be like living in one of Alfheim's dungeons, all overgrown and crumbling. The boy's whole ordeal was, in some ways, self-inflicted—but that didn't stop her from empathizing with what it had to have been like.

"Yeah, now add in this secret mini-*imouto* that no one else seemed to have and someone would probably gank me to get." His smile was half-grimace, but the words still kept spilling out, as if the story were something he'd been holding in like a full bladder. "But Kari wouldn't let that happen. When I found this place, she told me how to quickly grind rep with the foreman here and get hired as his assistant, which—*spoiler warning*—isn't actually a job. Just a chain of mostly-easy quests that got me a permanent place to stay."

There were certainly worse ways to end up in this game, as far as Yoruko was concerned. It sounded like a dreadfully dull existence, though. "You don't get bored here?"

Oh, he did; she could tell. There was no hiding the hunger for human connection that she could both hear and see in him. It clashed noticeably with the nonchalant shrug the Spriggan affected. "Naw, the NPCs aren't bad company once you do their questlines and learn how you gotta talk to them—actually, some are almost like people. Kari also helped a bunch with that."

After all the gloom thus far, Yoruko was grateful for another reason to smile and find common ground with this boy. "Penny helped keep me safe, too. She's a huge source of game information, and weirdly insightful about other players. I honestly don't know what I would've done without her."

Yoruko felt the pixie stir next to her neck when named, and raised her gaze slightly to Makoto's beanie cap, trying to figure out where Kari was hiding based on the lumps in it. "I'm glad I ended up making friends and joining a guild, though. I can't tell you how much of a relief it's been, having a party I can trust to keep Penny's secret. And my boyfriend, Caynz—he's been been so supportive, it's..."
really wonderful. I didn't realize how much being isolated had been wearing me down."

The smile on Makoto's face faltered briefly when Yoruko mentioned Caynz—or, she supposed, more likely at the mention that there was in fact a boyfriend-person in the picture, regardless of the name or form attached to him. It occurred to her that his willingness to open up to her probably wasn't just that they shared a rare but dangerous secret—she could well be the first real girl he'd seen in half a year. She didn't want to lead him on, and worried that she was doing so unintentionally.

But it's not just that I'm a girl, Yoruko thought. He's really lonely, period. Has he really had no one to talk to but NPCs most of this time? I'd go mental!

She leaned towards being an introvert herself, as did a lot of the friends that she'd had in band before joining Alfheim Online, but that was too much isolation even for her. Makoto wasn't like that, and she could tell—he was practically bursting with the need to talk and make jokes; there was an outgoing goofiness that clearly shone through the embarrassment and bitterness the game had layered onto him. His self-imposed hermitage was clearly one of necessity, not nature. She wondered what the personality of his Navi-Pixie was like, and whether she was as real as person to him as Penny sometimes was to her.

Yoruko glanced off in the direction that her party had gone, then up at her HUD to check the time. They still had a long trip back to Nissengrof, and progress was only going to get slower once the afternoon sun began to dip behind Yggdrasil's canopy and the dwindling light forced them to travel with more care. Caynz and the others hadn't emerged from the inn yet, and she appreciated that they were giving her space—but she knew that as a group they dared not linger too long here. If they delayed too long, they could end up having to detour northeast and stop for the night in Domnann instead of pushing on to Nissengrof.

It was unfair—she had so many questions! She longed to be in some kind of private place where she could let Penny free and watch the two pixies interact—but even if she trusted Makoto enough to walk blindly into an indoor zone he probably controlled, there just wasn't enough time. And who knew when she might be back in this part of the world?

"It's okay," he said with a dismissive wave once the moment of awkward silence stretched to an uncomfortable length. "You gotta go, I get it."

"I wish I could stay longer," Yoruko said, and meant it. "Maybe sometime you could come north and visit Nissengrof? It's a huge underground city where everyone's welcome. I've seen Spriggans there before, and this morning I saw a guild of them in Parasel doing a caravan to Arun. If you're low-level I bet you could find a passage there." She paused, thinking on whether to say what came to mind next; she decided to risk it. "Maybe you'd find some of your riaru friends there too?"

It had been the wrong thing to say; she could tell. Makoto frowned and studied his feet again. It was better than headlong flight, and after a moment he nodded. "Maybe," he said. "I dunno what I'd do about my name, though. My old gang probably hates me for ghosting them. I can't party up for travel, add friends, send PMs, or anything else without being a laughingstock. Any guild would know what a flaming shitlord I am the moment I applied. What's the point?"

Yoruko was quiet for a few moments, unsure of exactly how to express what she wanted to say until the thought had fully formed. She chose her words carefully. "Do you need any of those things in order to have friends?"

When no answer came after—she checked her HUD—nearly a minute, she nodded as if he'd said something. "You don't, do you?"
The beanie shifted slightly, and this time there was no mistaking the tiny head adorned with brunette odango when the pixie briefly peeked out from under one side of the cap. "Niichan, those other players are approaching again."

Both players looked towards the inn where the rest of Golden Apple had gone; there was a faint rise in conversational noise as the door opened and Griselda emerged ahead of the others. When Yoruko turned back to the Spriggan boy, he was already coming to his feet, and she did the same. Before he could go, she reached out and snagged his sleeve with one finger. "Hey, if you ever want to come visit Nissengrof… or just send a message… my name is Yo-ru-ko. Spelled exactly like it sounds. I'll make sure I'm not blocking PMs."

The boy hesitated, and then gave a little bow of his own. The sound of Griselda's laughter drew both of their gazes in that direction again, and this time he placed his hand on the doorknob and waited for it to click open. "I'll think about it," he said quietly.

That was, Yoruko reasoned, about as good as she could hope for. She bowed respectfully. "It was nice meeting you, Makoto."

She did not fail to notice the way he visibly cringed when she spoke his name aloud for the first time. "Yeah, you too, Mom. But, uh… can you do me a favor?"

Wariness briefly flared. "What kind of favor?"

A disarmingly sheepish look crossed his face as he glanced aside at her. "Hearing my riaru name kinda reminds me why I've always hated it. I don't want anyone I know to find me here, but if you promise not to spread it around, you can use my usual nickname."

"Which is?"

There was a long, heavy moment of consideration before he replied. "Ducker. My friends always called me Ducker… and I'd like it if you were a friend."

The bows the two of them exchanged this time were deeper, and held just a bit longer than necessary. With an apprehensive glance towards the approaching party, he quickly slipped through the doorway and shut it behind him with a sound that was heavy with finality.

Griselda and Schmitt had stopped a respectful distance away. Yoruko waited a moment longer, her thoughts full and disordered. She gave a quick little wave when Caynz met her eyes; he smiled nervously and rushed towards her.

She could tell he wanted to barrage her with questions, but from the wordless workings of his jaw, seemed to have trouble deciding where to start. She reached up and pressed a fingertip gently to his lips. "Later," she mouthed. The affectionate gesture was slightly undermined by the brief appearance of a transient icon in her peripheral vision, warning her that she'd tripped the anti-harassment system. She ignored the annoyance as best as she could and held the finger there until Caynz smiled and nodded, reaching up and swatting at the air before closing his hand over hers.

"There were quests on offer after all," Griselda said as the party made their way out of town, followed by the hooded gazes of the Spriggan NPCs. "But the ones that don't require local rep would've involved going down into the ruins, and we don't really have time for that."

"Pity," Yoruko said, throwing a look back over her shoulder at the receding town. "I bet there are a lot of stories in this place that we don't know about."

She couldn't spare the attention for long; their route took them along a narrow path that wound...
around the north side of the hill beyond the town. The only reason they weren't already in flight was the need for the rest of the party to top off their wings, and even that necessity passed before they were all the way around the hill.

Jan's Folly and its hilly environs fell away like miniature models as Yoruko and the rest of the group took to the air, disappearing behind the multi-colored haze of the flight trails they left in their wake. Within moments, there was no way to tell the town from any other set of ruins in the zone: one bit of dark orange among many spotting the verdant blanket of the forest.

In retrospect, Kirito knew that the duel between Nori and Kramer had been inevitable. He wasn't even surprised to find out that they'd met before, even though they hadn't partied together—the two Spriggans both filled the same tank role in parties and used similar weapons, though the style of Kramer's glaive leaned on its weight and aggressive moveset, while Nori's staff skills largely revolved—often literally—around evasion and deflection.

It's practically the opposite of when Asuna dueled with her, Kirito mused, evaluating the gear the two had equipped with a careful eye as each took positions on the manicured lawn surrounding the Grand Gazebo. Nori's staff is an AGI/STR weapon, while bladed polearms like Kramer's are almost all purely STR-based. In this fight, he's the one with the advantages of weight, priority, and reach. She's not going to be able to just stand there. And indeed, the moment the countdown finished, Kramer shifted his glaive into the pre-motion for a quick strike and rushed Nori, clearly intending to bowl through her like a freight train if she let him.

Unable to hold her ground, Nori did a nimble hop-step around the first few jabs and slashes from Kramer, who didn't seem inclined to give her any breathing room until his onslaught came to an end with a sharp blow from the butt of Nori's staff slamming into his armpit as he overextended. The low woodwind sound of Kramer's wings reverberated as they blazed into existence and carried him back out of the way of her follow-up. His gaze darted almost imperceptibly upwards for a fraction of a second to assess the HP loss before returning to his opponent.

Kramer confused Kirito. He'd thought that their previous parting of ways had been a final one, given their disagreement on the Friendly Bias cursor mode requirement. Since then, though, the older boy had started showing up at some of the increasingly-regular evening dueling events. Xorren had, apparently, managed to talk him into giving the clearing effort—and now, the new guild driving it—a second chance. Kirito had had no objections to sending him an invite; now a newly-minted guild tag, monochrome and nine-pointed, was visible on Kramer's status ribbon when it popped.

"Hey," Coper said, ignoring the fact that he'd become just as distracted as Kirito had once the duel started. "I asked you a question."

Kirito fought to suppress a sigh; it would only make things worse with the other Spriggan boy standing beside him. The Nori-Kramer duel was such an interesting fight from a technical and skill standpoint, and Kirito had really been looking forward to seeing how it shaped up.

It'd be nice if I got to watch it, he thought before turning his attention back to his very irate faction leader. He couldn't help but monitor the two combatants out of the corner of one eye as they maneuvered for advantage, but he could tell Coper was already staking out ground somewhere on the south side of pissed, and was making dangerous forays into the territory of livid. Drawing a deep breath, Kirito tried to salvage the situation.

"I didn't consult you because I didn't think I needed to," Kirito explained. "You told me to organize the clearing groups however I wanted, and according to your former party members, you weren't in
any hurry to throw together a guild of your own. I'd be happy to give you an invite." He made as if to open his menu.

"That's not the fucking point!" Coper seemed to at least be trying to keep from exploding at Kirito in public, but although he wasn't yelling, his seething vehemence was not a whole lot more subtle. "I'm the Spriggan leader. I should've had some say in the stupid-ass name at least, and I should damn well be one of the guild leaders."

So that was it. After the series of increasingly heated PMs they’d exchanged, Kirito suspected that Coper's annoyance—or at least a big part of it—really did come down to his bruised ego. This was a problem that needed nipped in the bud sooner or later, and sooner was better.

"No," Kirito said, slamming a verbal door shut on the notion. "You're the last person who should be forming or leading this guild."

"Now you listen—"

"Coper!" Kirito snapped, down to what felt like the very last dregs of his patience. The word, accompanied by a sharp gesture at the air, cut the other boy off before his voice could rise further and turn a private dispute into a public one. They were already drawing curious looks from a couple of nearby onlookers who’d gathered to watch the duel and were getting a sideshow in the bargain; he deliberately lowered his voice before continuing.

"When you asked me to lead your clearing groups, you said you'd asked me because I have a good personal reputation with other factions, and you don't. If we put you at the head of this clearing guild, it makes you, personally, the face of our efforts—which is what you said you didn't want."

Coper's gaze shifted sharply just as a particularly loud metallic impact tolled through the air, drawing Kirito's attention as well. Kramer was in the midst of sliding backwards several meters from a blocked attack of some kind, grass spraying away from his boots while his wings flared wide. Planting the blade of his polearm in the ground behind him, he kicked off and swung around the weapon as if it were a vertical axle, landing on his feet and bringing the glaive down overhand as he ripped it free from the dirt.

When it became clear that the exchange of blows wasn't going to decide the duel, Kirito's and Coper's eyes lingered on the action a moment longer, then met again. "Maybe," the other boy said after a pause that involved a fair bit of scowling and jaw-twitching. "But I don't see why that means I can't be a leader in the guild. It's not like anyone doesn't already know I'm the faction leader. The point was to keep my rep from hurting relations with other clearing groups, not pretend I don't exist."

"Right," Kirito said, bordering on exasperation. "And if that's so, then how does it make sense to make you a leader in the guild whose only purpose is to organize our clearing groups? It's a risk, so there should be a benefit to doing it—but if there is, I'm not seeing it. Other than stroking your ego or letting you invite whoever you want, that is."

Coper chewed on the question, largely rhetorical though it was. From his grimace, he didn't seem to like the way it tasted. "All right. We'll do this your way for now. But you'd better start giving me more say in what's going on."

"That's not going to happen. Kirito's eyes narrowed at the implied ultimatum. Right. You're still trying to pull off this plot you cooked up with the Salamanders. You just can't come out and say that, because you don't know that I know, and you're trying to be sneaky about tying us to them."

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"When you asked me to do this," Kirito said evenly, "I agreed because you told me the clearing groups were mine to manage, that I could take or leave whoever I wanted, and that you'd back up my decisions, not try to backseat game us. Are you going back on our deal?"

When Coper had no easy answer, Kirito knew he'd scored a critical hit. His suspicions were confirmed when the other boy eventually grated out a reluctant no. "I just don't like the way it feels like you're cutting me out. You've pretty much been avoiding me completely."

"No, there just hasn't been a need to meet in person," Kirito said, wishing that they were having this conversation somewhere private. "I send you PMs every day to keep you informed about important things, like the farming and clearing group schedules, and the Undine co-op groups."

Only after the expression on Coper's ash-gray skin darkened further did Kirito belatedly realize that he'd shut the door on one source of drama only to open another. "Yeah, about that. What part of leading the clearing groups gives you the right to make alliances without asking me?"

Kirito had had enough, and just barely managed to restrain his anger with an effort of will. "Did I miss a day where you delegated diplomatic permissions to me? Because I don't remember making any formal alliances, and I'm pretty sure that has to be done in person."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

Kirito tried to keep his feelings out of his voice and off of his face, but his irritation at Coper was making it a struggle. "Well, there was this part where we got the Undine leader to let Spriggans back in their territory, made their patrols stop attacking Spriggans, and told their clearing groups to start working with ours. But that can't be what you mean, because that's the sort of thing you told me to do."

Rather than concede the point, Coper avoided it and tried to change the subject. "And I'm sure your Undine girlfriend had nothing to do with that."

A slight flicker in the direction of the other boy's gaze told Kirito that Coper had noticed his fist tightening in anger at the implied attack on Asuna's position in the guild. "Actually," Kirito said, his voice dangerously low, "Asuna's months of experience as a senior clearer and diplomatic ties to her faction were extremely helpful in bringing Diavel and their clearers around. Because of her help, Spriggans have gone from being hunted on sight in Undine territory, to officially welcomed. Was there some part of that you had a problem with?"

While Coper looked away, briefly distracted by the ebb and flow of the fight in progress and unable to come up with a response, Kirito pressed the advantage. "Look, the Undines were our biggest diplomatic problem—some of us used to hunt them, and you know as well as I do what a risk it was every time a Spriggan had to travel between Penwether and Arun. They don't trust you, but they trust me and Asuna. She's not here because she's my girlfriend—she was that before the guild. Which is only sort-of true, looking back in retrospect. But still. She's here because we need her skills and credibility."

"And not mine?"

Kirito took a deep breath to regain some calm and organize his thoughts. Asuna was still off at Lisbeth's getting her gear serviced, and he tried to imagine what she might say to someone in a situation like this to get them on-side. It's probably better that she isn't here, actually. I need to get him off this subject, and I need to make him feel like I'm not completely shutting him out. He stepped around the other boy, forcing him to turn away from the crowd in order to continue talking.
"You're doing important work here, Coper. We need you in Arun to keep coordinating volunteers, supplies, and services—you have the treasury and project access, plus you're good at logistical details and that kind of one-on-one Charisma-stat stuff, and I'm not. But when it comes to things where reputation matters…"

"All right, all right," Coper said, relenting with a sigh. Kirito himself was tempted to sigh in relief; he'd been afraid that his faction leader was going to make a stand and fire him if his demands weren't met. *Interesting that he backed down so easily. He must think his position is extremely precarious, or that he needs me more than I think he really does. I wonder if he's getting marching orders from someone... and if so, what they are.*

Kirito wasn't sure what would happen if Coper publicly opposed him or tried to replace him; the guild was so new that there was every chance it would fall apart. He wasn't even sure that he'd be entirely unhappy at having that pressure off of his shoulders, but knew that wasn't an inner voice he wanted to listen to.

What he wanted to listen to, and ideally watch as well now that they'd settled that dispute, was the rest of Nori's duel with Kramer. He wasn't sure what Xorren had said to the other Spriggan tank to get him to change his mind, but it had allowed them to start up a second full clearing group, and in the morning they were all going out together for the first time. He'd never actually gotten the chance to see Kramer in action before the man had declined to join his party the first time, and he had defended against bladed polearms before so he had a fair idea of what to expect... but he still didn't want to miss this.

The fight was surprisingly close so far; neither combatant was far below three-quarters HP. At the moment Kramer was warily circling around Nori's mostly-stationary form with the tip of the glaive pointed at her center of mass. The shaft, long as a man was tall and twice the length of the blade itself, was held high above his head in what Kirito recognized as an offensive stance. He jabbed out once freehand, producing no reaction, spun it into a quick diagonal downwards slash that Nori slapped away with a twitch of her staff. With no hesitation, he then shifted his grip low and changed the angle of the polearm until it began to glow yellow. The technique lashed up and out a fraction of a second later, a quick strike that drove the point of the meter-long blade straight at the target's head.

Kirito saw the trap; Nori did almost too late. A thrusting strike to the head was incredibly trivial to defend against, requiring only a slight lean to one side or the other, and anyone who watched Nori fight for more than a minute could tell she was economical with motion. Nori did exactly that to buy time to bring her staff back up to a ready position, clearly preparing to punish the miss.

When the system-assisted motions of the weapon jabbed the blade past Nori's head in a miss, trailing a streak of warm light, the glow of active power did not leave it; the shaft rolled 180 degrees in Kramer's fingers and the claw-like hook on the back of the blade snagged Nori's shoulder as he pulled it back for the second strike of the two-part technique.

It was a sneaky move; if the blade thrust missed, the hook had a good chance of striking the opponent's neck or head as the glaive withdrew, and with the system assist and a good STR stat behind it, could even result in yanking them off their feet. Nori had moved just quickly enough to avoid the critical hit and takedown that would've caused, but she still took a small loss of HP from the glancing blow.

Ducking low, Nori swept Kramer off his feet with the heavy head of the staff, taking him in the ankles during the technique's brief freeze time. He caught himself with his wings before he could fall and used them to lunge aggressively forward, beginning a heated exchange of rapid-fire blows that brought their weapons together again and again, almost too quickly to follow—at least, not without
reflexes honed by months in VR doing exactly that. Colored tech tracers and the sounds of clashing wood and steel were still fading when they separated moments later, with Kramer backing off and watching for another opening.

It had been exactly the kind of thing Kirito had been looking forward to seeing, and he was just beginning to enjoy himself again when Coper ruined the moment. He felt a finger poke him in the shoulder, and the other boy waited for Kirito to look his way before crossing his arms and deploying a stubborn wall of side-eye. "So... since you're such a bridge-builder with other factions, why've you been turning down all the Salamander help I've sent your way?"

As he tracked the martial dance of the combatants with the automatic part of his attention that was honed by months of survival, Kirito found himself wishing—and not for the first time—that he were part of the duel rather than a bystander. *At least in combat, I know what the rules are and how to tell allies from enemies. I know how to maneuver for tactical advantage, and where my blind spots are.*

Every time he interacted with Coper—even looked at him—it was hard for Kirito to not think about Argo's warnings. It wasn't just a suspicion, she somehow knew that Coper—working with Burns—had been a key player in a Salamander plot to assassinate Yoshihara and bring the Spriggans into their alliance. Coper had, indeed, sent him both freelance Salamander clearers and even a party that claimed to be a back-bench Salamander scouting group willing to work with him. Some of the freelancers had been good prospects, to be sure, and he hadn't rejected all of them—but not all had been willing to change their cursor modes. At least one of those had turned out to be a former privateer, as had two members of the full group.

The conversations following the discovery of these details had been…

*Lively,* Kirito thought with a note of sour humor. *Let's go with 'lively'.*

"How much Salamander help have you sent me that I can even use?" Kirito asked, once his thoughts had settled enough to have some idea of what to say. "I told you we're doing background checks with Argo. You know Friendly Bias is one of our rules. We've turned away bad eggs regardless of what faction they're from, and most of the players you've sent my way have been just fine." The evening sun was in his eyes; he used it to point southwards. "But in case you missed it, there's a war going on between the Sylphs and Salamanders again. If we're going to work with other clearing groups, we can't risk getting pulled into that, or being seen as favoring one or the other."

"So basically," Coper said, seizing on the point as if he'd arrived at some kind of brilliant insight, "you've got rules that go for everyone equally. It just so happens they mostly filter out Salamanders." The pause that followed had to be intentional, and for effect. "And me."

Preventing Coper and Burns from packing their ranks with Salamander ringers hadn't been the specific goal of making privateering a black mark for applicants, but Kirito had to admit he wasn't unhappy with that being a secondary effect, either, no matter how ironic Coper's own past made it. Such history wasn't an absolute ban, but it—and whatever explanation the player provided, if any—weighed pretty heavily for both Kirito and Asuna, and for what he thought were damned good reasons.

Nonetheless, there wasn't really a way to explain that to Coper without giving away the game, and he grimaced slightly, briefly at a loss.

When Kirito didn't have an immediate reply to offer, Coper piled on for advantage. "And come to think of it," he added with a glance past Kirito's shoulder, "to someone else you've got no problem working with. Maybe you should figure out why that is."
Kirito was still struggling to think of how to answer that challenge when Coper turned and walked away, gesturing with one outstretched arm as if dropping an invisible mic at his feet, then taking to the air in a shallow arc towards the city center shortly thereafter.

Face burning, Kirito turned back to the duel in progress, but found that it didn't really hold his interest now. He was aware of the movements of the participants and their spatial relationships to him, and he knew that at need he could summon his weapon and spring into action, had it been a real conflict. But the part that would've taken joy in the spectacle felt hollow inside him at the moment, and while he couldn't avoid paying at least some attention to the fight, it was at best a distraction.

There were only a handful of Salamanders in the sparse crowd that had been gathering after the calls of "duel!" had passed through the nearby streets; Kirito had no difficulty picking out Mentat's gold-trimmed sanguine robes despite the fact that he was seated. The man had his peaked hood pulled up over his head, and didn't seem to notice Kirito until he'd walked around to the front of the bench.

In an unspoken invitation, Mentat moved the crooked length of his staff until it was no longer partially blocking the seat beside him, resting the dormant orelight crystal head against his shoulder. "Evening, Kirito. Something on your mind, or just here for the show?"

Taking a seat, Kirito leaned his elbows on his knees and loosely clasped his hands in front of him, thinking about how to broach the subject. While he'd been looking away, the extremely close fight had apparently concluded with Nori edging just barely below half-HP, and unless he missed his guess, both of them were now looking at each other with increased respect. Burns was waving over the next pair of players waiting to use the Grand Gazebo; it was becoming known as an evening meeting place not just for the friendly duels that a fair few of his guild members seemed to enjoy, but for other players who had similar interests. He hadn't realized there were so many.

Once it was clear that the next duel wasn't going to start immediately, Kirito made a throat-clearing sound. I wish Asuna were here. She'd know what to say in a situation like this. But it has to be done... and if I'm going to lead this group, it's something I'm going to have to learn how to do. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

The sound and the words drew Mentat's gaze to the side just far enough past the edge of his hood to catch Kirito's eye. "Now that sounds like the prelude to a conversation one or the other would rather not be having. Am I wrong?"

"Depends on what you think that means," Kirito allowed. "You know how we've been interviewing a lot of new recruits the last few days?"

"Hard to miss," Mentat pointed out. "Guild roster's growing pretty fast. Two full clearing groups now that Kramer's back, at least twice that in farmers or other stringers." He gave a faint smile. "Not bad for less than a week's work."

It was more than Kirito had expected to get from Mentat, and he took a moment to consider the feedback before moving on. "Recognize anyone you've partied with before?"

Mentat's orange eyes grew briefly distant as he searched his memory. "A few, perhaps? There was a Cait archer who once filled an empty slot in our party, former clearer of theirs I think—he stood out."

Kirito tried to remember the name of the new guildie in question, and felt bad for not being able to do so. Again he keenly felt the inadequacy of his life experience to the challenge at hand. I can remember obscure details from video games or programming languages I haven't touched in years, he thought. I ought to be able to keep track of all of these names! He pushed aside the twin distractions of self-doubt and the mage duel that had started, and tried to focus on what he really
needed to know. "Anyone else? Any of the Salamanders we turned away?"

Mentat blinked in clear confusion. "There have to be over three thousand people in my faction, Kirito, and I haven't worked with their clearers in a dog's age. I'm not sure why you'd think that I would know—" He stopped there, and something in his long features hardened. "Unless you thought we had something else in common."

Okay, enough of this social maneuvering stuff. I'm just going to come out and say it. Mentat's a grown man, and I have to hope he'll take it like one. Nonetheless, Kirito's voice was pitched for only the two of them, far below the din of the new duel. "You were a privateer once."

The look that Mentat gave Kirito then was sharp enough to cut. He shifted his staff to his far shoulder, and turned towards him sitting slightly sideways, one knee drawn up on the bench so that they could face each other. The short span that followed in that way wasn't quite a staring contest, but it gave Kirito an uneasy sensation on the back of his neck not unlike the one he got when he thought a player or mob was targeting him. "What do you think you know about me?"

Kirito did not miss the deliberate choice of phrasing. "I guess that's really the question, isn't it? There's a lot we don't know about each other, Mentat. I know you're a really good healer. I know you've never given me a reason to doubt you're anything other than a great guy and a valued party member." He tried to decide exactly how to phrase Argo's intel. "But I'm told that the Salamanders paid and supplied you as a privateer. You have to know why that's a concern."

All throughout, the mage's face had been impassive, stony. Kirito gave Mentat a breath's pause to see if he had anything to say, and when he didn't, added one more thing. "What I don't know is what you did or didn't do. That I want to hear from you."

For a time, he wasn't sure he was going to get an answer, or even a visible response. Mentat's face seemed tightly controlled; occasionally there was a twitch at his jaw betraying the turmoil below the surface. Slowly, carefully, he spoke, gaze hard and direct. "We wouldn't be having this conversation if you thought rumors and records carried more weight than your own experiences. But you're presuming an awful lot, to act as if an explanation is something that I owe you, as if I'm some new recruit you're interviewing. No one in this party has ever challenged you to justify your past, despite the certainty that you have one. Nor to my knowledge have you demanded the same of my friend, who has killed before."

It might well have been the longest string of words he'd ever heard from Mentat that weren't spell incantations. The mage leaned forward very slightly, and although his arm was draped casually around his staff, Kirito at that moment felt like he was facing an opponent over the whisper of steel than a party member over equally quiet words. "Before I tell you anything, you tell me, Kirito: what makes you think you have that right? Any reason I shouldn't just walk right now?"

With difficulty, Kirito tried to look at this from Mentat's point of view. The difficulty came not from any deficit of empathy, for that was something that he was self-aware enough to know he had in abundance. The struggle was one of information, or more specifically the lack of it. The laconic mage before him was far from an enigma—they'd partied together for nearly a week now, after all. But he never shared personal details, and rarely joined into group conversations. Kirito just didn't know enough about him to get past the privateering thing and put himself in Mentat's shoes, precisely because the man was easily as quiet, withdrawn, and private as Kirito himself—

His train of thought put on the brakes, blew its whistle, and slammed into a wall. He could've kicked himself just as hard. How would I react if I joined a party and someone started grilling me about what happened with Rosalia's group? Or who I fought in the early days of the game?
"You don't owe me an answer," Kirito said after taking the time to carefully think it over; he had the sense that Mentat was not someone who got impatient waiting for a response, and was rewarded with all the time he needed. "And I'm sorry if I made you think that. We're all entitled to decide who deserves our trust, and what to tell them."

When Mentat nodded, Kirito went on. "What I'll say is this: you know what we're trying to do here. You know the reputation privateers have. I'm not asking you this out of curiosity. I'm asking because if I don't know anything, I can't defend you if someone else comes asking these questions—or looking for revenge. I'm asking," he said pointedly, meeting the man's eyes, "because I want to trust you, and it's hard to do that without knowing the truth."

Mentat was silent a bit longer, visibly weighing Kirito's words. At last he seemed to reach some kind of decision. He must've been holding an unnecessary breath out of tension, for it left him in a softly-exhaled sigh. He reached up and hooked the hood of his mage's robes with his thumbs, uncovering his head of short reddish-brown hair and inclining it ever so slightly. "All right. That's fair."

Once Mentat had ensured there was another rezzer on hand, and Kirito had fielded a few questions from new guild members he passed, they left the Gazebo grounds and began making their way down the long set of stairs that led back down from the warpgate to the core of the city. The open stairway, four meters wide at the uppermost landing and broadening to at least twice that at the base, was steep enough that it saw most of its use from weary clearers returning from Yggdrasil with dark wings; anyone trying to get to the top was apt to just fly if they could. With few players on the steps, and nowhere for an eavesdropper to hide, the two of them could speak with some assurance of privacy without being obvious about it.

"A lot of Spriggans came south to Everdark and Gattan during the first few months of the game," Mentat said. "Were you one of them?"

Kirito shook his head. "No. I spent most of the first month in the north half of the map, and after all the valley bosses were down it was straight into the World Tree." He felt the need to add, "I couldn't be a part of the war that was going on."

If there was implicit judgment in what Kirito said, intentional or not, Mentat either didn't hear it or chose to ignore it. More likely the latter, he thought just before the mage spoke again. "All right. You want the whole story, here goes. I've always played healers in MMOs. It's just what I do. I like the role and I'm good at it, and I've never liked splitting my attention between alts."

Kirito grinned. "Not my thing, but I understand the appeal of the challenge."

Mentat's smile was brief but honest. "Yeah. Everyone on the forums was saying to roll Salamander if you want to DPS or do top-tier PvP, so I figured there's my healer. Read some beta guides, picked Water and Holy on launch, got in a few parties the first day. Good stuff."

"You got more than you bargained for when you logged in," Kirito ventured, weaving around a knot
of Cait Sith clearers who'd stopped to converse to one side of the stairway.

"Heh," Mentat said, almost more a grunt than a word, waiting until they'd fully passed the Caits before offering even that. "I think we all did. Kibaou was a human dumpster fire. I managed to slip out of the Everdark bum-rush, and after soloing for a few days to let things cool down, I went looking for parties again."

They kept walking, but eventually the gap of silence that followed came to an end. Mentat halted a few steps below Kirito's and turned about-face, the taller man looking up at him instead of the other way around, until Kirito came to a stop and brought their eyes level. "Do you know what the privateer program actually was? Do you know what it means that someone has a record of my name?"

_The Sals paid him coin for services rendered._ Those had been Argo's words, and while they had the sound of useful information, Kirito realized that when you really thought about it, without proper context they didn't say much of anything at all about Mentat himself. _There's a note in a book or scroll somewhere that says the Sals paid him. How much? How often? For doing what? We've got the headline, but not the story._

Becoming aware of just how much he actually _didn't_ know, Kirito shook his head; Mentat continued. "Think back to being alone in the first days of the game, trying to survive. You find a really well-equipped party who say they're being subsidized by the faction leader to harass the Sylphs, and they're desperate for a real healer. They take you to someone in charge, get you geared up, no expense spared. You spend the first day clearing a path back and forth to the Sylph border, leveling up off mobs."

Kirito recognized another piece of common ground with his healer, then: regret. It was plain as his HUD, seen in the briefly pained squint of Mentat's eyes. "Someone offers you a sweet deal like that, and all they want is for you to heal for them while they harass some parties of people you'd logged in expecting to PvP with anyway… you don't ask too many questions. Questions like what 'harass' actually means. Or what really happens when a corpse-light goes out." It was more talking than Mentat seemed accustomed to doing; every now and then he'd stop for just long enough that Kirito thought he might be done, then add something else. Following at the man's side, Kirito listened with only a brief grunt of _aizuchi_ to acknowledge that he'd heard.

"I never took a life," Mentat said along the way. "I never even dealt damage to another player outside of a duel." He hesitated again. "But I healed the people who did. Kept them alive, and let them keep on doing it."

That addendum answered a great deal for Kirito, but he needed time to think on it. When they reached the bottom of the gradually-widening stairway and nothing else had been spoken, he asked the question that was still nagging at him. "How long?"

The answer came without hesitation. "About a week. More or less; the days kind of blurred together back then. Then there _were_ questions, and I didn't much care for the answers. I had a choice to make about what kind of person I was. And I chose to disappear."

"Disappear?"

Mentat's smile was as thin as a layer of silicon in a chipset, and as short-lived as one overclocked too far. "You really think the people handing out spoils from the Imp starting treasury were willing to see one of their investments just walk away out of conscience? I'd already heard about Kibaou killing players he thought were disloyal, or felt threatened by. Or because they knew more than him and that _bakatare_ had an ego made of rice paper. I wasn't taking that chance, thanks."
Kirito nodded his understanding. More than once he'd had to make a discreet exit from parties where he didn't feel safe, though for very different reasons. "You and Burns knew each other, right?"

Mentat, after a brief pause, nodded. "From a clearing group I got roped into right after Mortimer took over. There was a lot of Kibaou culture still going on. First group leader was kind of an asshole, and so was the next... so Burns and I decided to strike out on our own. Most of that clearing group, actually."

Kirito realized that they were no longer walking; without consciously taking notice of it they'd run out of stairs, and had been too wrapped up in conversation to do more than stop in place at the bottom, where it fed into the uppermost avenue hugging the World Tree's great trunk. Mentat watched a Gnome player in heavy armor trudge by on his way up the steps, smiled in slight amusement when they gave up on walking and summoned their wings, then turned back to Kirito.

"Anyway, I joined up with Eugene and their clearers again to hit the first gateway boss, and decided I wasn't a fan of being treated like a soldier. I've stayed independent ever since, and I don't heal for ganks or bandits." This time, the smile was a bit more substantial. "For some reason, healers never seem to have trouble finding a party."

Kirito felt like his head was pounding with the pressure of his thoughts; he imagined he could hear his pulse there, even though he knew that wasn't an effect that the game simulated. If Mentat is telling the truth, all he wanted to do was to survive, and help his party do the same. He's not blameless for the deaths his privateering group caused in the short time he was with them... but he's not Rosalia, either. If I'd gone to Gattan in the first days of the game, looking for work... And then he had to force himself not to shake his head in an outward reaction to inner thoughts, the urge to negate them was so strong. The circumstances are different. As a melee combat character, I wouldn't have joined a group that was going to be involved in faction PvP, period. But what if I'd been a healer?

The thought jarred something loose in Kirito's memory, something else that had been nagging at him. Coper wouldn't have set up the Yoshihara gank without a healer there to back him up. But none of the leadership candidates that Coper had with him were healers, and when going through guild applicants I haven't recognized anyone else who was there there with him.

I'd assumed Mentat was in a second party somewhere out of sight, ready to heal or rez, but... if he's telling the truth about his past and his refusal to heal for PK groups, then Coper would know that—he wouldn't have even asked for help with the hit.

At some point in the preceding minutes, the evening sun had begun its journey past the mountain range to the west, to eventually sink into the unknown void between realms that lay beyond Alfheim's seas. The fact only caught Kirito's notice when he no longer felt the sun's warmth on the side of his face, and he turned just in time to watch the last twinkle of direct light sink out of sight.

Noting the path of Kirito's gaze, then glancing back up the steps in the direction of the warpgate and Grand Gazebo, Mentat said, "they'll probably be packing it up soon."

He clearly meant the friendly dueling, which was starting to become a regular event in the evenings, and tended to take sunset as its curtain call. That also meant Asuna would probably be back soon, if she wasn't already—she would've flown back from Lisbeth's shop, and Kirito thought it unlikely he would've noticed one player's distant flight sounds against the background of city noise. He nodded. "You're probably right. We should get back to the others and talk about what we want to get done tomorrow."
Mentat inclined his head a little in acknowledgement, and spoke as he turned. "Indeed." The translucent red shapes of a Salamander's wings, like crooked hatchets, manifested on his back; he gave them a brief test wiggle. "Anything else on your mind before we take the express back?"

Kirito couldn't believe his good fortune. *Well, I was going to just say okay, sure, let's fly back and skip any more questions. But if you're going to open that door... "Actually, do you know if Coper parties with any other healers? Anyone else who'd be able to rez for him if he needed it?"

Mentat frowned, a puzzled furrow splitting his brow. "Well, sure. But I couldn't tell you the names of any other *real* healers that Coper's partied with; I wouldn't have been in the party at the time. Why?"

Torn as to how much he really wanted to say when they'd made so much progress, Kirito's lips parted as if in answer, then sealed in a thin line. Mentat frowned at the obvious reluctance to speak, and seemed about to make some remark, but then a stray thought struck Kirito as worth mentioning. "You said 'real' healers. What do you mean by that?"

There was a brief pause. "Well, like Xorren can swap in Water or about a dozen other things in a pinch, but he's not a *real* healer. I don't think he even has the fuck-my-HP starting rez, and I wouldn't want him to try keeping an entire party alive in a tough fight. In a clearing group you need a dedicated, specced healer. Someone for whom that's their primary role."

Kirito had to smile at that. Xorren was the only player he'd ever seen make skill-swapping work at this level of play, but it did indeed seem to work for him. Mostly. "Then I guess it's good that we have one of the best."

Mentat's wings folded down flush against his robes as he stopped and looked back at Kirito, face suddenly neutral. He didn't speak for several long seconds. "Do you?"

It took Kirito a moment to pick up on what Mentat seemed to be asking, and to realize that they hadn't actually reached any firm point of closure on the very subject that had brought them here. There were a few different ways he could interpret the simply-worded question, not all of them good—and he wasn't sure which was most likely.

Kirito considered. He had spent almost a week now partying with Mentat, which amounted to dozens of hours of fighting mobs with him. He knew the man's capabilities, but he hadn't really known *him* all that well.

At no point in the preceding week had Mentat ever given Kirito a reason to doubt his sincerity or his ethics. So far he had been nothing but an exemplary party member—easily as good a healer as Asuna, and consistently focused on keeping them alive.

He thought he knew Mentat a bit better now—or at least hoped he did. Because the sole piece of evidence arguing to the contrary was Argo's report of a line in a book somewhere stating that the Salamanders once paid him as a privateer—a detail that Mentat didn't even dispute, and for which he had a reasonable explanation.

It seemed to Kirito that his healer was, in so many words, asking whether he was still considered a member of the team.

Then Kirito quickly corrected his own thoughts. *Maybe, but if so, then what he's really asking here is: do you believe me?*

It really did come down to the simple question of whether Kirito trusted Mentat enough to take him at his word.
And that was a question that he realized he had already answered for himself.

"I hope we do," Kirito said with a smile, a quartet of shadowy wings in the shapes of kukri blades sparkling into existence behind him.

He didn't have to look back in order to hear the other set of wings following where he led.

The emissary the NCC had sent to meet with Sakuya was a middle-aged Puca man in robes of uncharacteristically muted colors and patterns, a pale sea-green affair in a loose cut with arcane symbols and musical notations embroidered at the hems in matte black thread. The embroidery chased the borders of darker green lace at the sleeves and hood, the latter of which he pushed back to reveal a prematurely balding spot on the pate of his wheat-colored hair. "Lady Sakuya," he said, prefixing her name with the English word for her style like a larper instead of addressing her with an appropriate Japanese suffix. "Thank you for receiving this delegation. My name is Conchordancy, but you can call me Chord if that is easier."

"A delegation may be a bit of a stretch for a party of one," Sakuya observed with dry humor, bowing when he did, albeit just a touch less deeply. "But I thank you and those you represent for the gesture all the same, Konkorudanshii." She took care to clearly enunciate the difficult name, at least the first time, and noted the man's slight smile with satisfaction.

Indicating one of the seats in front of her desk with a casual sweep of the hand, Sakuya began to make her way around to her own. "I admit to being surprised; when I asked for a formal audience with your leadership, I was under the impression Yurielle and the other proxies would travel the way they did for the treaty summit, as I now cannot do so any more than their principals can. Would that make you the proxy for the Puca? And should I expect to receive other such visits?"

Conchordancy held up a palm to politely decline the offer of a seat. "Please forgive the confusion; I am not the Puca faction proxy. That would be the Lady Proxy Aria, and I'm afraid she cannot travel this far south after the recent changes in the world's hazards. My function here is to anchor communications between us all going forward."

Anchor? Going forward? The first turn of phrase in this context tickled a memory for Sakuya; she thought she'd heard someone else use the term that way. "Please explain."

"Are you familiar with the spell «Moonlight Mirror», my lady?"

The memory clicked into place. "Of course. A friend of mine used to use it to chat with people on her friend list in the beta. Some Imp clearers are rumored to use it for coordination when they're in the World Tree, but Dark Magic isn't very common outside of their ranks."

Allie always did love this spell; as soon as she heard there was a way to talk with any of her friends, anywhere in the game, she was all over it. Gods, she was so annoyed when she found out she was going to have to grind Dark all over again after the beta!

"The spell itself is uncommon for a number of reasons," Chord acknowledged. "It isn't granted automatically to non-Imps, though anyone can use it if they have the skill and learn the incantation—which is itself a bit of a tongue-twister." Sakuya thought she heard a hint of pride creeping into the man's voice; he had clearly worked hard to overcome that particular obstacle. "But at the direction of Lady Proxy Aria and our Director of Field Arcana, Wizbang, we've begun to train up a small cadre of mages in Dark Magic. We aim to establish a kind of long-distance realtime communications network, if you will, anchored by our ambassadors across Alfheim."

A simulated thrill ran up the spine of Sakuya's avatar as she realized the implications and the game responded to her mental state. There had been talk amongst some of the mage groups at one point or another about ways to communicate between clearing groups while within the World Tree, and although they had a few clever but extremely limited workarounds using the shared inventory tabs of married couples to pass written messages, there just weren't many functions in the game that penetrated outside of a dungeon.

But only a few of their DPS mages were Dark users, and the idea of using Moonlight Mirror for this purpose had never progressed beyond the realm of "nice thought but impractical". Clearly the NCC felt otherwise, and the proof was standing before her. "I see. And by going forward I assume you wish to remain here in Sylvain?"

Chord inclined his head. "You are perceptive, my lady. I am the newly-designated Sylvan Ambassador, and by your leave I will be seeking residency in the city. My role is primarily to facilitate communication between you and the NCC Proxies. With your permission, I will now do exactly that." He shook his hands out of his sleeves, freeing them up in a gesture she'd seen other mages do and raising his eyebrows.

Her experiences with Loki aside, Sakuya knew that the risk of Chord being able to cast anything here that would pose any threat of harm was effectively nonexistent. That knowledge didn't stop her from hesitating before agreeing. "A moment, please."

The Puca mage clasped his hands before him and slowly dipped his head again. "Of course. I am under your roof. Bring in whomever else you wish and take whatever precautions you deem wise."

A few seconds in her menu sufficed to reassure Sakuya that all forms of PvP and duel invites were still disabled, and for the moment she was content with only Chimiro's silent witness to the proceedings; her assistant stood off to one side of her desk at a respectful distance, with an unobtrusive stillness that made him socially invisible until called for. Satisfied, she returned her attention to the mage where he stood patiently before her desk, and extended an upturned palm towards him. "Please proceed."

Conchordancy spent moments in his own menu, presumably preparing in some way for the spell or selecting a target from his friend list, and glanced out through the expansive bay windows across the Tolkienesque cityscape. "A little explanation before I go on, Lady Sakuya. Moonlight Mirror's duration is based on environmental factors; at this time of morning and with current weather conditions we'll only get about the base of two minutes from magnitude 4. To give us the longest possible window, I'll have to run the magnitudes, which means re-establishing the 'call', so to speak, every few minutes. Each successive magnitude will give us more time, but if I just started with the longest it would put all the others below it on cooldown."

"I know how spell cooldowns work, thank you," Sakuya said, then immediately regretted the defensive reply. "I'm sorry. It's good to understand your process. Please go on."

Conchordancy gave a crisp nod. "My lady. Yatto yojikke, glefranyelth dweren."

Sakuya didn't even want to think about how much practice the smooth incantation had to have taken; she was no slouch at combat magic but her brain quailed at the idea of trying to correctly say glefranyelth even once without injuring herself. One of the hardest things to learn for effectively using magic had been the difference between the pronunciation of the Latin-alphabet L in incantations—which was very close to the Japanese liquid consonant usually romanized as R—and the phoneme represented by an R in her spellbook, which was closer to the English consonant by the same name, and a serious pain in the ass when they both showed up in the same spell. Words like plorjabu had taken her countless hours of repetition in the beta to consistently get right.
Whether through talent, training, or both, Chord's execution of those difficult sounds was flawless. At the conclusion of the usual spinning rings of golden runes accompanying the spellcasting FX, a violet-fringed hole ripped its way into the air about five meters in the direction the mage was facing, an iridescent disc widening as if trying to force its way open. When the spell completed, that disk seemed to gain depth until it faded to what was, to Sakuya's mind, effectively a window or portal showing a video image of some other location; were it not for the faint glass-like sheen at the event horizon, she felt like she almost could've stepped through it.

The room at the other end looked as if it were underground somewhere; the walls and ceiling were all hewn stone with thick load-bearing timber and steel structural supports, and the room itself was diffusely lit with orelight from somewhere out of frame. Three very different faces gazed back at Sakuya over a table of polished dark oak; only one was familiar to her.

"Lady Sakuya," said that person, seated to one side of the other two and facing her with a slight turn of the head. Slender and athletic like Sakuya, Yurielle leaned forward in a sitting bow; her silver bangs drifted over her eyes briefly as she did, and the rest of her high ponytail flowed over the flared shoulders of a dark green tunic embroidered with angular iron-gray knotwork in the shape of gears.

"Proxy Yurielle," answered Sakuya with a similar seated bow after swiveling her chair in the direction of the jagged-edged ultraviolet rip in the air that framed the depths of Moonlight Mirror's image. "I trust Thinker is well?"

"Well enough, thank you for asking," Yurielle said of her partner and leader, a ghostly smile touching her lips before her usual subdued manner asserted itself. "I act as Leprechaun Proxy. This is Proxy Aria of the Puca, and Proxy Daizen of the Gnomes. The NCC Faction Leaders send their regards through us, and we speak with their voices."

It had the sound of ritual; Yurielle had said something similar at the beginning of the summit that resulted in the Treaty of Arun. Sakuya gathered that it was by this point as much a part of official introductions for them as yoroshiku onegaishimasu. "Thank you. Your emissary is welcome in Sylvain; I will ensure that he has appropriate lodgings and a green cursor." Her eyes went to the side and briefly met Chimiro's; the man gave her the slightest of nods to acknowledge that it would be done. She wasn't sure if any Sylph expatriates living in the NCC had the same benefit, and made a mental note to find out if possible.

"That is very generous of you," said Aria, a pudgy Puca woman with the clear, modulated voice of a singer. Like many Puca, she looked a bit like one of Sakuya's own faction; she was fair of skin, and her hair was the pale color of straw. The latter was done up in a complex arrangement of interlocking braids so delicate that it would've been impossible to pull off in the real world without industrial quantities of cyanoacrylate glue; it had to be the work of a player stylist or a cosmetic unlock from a quest reward. She certainly didn't look to Sakuya as if she ever ventured far outside of a safe zone.

"Chord is one of my best service mages, and he is at your disposal whenever you need to be in contact with us." The mage dipped his head when named.

Daizen was seated at the table between the two women, directly opposite their own viewport. It struck Sakuya fleetingly that they had arranged themselves much the way their territories were as viewed from the south, with the Puca to his right and the Leprechaun to his left, mirrored from her perspective. She wondered if their power structure, nominally that of equals, leaned as strongly towards the Gnomes as she'd been led to believe—and how much further detail Argo possessed than Sakuya had already bought. She hadn't met the Gnome before; the orelight reflected off parallel bald patches in his receding black hair when he bowed in his seat again and introduced himself properly. "We all appreciate you reaching out to us, especially given the recent troubling events in the South."
"That's putting it mildly," Yurielle said with a narrow smile that was visibly short of heartfelt. "We would like to understand the Sylph perspective on this conflict."

"Our perspective is quite simple," Sakuya said, hands clasped in her lap before her. "On the 8th of May, the Salamanders invaded our territory for the first time since Kibaou, and have been killing both low-level farmers and the clearers sent to protect them. We are attempting to expel them from our territory, and the resulting conflicts have resulted in further casualties on both sides. We seek an end to the conflict and Salamander withdrawal from our territory. The Salamander position," she said tightly, "is that the conflict will end when we surrender a portion of our territory to their exclusive use. This is unacceptable to us for reasons that should be too obvious to waste time explaining."

To Sakuya, the odd thing was how unsurprised the three NCC proxies looked upon hearing her explanation. They already knew most of this, she thought. Which makes sense; even without Argo's information pipeline, they have a network of crafters and traders in every city that can pass along what happens around them. They probably know more about what's going on at the Gattan end of things than I do—and I'm sure they've heard their own version of what the Salamanders think about all this.

Once she fell silent, the proxies exchanged a flurry of glances. Daizen spoke first. "Lady Sakuya, as regrettable as this conflict is… what is it that you are asking us to do about it?"

"Enforce the Treaty of Arun," Sakuya said emphatically. "You are the only ones who possess the power, the leverage, to do so. When the Spriggans refused to sign the Treaty, the other eight factions collectively punished them in various ways until their recent change in management, and the NCC promised to hold individual Spriggans accountable. This was largely ineffective due to the decentralized, anarchic structure of the Spriggan faction; they are a collection of individuals over whom the Spriggan leader held no actual sway. That is not the case here."

"It is curious that you should ask this of us," Yurielle said with what Sakuya could tell was an effort at a neutral tone; she had gotten along with Yurielle the few times they'd met, and wondered what she might've done to offend the woman. That much became clear almost immediately. "As you implied, you and Corvatz are both leaders of factions which, while by no means monolithic, are unified enough for your leadership to matter. You have choices to make, and have in fact been making them, with the results we now face. You are not without the ability to influence the course of this conflict, and our understanding is that your own groups have been preying on Salamander farmers just as they have on yours."

Farmers who are poaching our territory behind an invading force. Sakuya didn't voice that protest, especially since it was an excuse she wouldn't have—and hadn't—accepted from Sigurd. The Treaty of Arun did not forbid or punish war—only the deaths that war made all but inevitable.

She had been expecting to be called out for their recent deadly ambushes; had she not been, she would've found a way to bring up the subject. "Your understanding is substantially correct, but incomplete. When it became clear that the Salamanders were killing our farmers and sending theirs in place, we decided to send a message that they could not do so with impunity. In aid of this, we have found a method for making our groups appear as if they were mobs that the Salamanders want. When their farmers attack these 'mobs', our groups drop the illusion and punish them."

"Let us not mince words," Yurielle responded the moment Sakuya had finished speaking. "When you say 'punish' them, you are referring to orders you have given to attack low-level Salamander players."

"Those are orders which Corvatz has already given to his clearers," Sakuya pointed out. "Do you propose to upbraid them in the same way you have me?"
"We have not proposed doing anything," Aria said. "You have requested our help in getting the Salamanders to stop attacking you. That implies that you wish us to apply pressure to them. It also invites uncomfortable questions."

Daizen nodded his agreement. "Please understand, Lady Sakuya: you are asking us to take sides in a fight that is not ours—in effect, to make enemies of the Salamanders."

"You had no trouble making enemies of the Spriggans when their so-called leader rejected the treaty," Sakuya remarked tartly. "Corvatz has done the same. Surely there must be some difference between the two factions to explain your reluctance now." Like the fact that one is a threat to you, and the other poses none. Let's see how long it takes you to admit that this is a pragmatic calculation, not a stand on principle.

It took little time at all. Daizen and Aria looked at each other with clear discomfort as the sarcastic barb found its mark. Yurielle, however, seemed prepared for the response. "Let's be frank, Sakuya—the Salamanders are powerful, dangerous enemies. Even if this were a completely one-sided conflict, with the Salamanders as sole transgressors, we would hesitate to put our people at risk by getting involved. We have hundreds of players living and working in Salamander territory, and if we act unwisely towards the Salamanders, their lives could be in peril. That is even more true now that your own people are committing Treaty violations, muddying the question of responsibility."

Thank you, Yurielle, Sakuya thought. I suspected I could count on you to call out the elephant in the room, and I was hoping you'd be present for this conversation. Before she could say anything, Conchordancy spoke for the first time since the meeting had started. "I need to recast."

The proxies all nodded moments before the ragged edges of the spell's viewport began to shrink. Before its duration expired, the NCC mage was already casting the next magnitude of his spell. "Yatto mezal, keglefranyelth dweren."

Once Moonlight Mirror had re-formed in the air before them, Sakuya took the initiative. "As I was about to say, the orders I gave our groups are different. They have been instructed to always leave the healer alive—discouraging Salamander efforts and harming their progression without taking lives. We cannot simply stand by and take no action at all—your people would not stand for that if our positions were reversed. But our purpose is to deter them, not kill them. You're the only one of these three with combat experience, Yurielle. If you're as well-informed as it sounds like you are, just take the bait.

"When said healers are Paralyzed and Silenced," Yurielle responded bitingly, confirming Sakuya's suspicions, "leaving them alive so that they can rez is something of a technicality." She leaned forward across the table for effect, anger in her eyes. "I know you, Sakuya. You're more self-aware than this, and you're no hypocrite. Why are you feeding us bullshit excuses for actions you know you can't defend?"

"Yurielle!" Daizen's voice was scandalized. "Can we at least try to remember that we're engaging in diplomacy with the leader of another faction?"

Sakuya was already holding up a hand. "No, Daizen, it's all right. Yurielle has a point." She glanced over at Chimiro where he stood, mannequin-like, waiting for instructions. "Can you give us a few minutes?"

The Sylph administrative assistant bowed low. "My lady."

Once the man was gone, Sakuya was left alone in the room with the ambassador from the NCC, a glowing gash in the fabric of the air, and a tightrope to walk. Wasting no time, she spoke quickly as
she focused her eyes in the particular way that activated Searching without having to go into her menu, completing a familiar incantation at the same time. "Futto mezel kehevatrul dweren."

Conchordancy and the NCC proxies were all staring at her bemusedly; Sakuya didn't care. Turning in a full circle, she looked closely until she was one hundred percent certain that there were no movements or cursors in her office that oughtn't be. I doubt even Sigurd can freeze still enough on a moment's notice to completely fool Detect Movement. And I'm just being paranoid; he's out in the field and doesn't even know about this meeting. But I can't take chances on anyone else getting too curious.

"Is there something you'd like to share with us, Lady Sakuya?"

Turning back to the glowing window of Moonlight Mirror, Sakuya dropped both detection effects and addressed the proxies again, nodding in response to Aria's question. "As I said, Yurielle has a very good point. I ordered that the healers in the farming group be left alive so that they could rez their colleagues. While the decision to disable them with status effects was on Sigurd's own initiative and against my orders… as Sylph faction leader, his actions are my responsibility, and I must own the consequences for them."

Yurielle's face was carefully guarded as she responded. "Then surely you understand that even if we were to act, we could hardly, in fairness, give the Salamanders any warning or penalty that should not also weigh upon you."

Sakuya had carefully planned what she wanted to say next, and was relieved that she'd been given the opening to do so. "I understand that. And I understand the position that all of you are in—having to make the best possible decision for your own people, while mindful of how those players are likely to regard their leaders when election time comes around."

"The re-election of our faction leaders is not a factor here—" Yurielle began.

"Bullshit," Sakuya said matter-of-factly, without any real anger, rising from her chair and striding slowly towards the portal's aperture. "I thought we were done with the bullshit, but if you want me to be straight with you, then you'll give me the same courtesy. The leaders who chose you to represent them—and by extension, you yourselves, as their running-mates—have to stand for election every 30 days just like the rest of us. Now, I know that the NCC organizes its farming efforts just as carefully as we do, if not moreso."

She'd deliberately chosen that line for its apparent non sequitur quality; no one jumped in to immediately respond and Sakuya went on. "Proxy Yurielle, how do you suppose Leprechaun players would react if the Spriggans suddenly decided to carve out some of your territory for their own, and attacked any of your farming groups who tried to tend their usual assignments?" No response other than a scowl. "Where might their anger turn, if you were to offer no response whatsoever to this aggression? If your response was, in effect, to surrender that territory? What precedent are you setting—not just for yourselves, but for all of us?"

Sakuya could tell that she was hitting the target; her smile then had no humor in it. "Tell me: what do you suppose would happen in your next election if you did that? Think carefully before answering, because that is precisely the position I am in." Even though she knew it wasn't necessary, she drew in a deep breath.

"And because," Sakuya continued tightly, "I can assure you that if I do nothing, and the Salamanders continue to seize our land and kill our people anyway, on the next cycle I will be replaced by someone who will not hesitate to wage unrestricted war, and seal-club every goddamn Sallie they can find outside of a safe zone." By the time she'd finished, her voice had intensified until she felt
like every word was delivering a physical blow, to repeated winces from her audience. More softly, she added: "I don't want that, and neither do you."

Aria's frown deepened as Sakuya's voice rose; even in a world where the emotion simulation system's interpretation of mental states made it difficult to keep one's feelings off their face, the Puca woman's was open and expressive. "While I empathize with your plight, surely that is beside the point. The Salamander leader no doubt also feels that his own people require him to take the actions he has taken. That does not make the actions right."

_Oh my fucking god, woman. Try having an original thought._ "But it is a factor that must be faced head-on nonetheless," Sakuya retorted, "and that is no less true for your peoples. I understand that the NCC has an increasingly restive isolationist minority that is quite unhappy with the Gnome-centric balance of power in your alliance, and agitates for a more adversarial stance towards non-NCC factions. Is that not true?" The proxies did not answer immediately. Aria and Daizen both stirred uncomfortably in their seats; Yurielle's expression flickered quickly from shock to anger. _Got you._

"The NCC is in a unique position in Alfheim. Your people form the majority of the world's skilled crafters, and every faction depends on them to one degree or another. Your trade caravan parties keep the cities connected and get mats where they need to be; it is due in large part to your efforts that our supply lines are beginning to stabilize post-update. And your policy of blacklisting any individuals who violate the Treaty has, also in large part, helped keep the peace on a micro level for months now."

Sakuya had a good sense of the field of view in Moonlight Mirror by now; she stepped past Conchordancy and stood squarely in front of the arcane viewport, and clasped her hands behind her back. "In other words, you alone have the leverage to compel another faction to heed the Treaty in their _official_ actions—by threatening to blacklist them at the faction level until they comply. It's not just concern for your expat crafters that's staying your hand. You're afraid that if you step in, it will empower your vocal xenophobic minority—and threaten the base of support for leaders who I would imagine have gotten quite comfortable in their positions over the last six months."

Once she'd finished, Daizen waited a few moments and then spoke slowly and carefully. "Lady Sakuya, your speculation about the NCC's internal politics is also beside the point. As we have tried to tell you already: you cannot both petition that we try to force the Salamanders to honor the Treaty, and then also claim that their actions and your domestic pressure are justification for violating it. You must pick a path. Were we to blacklist only the Salamanders, they—and the rest of Alfheim—would rightly see the omission as tacit approval of and support for your actions, and make certain enemies of a powerful faction led by a militaristic ideologue."

"The world will see _inaction_ as tacit approval of and support for what the Salamanders have done—as well as the way in which they have done it. The precedent you set here will affect whether and how others respect the borders of _all_ factions, not just ours." On saying this, Sakuya met Daizen's gaze so directly that the portly Gnome actually looked down. "I am not asking you to treat the Sylph and Salamander leadership differently. I am asking you to fulfill your obligations under the Treaty of Arun, and intercede with any necessary actions to pressure all signatories to cease their violations."

A space dragged on for several seconds once Sakuya delivered that last line. No one seemed to want to fill it with anything other than fidgeting or bemused looks. _You're smarter than this. Figure it out._

Yurielle seemed to recognize all of the subtext first; another wide-eyed look of shock flashed for only the length of time it took her to govern her expression. One by one, understanding lit up the faces of the other two proxies, and there commenced a great deal of whispering and furtive looks. The edges
of Moonlight Mirror were already starting to shrink; Conchordancy cleared his throat, drawing all of their gazes to him. "Recast."

Daizen nodded to him once, and then leaned back over to Aria and whispered to her as the aperture closed. Once it had, Sakuya held up a hand to halt Chord in his casting. "Chimiro!" she called out, just loudly enough to carry outside the door. Her assistant entered promptly, and came to stand before her. "I need you as a witness now."

Chord looked aside to Sakuya as she said this. He'd already been wearing uneasiness on his face; now alarm was clearly written there. "My lady, this is the last magnitude of Moonlight Mirror I will be able to cast without waiting for cooldowns, which are quite lengthy. Before I do so…" He swallowed slightly and drew himself up a little straighter. "I want to make it clear that I am not merely a communications anchor. I am an advocate for good relations between our peoples. Do you understand what you just said to the proxies? What all of the implications are, and what you are setting in motion?"

"Yes." Sakuya allowed a smile to touch the corner of her lips; she would not betray the intensity of her relief or the reasons for it. She turned, then, and looked straight at the Puca mage. "Do you?"

To his credit, Chord seemed thoughtful at the challenge in her reply, not defensive. He didn't hesitate for long; the proxies were no doubt wondering why communications hadn't already been re-established. "I do rather hope so."

Now Sakuya did permit a fully-formed smile. "So do I. Now cast your spell, and pray that everyone involved is as smart as they think they are."

Judging by its decorations and tileset, Mortimer was certain that the well-hidden contested zone beneath Gattan was not only a previously-unknown secret dungeon, it was a dungeon in the literal sense—or at least had been crafted by an environment artist or map designer to appear as if it had once been part of one, at some unspecified point in the dusty past. The mob-infested tunnels leading to the cleared, inhabited area had all the appropriate thematic trappings—all the way down to rooms with collections of bechained iron maidens rusting in neglected rows like spiked matryoshka dolls, and the amusingly clichéd sets of manacles dangling from walls at regular intervals on short chains. He would've bet not a one of the set dressings had ever seen use in their virtual existence.

The modestly-sized dodecagonal room that served as a spellcasting practice area, by contrast, contained almost entirely player-crafted assets—or at least the detail objects looked clean and new enough to have been added by a player. A quick tap at one of the decorations confirmed its crafted origin, which Mortimer found interesting—he'd seen objects elsewhere in the zone that were identical save for their faux patina of grime and weathering. Local recipe drops, then. That or a quest from another dungeon with the same theme. Someone's been inhabiting this place long enough for it to be worth sourcing furnishings from a crafter.

The objects appeared quite deliberately placed as well, though he couldn't suss out the pattern yet; it tugged at his almost instinctive need to solve puzzles. The only illumination came from candle-sized orelight crystals set in cast bronze sheaths—most of them nestled in the corners of the floor like vertices in the designer's mapping tool but others, different in color, placed in seemingly arbitrary ways. The light was adequate for the kind of work that seemed likely to take place in the room, but he wouldn't have wanted to try to read anything that wasn't illuminated in his HUD.

Alone once Mars eased the heavy iron doors shut behind him, Mortimer passed his time waiting by familiarizing himself with the surroundings. It was the first time he'd had the time and leisure to stop
and take a good look at what Mars, Trigger, and the rest of the guild called «Sandmen» informally referred to as the "blast zone". He'd reasoned that the colorful appellation was probably an obvious reference to the room's intended purpose: spamming explosive area-of-effect spells in a controlled space.

If that were the case, it didn't show in the world's mutable surface layer. Fresh experience power-leveling in dungeons had reminded him that the use of damaging elemental spells left ephemeral signs on the environment: Fire and Dark each inflicted their own distinctive scorch marks, the physical damage of Earth gouged or abraded, Wind knocked loose environmental clutter around, Water made things wet and miserable, and explosive AOE forces in general did what explosive force was wont to do.

Granted, the visual effects were short-lived; even displaced detail objects in the wild seemed to reset to their original positions after a period of time—and always, Mortimer was certain, when there were no players present to observe something so blatantly gamey. But he'd expected at least some signs of the sort, especially since Trigger had supposedly been using the facility just before him.

No such wear showed in what he could see of the dimly-lit room. Two of its sandstone walls held imposing double doors of thick black iron facing opposite each other across a span of somewhere just under fifteen meters, one set through which he'd just entered. The two facets to his far left and right were of the same weathered sandstone as the rest of the dungeon.

Those were bare save for large portrait-sized placards of numbered concentric circles posted on each of the two walls; Mortimer vaguely recognized them as generic mass-produced archery targets that he'd seen used for ranged DPS training. Their arrangement and purpose here seemed fairly self-evident to him, but no one had yet given him any instructions other than to stand where he was, in the center of the room, and wait.

So he waited. Waited, observed, and listened.

The remaining eight walls were draped by long, heavy banners or tapestries that hung from a meter above head-level and covered nearly the entire wall facet. Each was emblazoned with the Salamander faction symbol: a stylized red flame composed of four irregular pointed shapes swirling around a rounded core. It had always looked a little too much like a Salamander's Remain Light for Mortimer's liking, but there was no question where the loyalties of their interior decorator lay.

A glance up revealed—if that was the word—that those walls rose to at least twice man-height, and rapidly faded into darkness as the faint orelight dropped off well before whatever ceiling topped the room, leaving its actual height uncertain. Looking up gave him the impression of staring down into a bottomless pit; Mortimer dropped his gaze level again and kept it that way to avoid the uncomfortable sight.

From the faint sounds of spellcasting he could occasionally hear, muted by distance or intervening obstacles, Mortimer wondered whether this was the only training room. It was hard to pinpoint; some acoustic trick of the high-ceilinged chamber made all but the loudest noises—including the echoes of his own footsteps—sound as if they were coming from every direction at once, sometimes as if they were just outside the door. The effect made the room feel bigger than it probably really was.

The full-throated whine of old metal complaining about its graceless glide across stone, however, came from right in front of him. The other set of double doors swung wide most of the way as Trigger shoved them open with both hands, hesitating when one of them caught on a stubborn bit of floor. It must have been a regular occurrence; Trigger didn't even look as he gave the door a desultory kick with one of his many-buckled boots to get it past the impediment, causing it to bang against the sandstone wall.
"You're punctual," Trigger observed, regarding him with eyes the deep gray of a dead CRT monitor. When he pushed back the cowl of his robes, Mortimer saw that his bald head was covered with more of the same black fractal markings that covered the backs of his hands. They were clearly a product of the game's cosmetic customization options put to creative use, but he couldn't help making an uncomfortable mental comparison to yakuza body tattoos. He wondered if that was the intended reaction.

The older Salamander didn't wear the sullen glower he had when taken by surprise on the last visit, but his expression wasn't exactly friendly, either. Mortimer decided to see where the cracks were in the facade, or whether it was one at all. "I find that showing up on time has an agreeable tendency to make people want to work with you again—or at least refrains from giving them a reason not to."

The first crack showed itself at one corner of Trigger's mouth. "There's some truth to that. All right then, here's how this works. When you're in this room, you will stand precisely where told, cast only the specific spells you are told, at specific magnitudes, at specific targets, and at specific times. For our method to work, we're burning expensive resources, and you must do all of this exactly when and as instructed. Cast anything else and you're out, no second chances. Understood?"

"With perfect clarity," Mortimer replied to the lengthy boilerplate lecture; he could hardly say otherwise.

"Good. First thing's first, gear check."

Mortimer had obeyed the instructions PMed to him by Mars—to the letter. "Nothing with offensive procs of any kind. As much MP and CDR as I can afford, and enough of the one to fuel the other."

Trigger nodded to acknowledge each point. "Good, you can follow directions. I'll be buffing you, but anything you have that reduces cooldowns or gives you more mana to work with will make this go faster. Anything that adds extra effects or damage, though, can break the leveling conditions. Do not allow that to happen."

The explanation, though vague where it came to the underlying mechanics involved, made fair enough sense to Mortimer—he'd exploited glitches in non-VR games that required painstaking precision and highly specific conditions to pull off. He let Trigger's condescension roll off of him as just harmless words, and took the advice at face value. "Right. Anything else I ought to know?"

"You're training Fire today. All spells will be non-damaging debuffs in AOE Projectile manifestations, pointed straight down at the ground under you. After I say begin, I will cast the first spell. You will listen to it, and cast the exact same spell. You will then run the magnitudes up to the limit of your skill—which for now is just the one spell—and tell me when you are on and off cooldown. Understand what all of that means?"

Mortimer quirked a small smile. "Yes. Give me a little credit."

"No," Trigger said with granite bluntness, much to Mortimer's surprise and annoyance. "You haven't earned it yet. For now, I need to be absolutely certain that you understand your role and will execute it precisely."

While Mortimer tried to decide whether there was a point where it became worth drawing a line in the sand on the man's attitude, Trigger extended a bony forefinger from one hand as it emerged from the gold-trimmed sleeves of his crimson robes. He pointed at a point on the ground a few steps closer to him than the center of the room. "Stand there."

The squat quartz-shaped candle in the indicated spot was the only one in the room that glowed white
instead of red, casting a small halo of cold light that dropped off quickly. Mortimer's eye put the spot
at almost exactly five meters away from Trigger, depending on what point on or inside their 3D
model the game used to measure such things; he took three steps forward. He accepted the expected
party invite as soon as it popped up, and watched Trigger's name and status bars appear below his.

Trigger gave both wrists a crisp flick to free his hands as he raised his arms, then his voice. "Cast
prep!"

The bellow took Mortimer briefly by surprise; it was followed by the indistinct sounds of other
voices casting spells somewhere out of sight, and with enough obstructions and overlap to reduce the
individual incantations to a dull muddle. There was a brief rattle of chains, a grinding of steel and
stone that he felt through his feet almost as much as heard, and then an unfamiliar voice called back.
"Cast prep OK!"

After this exchange, glowing golden runes began to spin around Trigger like tumblers in a lock until
they snapped into place. Mortimer felt the familiar warm and cold flashes of spell effects flowing
across him, and recognized the icons for «Haste» and «Rejuvenate» as soon as they appeared in his
active effects list.

Trigger spoke sharply to Mortimer the moment he finished casting, and pointed his right arm straight
down at the ground. "Now, do as I do. Hitto kachikke tovaku tepnaga jan."

A fiery red glow surged down the man's arm and collected at his fingertips for a split-second before
erupting into a projectile, which closed the short distance to the floor barely a moment after forming.
The AOE, being a low-magnitude non-damaging effect from someone in his own party, did little
more than stir Mortimer's fringe of short-cropped hair and the banners on the wall as if by a light
breeze; as soon as the translucent red globe of its visible effect had faded, there was no sign it had
ever been there. When Mortimer echoed the incantation, his spell behaved no differently and was
gone before his voice had stopped echoing.

He hadn't exactly expected any kind of sound effect, pop-up window, or other sign of the exploit at
work. Still, the result did strike him as a bit anticlimactic. "That's it?"

"Base cooldown for that spell is 27 seconds. My Haste will cut that to around 15, minus whatever
CDR you have. Use that time to refresh pots when necessary and check your skill progress."

Seeing the good sense in the suggestion, Mortimer quaffed one of the many high-grade MP potions
Mars had handed him just before he'd stepped into the room—the expense of which were no doubt
part of why this endeavor was taking such a bite out of his savings. A glance at his Skills menu
brought both of his bushy auburn eyebrows up in surprise.

Trigger's voice was smug. "Now you see."

He did. Saiyuki's team had been prioritizing giving him opportunities to grind his Fire Magic skill
more than gaining EXP, and at the conclusion of the previous day's grind, that skill level had been
only a few fractional points past 227—just barely above the prerequisite set by the Sandmen. It had
taken three full days to accomplish that much progress since his last visit, and by the time it had
passed 200 it was taking multiple battles to raise it by even a single full point.

Mortimer hadn't cast a spell since, but the numbers beside his Fire Magic skill now read 229.4—even
after he closed the window and refreshed it to make sure it wasn't some kind of display error. He was
fairly sure he was wearing an expression of astonishment when he looked back up at Trigger, but at
the moment didn't quite care. "From one cast? That's extraordinary."
"Indeed it is. Cooldown?"

Mortimer glanced at the relevant column in his HUD; the shaded red icon for «Interrupt» was flashing as it counted down the last few seconds of its cooldown timer, and he folded fingers into a fist until the icon disappeared. "Done."

"Cast again."

Mortimer did. And again, and again; so many times that the syllables of the incantation began to blur into gibberish, the already-obtuse magic language turning into an unintelligible collection of sounds devoid of mental association or meaning. Some kind of diminishing returns from casting the same spell seemed to be at work; nearly two grueling hours passed in this way before his skill passed 325, with the occasional break only for another round of call-and-response between Trigger and whoever was working behind the scenes. At that point Trigger had him begin alternating magnitudes; switching between different incantations seemed to accelerate his progress, and before the end of the day's session, he'd reached and surpassed the 360 necessary to cast AOE Distress M2.

*Weeks of grinding in one day, indeed,* Mortimer thought in amazement. *You can get the first 100 points of most skills in a matter of hours, a day at most—if you're doing nothing but grinding it. Even the next 100's not so bad. After that, though... the wall rises higher and higher as you climb it.*

Although Trigger seemed to relax the more that Mortimer demonstrated competence, the man didn't prove any more willing to engage in small talk that would make that time pass a bit more easily. It wasn't until the end of the day that Trigger actually gave Mortimer a respectful bow, which he returned with pleasant surprise.

"Rough start, but you're getting it. Should only take another day to get you to the point where your MP's the limiting factor, not your skill level."

Mortimer hadn't told Trigger his character level or MP pool, but he reasoned it probably wasn't difficult for someone to do basic math after spending all day watching the little blue bar in his party list go up and down with the casting of spells that had known costs. Between Rejuvenation and the expensive MP potions, his out-of-combat regen had been boosted to somewhere around 40 MP per second, which meant that—for the moment at least—he recovered MP far faster than he could possibly exhaust it solely by chain-casting low-magnitude spells. It didn't *feel* anywhere near that fast when he was in the blast zone, but for now it would do the job of getting his magic skill up in a hurry.

*Whatever they're doing here, it demonstrably works. The question is, how? Our mage groups have tried training up by chain-casting spells like this before. It's a waste of time; diminishing returns drop off within a few casts of the same spell, especially with no targets. What are they doing differently?*

Then he corrected himself. *That's not the only question. Now that I've confirmed that their method does work, I not only need to figure out what it is—I need to figure out the best way to use it without putting all of us at risk.*

It was a safe bet that the Sandmen weren't going to go along willingly with any expansion of their business model. Mars told him as much when he tried to carefully broach the subject again on their way back upstairs; Trigger had been a black hole from which little to no information escaped.

"Never happen," in fact, were the exact words Mars used, the answer clipped and immediate.

Keeping his voice low but conversational and his eyes on the zone around him, Mortimer affected a nonchalant shrug and kept walking, sword in hand. "I'm sorry to hear that. The Sylphs just hurt us
badly because they figured out how to use magic in a way we didn't know was possible. Magic skill
was the key to the last gateway boss, and our mage groups took some hard losses that we're still
struggling to make up." Drawing up beside Mars, he set a hand briefly on the shoulder of the man's
wine-red robes. "If you were to offer this training to more of our clearers, it could be the edge the
Salamanders need to regain our lead and clear the game."

No answer came immediately; Mars was pensively quiet for some time while they picked a set path
carefully through a cobwebbed section of dungeon with floor traps that were triggered by partially-
camouflaged pressure plates. They had presumably been concealed by the map designer using a
layer of dirt and detritus; Mortimer guessed that the Sandmen had been the ones to mark off the
dangerous spots and safe path with more of the same cheap crafted orelight candles he'd seen in use
by them elsewhere.

Mars did not share what might happen if they stepped on the plates, and Mortimer had no desire to
find out for himself. When they reached the other side of the trapped rooms, his escort finally gave
him a response. "Look, Mort—I can call you that, right? It's not like you're our leader now."

Mortimer kept his smile thin, but he wasn't offended. "I may again lead the Salamanders someday,
but I'm just a citizen at the moment. Call me what you like."

Mars snickered for just a moment, almost a snort in its brevity. "Yeah, maybe that's an offer you
don't wanna make in mixed company." It was clearly a light jest, but it was enough of a non-answer
to buy some silent time on their way to the lift that would take them back to the surface level. Mars
tipped his head as they passed the two bored Salamanders guarding the base of the lift, who barely
even looked at him long enough to nod in return. After reaching up and pulling the false sconce that
began the cell's slow, grinding rise to the jailhouse, he turned to Mortimer. "You got a smartphone
back in the world, right?"

"Of course I do."

"What kind of question is that?"

"Ever think about how it was made? I mean like, all its parts, where they came from, who put them
together?"

Mortimer hadn't, really, but his mind called up memories of headlines seen in passing; controversies
over cheap labor in overseas factories, or some other such third-world nonsense that he never had the
time to worry about. He shook his head and frowned as they stepped out of the Potemkin cell. "Not
really. I just care that it does what I need it to."

As soon as he spoke the words, he thought he saw the analogy that Mars was trying to draw. He
turned and faced the man, who did the same as they stopped in the dark hallway. "You're telling me
not to look too closely at how the food is made, lest I spoil its flavor."

"I'm telling you," Mars said with a slow care that contrasted with his usual casual manners, "that
some things only scale up so far. Gitou wanted to expand, too, talking about setting up his own side
operation procuring resources—and we're pretty sure that's what got him killed. There's a lesson in
that, my man: get too greedy, attract too much attention, and nobody gets to have nice things. You
hearing me?"

"Hearing you loud and clear," said Mortimer, keeping the rest of his turbulent thoughts inside for the
moment as he raised a hand in parting. "See you tomorrow."

The ominous message from Mars wasn't the only thing Mortimer heard clearly; moments after he'd
stepped out into the lingering heat of a spring evening in Gattan, the familiar chimes of both a system
notification and a PM sounded in his ear. Once he'd put sufficient distance between himself and the
jail, he turned a corner and focused the PM to bring it up; he would've known the sender from the
brusque writing even if his brother's name hadn't been on it.

「Figured out how to give you what you asked for. You didn't get it from me.」

Mortimer restrained himself from laughing out loud; he knew for a fact that power delegation
changes were tracked in the faclead interface, but would've bet real-world currency that Corvatz
either didn't know where that was located or never checked. There were more than a few occasions
where the current Salamander Lord hadn't known things that he would've if he'd spent any time
reviewing the dense, admittedly-spammy activity logs. And on the off-chance their faction leader
ever looked, Mortimer had an innocuous explanation prepared.

A blink closed the PM; the system notification that followed was exactly what he'd expected from
Eugene's brief missive.

📅 17/05/23 18:24 AST — «Eugene» has made the following change(s) to your delegated
administrative privileges:

«Roster, Faction, Read-Only» - Added

«Guild Records, City, Read-Only» - Added

«Property Records, City, Read-Only» - Added

For more information on the above power(s), please tap or focus the relevant link to open the
Alfheim Online Manual.

Mortimer didn't need the manual; he was as familiar with those interfaces as he had been with the
tools and applications he'd used back in his riaru job. Although only a tiny fraction of the
permissions he'd once held as a Faction Leader, what Eugene had given him was enough to get him
at least some of the information he needed.

Whistling tunelessly, Mortimer let his legs carry him automatically back to the privacy of his
apartment while he silently reviewed a growing list of names in his head.

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Yuuki wanted to speak, and knew full well how to keep her voice down and be stealthy. Rei
wouldn't allow even that; the other Imp waited with one hand held up to still any noise from Yuuki
until both Salamanders were not only out of sight, but had passed through an interstitial iron door that
led back into the public areas of the city jail. Only once the voices and heavy footsteps were silenced
by the closed door did she drop her hand.

"They're gone," Rei said softly, the words barely more than a breath but still uncomfortably loud in
the stillness of the near-empty wing of the jail. "Did you see him?"

"I saw the two who just passed," Yuuki said in her own whisper, suspecting in hindsight that the
other girl's caution had probably been well-placed after all. The unused section of the jail might've
been dark enough for the two Imps to effectively conceal themselves, but sounds carried a long way
in surroundings like these. "I wouldn't really know for sure what Mortimer looks like, though."

"I saw the two who just passed," Yuuki said in her own whisper, suspecting in hindsight that the
other girl's caution had probably been well-placed after all. The unused section of the jail might've
been dark enough for the two Imps to effectively conceal themselves, but sounds carried a long way
in surroundings like these. "I wouldn't really know for sure what Mortimer looks like, though."

"I'm telling you, it was him. I knew staking out the jail would get results eventually. You heard what
they said?"

The eavesdropped conversation had been thick with innuendo, but hearing Gitou's name mentioned
had gone a long way towards putting everything in context and convincing Yuuki that they were on
the right track. "They've got some kind of operation going on here. Probably has to do with the stuff
Gitou was bragging about. And the former leader sounds like he's in on it, or at least turning a blind
eye."

"Color me so surprised," Rei said acerbically, the whisper at which she was still speaking turning the
words into a sibilant hiss. "That monkey never did a damned thing to make things right after he took
over. No way he ran this faction for all these months without knowing what's going on here."

Yuuki thought she remembered that it had been Mortimer who'd put an end to the privateering
groups that had plagued the Undine borders for more than a month, but couldn't be sure—and even if
it were so, that didn't mean he was or wasn't part of what was happening here. She knew what
it sounded like, and Rei still might've been right, but she didn't think that the other girl was an
unbiased judge of character when it came to Salamanders either.

When Yuuki didn't respond, Rei dropped herself into the furtive crouching posture that activated her
Hiding skill, then slipped quickly outside of the unoccupied prison cell and disappeared for a short
time. When she returned, her expression held triumph. "Tracked their footsteps back to the one they
came out of," Rei said. "There's a mechanism in there that my «Trapping» skill is highlighting, and
I'm betting it opens a secret door."

"So what do we do? If we've found their base, they're gonna have guards."

"You don't have Hiding, right?"

Yuuki shook her head; it wasn't an essential skill for either melee DPS or an off-tank, which were the
in-your-face roles for which she was best suited.

"Wind or Illusion? Consumables? Anything you've been holding out on that lets you disappear or
hide your cursor if they're anyone waiting on the other side?"

That all warranted another headshake of negation, which drew a sigh from Rei. "Well that sucks.
We're fine as long as we stake out an unoccupied cell. The second we step back out into the hallway,
we've got cursors for anyone searching." She looked briefly conflicted, and then said, with the
reluctant air of making an admission: "I keep an invisibility potion for emergencies, and chances are
I'll have to use it to get past whoever's guarding the other side of their secret door. But after that, the
one mag of Transparency that got us here will do the job for two minutes with a cooldown of a little
over one, less if I do a Haste first."

Yuuki thought it over. It wasn't hard to do the math, both figuratively and literally. "So if we go any
further, we're basically hoping that no one happens to be looking for cursors during the third of the
time that ours are gonna be visible, and you're gonna have to be recasting spells constantly."

"No, that's what we're hoping if you go any further," Rei corrected. "I've got high-level Hiding and
can sneak circles around these monkeys even without the invis pot. And they won't have a lock or
trap that can stop me."

Yuuki balled up a fist in frustration. She wanted to be doing something, not waiting around for
whenever Rei got back. That the circumstances made doing exactly that the most sensible course of
action didn't make the necessity grate any less. "What about me?"

The answer that Rei gave wasn't in Japanese; she reached out and briefly touched Yuuki's arm while
she spoke. "Futto yojikke vayezule prelth, shaja tepnaga dweren."
Yuuki's surprise was overtaken by the uneasy fascination she always felt when a Transparency effect dissolved the texture of her avatar, leaving behind only the hints of outlines—and in this kind of dim light, not even that. Even with the enhanced vision of an Imp, it was hard to see Rei—or even her own body—when they were still; without that advantage, the two of them would be as near to invisible as made no difference.

"Get out of here," said Rei's voice from somewhere within the dark room. "I'll message you once I've scouted the place out, meet you back at the Dark Alley Inn, and we'll form a plan based on what I find."

Before Yuuki could do more than begin a whisper, there was a sharp, ratcheting mechanical sound. Then she couldn't hear anything but the dull grinding of rock as the entire cell sank out of sight, leaving behind only an unremarkable sandstone wall in its place.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note 4/16/19: Hello everyone, and welcome back to Alfheim. As has been uncomfortably routine in recent times, it's been longer than I'd like since the last chapter—though thankfully not as long as the last. This was a very, very important chapter with events I've been looking forward to having "on screen", as it were, for years. It was I hope it was worth the wait. Please let me know what you think.

On a more personal note, this year I said goodbye to Suede, my feline companion for the past 14 years. He was already an adult cat of about 7 when we rescued him, and although his precise age is uncertain, we know he was at least 20 when I held him as he passed peacefully. No small amount of what you've read over the years was written with him on my lap or nearby. He was gentle and affectionate to everyone he met, even at the very end, and I miss him terribly. He was a singular cat.

I don't need well-wishes or anything. I just want him to be remembered. So if I may ask something of those of you who can, please go to these two image links and take a moment to think of him:

Undated photo: https://i.imgur.com/QTyKSAD.png

Earlier this year: https://i.imgur.com/09sqdFA.png

Farewell, my beloved old friend. Up, up, up, past the Russell Hotel.

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