

Monstrous Compendium Online

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10689963) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/10689963>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Sword Art Online , Eberron
Relationship:	Kirigaya Kazuto Kirito/Yuuki Asuna Asuna
Characters:	Kirigaya Kazuto Kirito , Yuuki Asuna Asuna , Argo (Sword Art Online) , Tsuboi Ryoutarou Klein , Andrew Gilbert Mills Agil , Shinozaki Rika Lisbeth , Sachi (Sword Art Online) , Fuurinkazan
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Fantasy , Crossover , Dragons , Transformation , Youkai , Monsters , Don't copy to another site
Language:	English
Collections:	Kallipsos epics , Suggested Good Reads , Ultra favorite , Works Worth Rereading , Lovely Pieces , Recommended Fics to Reread , So Much Talent on AO3 , the ones that stay good when the novelty wears off , frankly fantastic fics , Masterpieces to Binge , Why I ♥ ao3 , SAO Crossover Fics Only , moon's top shelf fics
Stats:	Published: 2017-04-21 Completed: 2019-04-23 Words: 102,658 Chapters: 13/13

Monstrous Compendium Online

by [Vathara](#)

Summary

Canon, Kayaba spoke of a vision; of a castle in the sky. In another world, that castle is real....

The players of SAO have just signed up for a job interview. Plotting dragon style.

Some dragons need to be slain.

Notes

This started as a fantasy AU idea, then effectively became an Eberron crossover AU with Droaam replaced by... heh. SAO and Eberron, definitely not mine.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The Lonely Gorgon

“So you’ve returned, human.” A dark chuckle, barely louder than the rustle of green silk skirts. “You’re either brave, or foolish.” She halted, almost within reach. “What’s this?”

Gaze carefully on the floor so he just saw the toes of Stheno’s black leather sandals, Kirito offered the obsidian sunglasses in an upturned hand. “You said, whatever gaze you hold turns to stone.” He smiled, though he could almost feel his heart thudding in his chest. “But these hold any gaze. And they’re already stone.”

Delicate as a butterfly’s pricking feet, clawed fingers touched his palm.

This is it. Either I’ve guessed right, or-

Stheno took the dark glasses.

<<The Lonely Gorgon: Quest Complete.>>

His avatar didn’t really breathe. But Kirito felt like gasping anyway. Level gained, experience - he’d look at it later. Stheno wasn’t an enemy, and she was apparently very, *very* difficult to aggro. She’d still left scores of careless players paralyzed or poisoned, and had carried out at least one TPK on a group that had deliberately attacked her rather than consider her quest.

Given the monsters that roamed the floors of Aincrad, even momentary paralysis was terrifying.

I haven’t been turned, Kirito told himself, as he had every day since the game had become their world. *I’m not going to be turned.*

I’ll die before I’m turned.

A sobering thought, and not one he planned to share. With anyone. Fuurinkazan, Argo, Asuna - they could decide for themselves what they could bear. He - couldn’t.

The monsters can kill me, but I won’t lose to this world!

“You may look at me.”

Startled, Kirito glanced up. Tensed, waiting for the status effect to strike-

She’s beautiful.

Not human, obviously; scales speckling her face like tiny emerald freckles, cobras in the same verdant hues curling out of long, dark red hair. But that was a friendly face behind dark glasses, and if the smile hinted at fangs in it... well, he’d seen worse.

Sometimes, much worse.

“We don’t see that many humans this far inside Aincrad,” Stheno mused. “What brings you here?”

Another quest?

It could be, even if Argo hadn’t picked up any rumors of another one linked to Stheno. No one else had even gotten close to completing the Lonely Gorgon before; it was likely Cardinal hadn’t had time to spawn new rumors yet.

Go for it. “We mean to defeat the Lord of the Black Iron Castle.”

“A worthy goal, if true. The Dark Pack’s lord is a threat to all of Aincrad.” Snake tongues flicked in and out, as if to taste his truthfulness. “Yet I had thought the nations of Galifar - even the gnomes of Zilargo - denied there was such an evil lord, or such a castle. Only unholy monsters dwell within the hidden valleys, the mountain fortress of Aincrad, with no more just fate than to be slain and perish utterly.” One clawed hand waved gracefully at the sword harnessed over his shoulder. “And of the humans of Galifar, only their fiercest soldiers and mage-warriors have such skills. So how come you here, human? To a land where all youkai’s hands rise against you in dread and fear for their very lives?”

World information. *Oh, Argo’s going to love this!* “We are not humans of Galifar,” Kirito said steadily. “We are from islands far beyond the elvish kingdoms, so far that we only first heard rumors of Aincrad months ago.” He hesitated. *Stheno has to be a pretty advanced AI. I have to try.* “My name is Kirito.”

“Is it, then.” Her voice was quiet. Curious. Her snakes barely stirred, but their gold eyes fixed on him. “If rumor is all that touched you, how came you to my homeland?”

“One of the Dark Pack’s wizards, Akihiko Kayaba,” Kirito replied. *You wrote yourself into the game, bastard. Let’s see what your own AI does with this.* “He wove a spell to pluck twenty thousand souls from our realm, and teleport them here, to Aincrad.”

Cobras hissed, and Stheno frowned. “Twenty thousand humans with no knowledge of our realm save rumor... so. The Ebon Wolf meant to take you all for his own creatures.” Slowly, she shook her head. “Twenty thousand trained warriors, newly turned, with no kith or kin to help defeat the bloodlust in their hearts. Aincrad would be destroyed, utterly.”

“We weren’t warriors when we first came here.” Kirito glanced at her, then at one of the snarling minotaur statues that guarded the entrance to Stheno’s cave. “And surely the Ebon Wolf could not hope to face you.”

“And surely he would not face me,” Stheno said dryly. “Why should he, when he could summon a thousand turned mages and warriors to besiege me instead? I am immortal, not invincible.” The medusa tilted her head, as if he’d said something very odd. “Not warriors? Then how did you escape his minions?”

“Some of us didn’t.” He’d never expected the Town of Beginnings to turn into such a nightmare. Kayaba’s *starting tutorial*, wererats grabbing a hapless NPC and biting down,

before the horrified youkai town guards arrived to chase them off, and seize their terrified, infected victim, and-

Kirito flinched, remembering the sickening pop of mutating flesh and bone as the man had begged to die.

That had been bad enough. But the fear that had swept through the players, as the first unlucky few encountered more lycanthropes, and found out the hard way that Kayaba *wasn't bluffing*....

This is our reality, now.

"Some of us didn't," Kirito repeated, half to himself. "I was lucky. I knew a little about swords before I was brought here. And I've learned more, often due to the kindness of strangers. Many of them youkai strangers." He met that dark-shaded gaze. "I'm not from anywhere in Galifar. I want to defeat the Ebon Wolf. We all do."

"We?" Stheno raised an elegant brow, snakes curling. "Survivors of twenty thousand stolen from hearth and home, and you'd have me believe you're all of one mind?"

A very complex AI. "No, of course not," Kirito said seriously. "But some of us will fight." His voice caught in his throat. He took a breath, and made it steady. "It's the only way we'll go home."

Dark lenses shaded her gaze, but he thought her eyes narrowed. "Come with me."

Have I triggered a quest, or not?

One crevice in Stheno's cave wasn't what it seemed.

Paint, not magic, Kirito realized, reaching out to touch the false shadows that directed attention away from the very real passageway. *A Detect spell wouldn't find this. You'd have to see it.* "Who threatens you?" he blurted out.

Ahead of him in the flowing channel of dark stone, Stheno glanced back, cobras curling up. "You believe someone threatens me?"

"You don't live in that cave," Kirito declared. "You make it look as if a monster lives there; gnawed bones, the fire pit, the statues. But there's no soot on your dress, and you don't smell like smoke." Small details. Most people wouldn't even look for them in another game. Who'd bother programming in stains and stinks, when players wanted a fantasy?

But Kayaba was a perfectionist. In SAO, details *mattered*.

"You're a medusa," Kirito went on, "and the legends say their magic rivaled the gods' own offspring, which is why they were... cursed." Oh hell. Talk about earning a penalty on his reaction roll.

Stop talking and you'll fail this for sure. Maybe you can still salvage it. "You make it look as if there's no magic around you at all," Kirito persevered. "Why? Who do people think you

are? Who are your enemies trying to find?”

An impish smile tugged at her lips. “Maybe I just like my privacy.” She stepped forward, and out of sight.

Where did she-?

He smelled... *green*.

...Oh.

The twists and turns of the lava-tube passageway had trapped light, making the corridor seem to be just another obsidian-dark stretch of cave. But one more step had taken him beyond the last bend of stone, where sunlight washed down over trees and blooming herbs like a glittering waterfall.

Kirito picked where he put his feet, afraid to stray off the subtle path worn into the underbrush. He didn’t have the Herbalism Skill, but he could identify a half-dozen rare plants for healing or magical components just glancing around. There was Nightbane, and Rattlesnake Master for treating venom damage, Royal Catchfly to ward off insect swarm mobs, Firepink whose tiny notched petals added bonuses to Fire effects....

And one bunch of vibrant azure blossoms that seemed to have sprouted from a curling sculpture of silver-white bark and wood.

Yggdrasil Shoots. The same as the Tree that holds up Aincrad. I’m in a Pixie Garden!

Kirito froze, not daring to move. Almost not daring to exist. Pixies were small mobs, generally armed with weapons no larger than needles. Apparently laughable, compared to the sheer mass and DPS of a level boss, or even a pack of Dagger Dogs.

Small mobs. Small, complex-AI, magic-using, beast taming mobs....

He’d rather be facing Illfang all over again. Kirito slowly scanned the upper branches of the trees surrounding this hidden glen, catching flutters that might be tiny wings. They could be anywhere. Scan *might* find them. A Detect spell might work better, if he’d had one, pixies were intrinsically magical... but then again, so were most of the herbs here.

And so is Stheno.

A double layer of concealment. And none of it by active magic.

This is important. It has to be. He gulped. *Oh no. Argo’s going to kick herself for missing this.... This isn’t a quest. It’s a triggered event!*

And he was alone. Wonderful. Klein was right; staying solo really was going to bite him.

Well, if I die, he’ll say “I told you so-”

“Cautious.” Stheno had faded out of the bushes at his side, as if the plants themselves had parted for her. “Wise. You should put this on, I think, before you take another step.” She held out a small ring of peacock-green and purple-copper feathers, and reached for his right hand.

He let her take it, curious and worried. She’d had plenty of chances to attack him already. And when something in a quest was stated as “you should”, that generally meant *do this or quit the quest if you don’t want to die*-

<<Stheno’s Gift: the Cockatrice Feather Ring.>>

The what?

Downy feathers tickled his index finger, before the ring slipped under his half-gloves as if leather had swallowed it. Nothing seemed to change.

Stheno stepped back, and gave him a smile that was Argo’s best *I know something you don’t*. Picked up a basket, running grain through clawed fingers like a snake-haired farmwife. “Here, chick chick chick!”

Chirps like sparrows answered her, quail-sized creatures with clawed wings fluttering and strutting out of the bushes, toothed maws snapping up stray insects flushed out by their passage.

Archaeopteryxes? But they’re so many colors-

One of the bitten insects turned stony gray, before a green-and-black feathered hen crunched it in strong jaws, feeding the grit to a rainbow dozen of peeping fluffy chicks.

“Oh,” Kirito said, stunned. “So that’s what a cockatrice looks like. Argo was wondering... eep!”

Stheno chuckled, shoving the basket into his grip. “Go on. They won’t bite.”

Easy for you to say. I don’t do tests of bravery. Leave that to jerks like Kibaou-

No. Stheno had given him a gift. This wasn’t a test of bravery.

It’s a test of trust.

If he could trust Stheno to look at him through obsidian glasses, how could he not trust her now? Reaching down, Kirito let the hen sniff his hand.

Clawed wings gripped his fingers, pulling them down to draw the scent in better. “*Chirrrr...*”

“*Cheep!*”

He went down in a pile of clawed fluff, trying not to giggle in exhausted relief. *Good thing I’m not allergic to feathers.*

“Don’t let them get pushy.” Stheno helped him rescue the basket, chuckling under her breath. Scattered her share of the grain, and cooed to a chick or two; then led them all farther down the path to where air turned cooler and moist, water trickling down a fern-wreathed cliff of granite to fill a small pool before running away in a clear stream. And sprouting in the midst of that pool....

Kirito almost froze on the spot, staring at the gigantic <<Jade Vine>> that lifted toward the sun. He’d seen one or two of the living-stone plants in other volcanic landscapes, but those had been small, fragile bits of jade, vines thinner than a straw and barely reaching his knee. This was as tall and sturdy as a wisteria in full glory, every tendril supporting chains of rubies like bunches of ripe raspberries.

No. Not rubies. <<Youkai Bloodstones.>>

The critical spell component that a youkai lord could use to transform a human player into... something else. He’d seen one at the end of a few quests, always politely walking away. Once he’d seen half a dozen, glimmering in a bakeneko youkai’s keeping and guarded like the priceless treasures they were. In Aincrad’s lore, a Bloodstone was the blood and memories of a youkai hero, frozen in stone so the clan could call upon lost knowledge in their hour of need. Or - rarely - so the clan could gift a deserving human with that trace of *other*, and adopt them into their new family.

He’d seen one Bloodstone at a time. At most, seven.

Stheno had *thousands*.

Argo couldn’t have paid him to get any closer.

“Now.” The medusa seated herself on a boulder carved into a friendly nook, with a lichen-gray and green cushion to make it more comfortable. “Tell me what you know of this foul wizard, Akihiko Kayaba. Few youkai have seen any of the Dark Pack and lived to tell of it. Tell me of his spell, and all that has passed since it brought you here.”

“Everything?” Kirito said faintly. “That could take a while.”

“To defeat the Ebon Wolf?” Stheno leveled a stern look at him. “I have all the time you need.”

Clear all 100 levels, Kayaba had said, defeat the Lord of the Black Iron Castle, and you will be returned to your proper realm.

It was worth a try.

“Four months ago,” Kirito began, “we were invited to a grand tournament. A place where we could... play... at being brave warriors and mages....”

Asleep at last. Stheno watched the still avatar of a human boy rest under the warmth of her flock. Fitting guardians; as one elan ranger had warned her, this young swordsman was

almost as wary as a wild cockatrice himself.

Make that a feral cockatrice, the seeress thought darkly. Lost and abandoned. He hasn't despaired, but so many of the others....

One of the chicks shifted on Kirito's shoulder, its first green-black adult feathers gleaming against black hair. Stheno's breath caught, as memory stabbed her heart. *Connlan.*

No. Connlan was... Connlan had been older. And he was gone. The last of Aincrad's Moonswords to fall, and the one she'd never expected to miss so much.

Who'd expect an exile of House Vadalis to take so well to our ways?

And that was what had hurt the most. He'd come so far, from that desperate young warlock who'd made it into Swiftwater Pass. Struggled so bravely; first to fight the evil that had infected him, and then to win true acceptance among the youkai who'd saved him. He'd fought so *hard*.

And Karrnath had killed him, with no more thought than swatting a fly. Less; the wizards hadn't tried to murder him, they'd tried to murder all medusas, in hopes of truly slaying-

Stheno winced, shoving memory away. It was true memory. But it wouldn't help any of them now.

Rising, she stalked downstream, around a willow-draped bend that with a little magic would block all sound from Kirito's hearing. Even yelling. She rather thought there would be yelling.

A whisper to set the ward of silence, and she raised her hands over the stream. Water flowed up to clawed fingertips, gathering into a shimmering sphere. Sunlight glowed, caught in the lens of water, brighter and brighter-

Cleared, into the massive head of a red dragon. "*Lady Stheno,*" the dragon chuckled. "*To what do I owe this pleasure?*"

"Lord Beniryuu." Stheno's lips thinned. "Tell me why I shouldn't advise Euryale to rip out your beating heart." *Or ask Vincent to plot routes into your lair...*

No. That was a threat best left unspoken. In case she ever needed it to be not a threat, but a promise.

Besides. If she knew Valentine, the ranger had already scouted every lair Beniryuu claimed, and several more the dragon was sure no one knew of.

"*Charming as ever.*" A rumbling laugh. "*What have you Seen, to make you so testy?*"

"You've brought children into Aincrad!"

"*Of course I have.*"

Damn all smug dragons and their thrice-damned Prophecies. “The youkai lords bargained with you for warriors, not children! Willing souls, who would *choose* to join our land and our cause-”

“And they will.” A thread of smoke rose from red-scaled nostrils. *“I’ve watched humans for many centuries, dear lady. They will adapt. Especially the children.”*

“Not if they’re afraid they’ll become monsters!” Stheno sank claws into rippling water. “You show them a human being infected by a lycan, and never tell them there’s a way to fight the infection? To keep their own minds - their own souls! - and survive?”

“I thought I would leave that to the clan lords in the game. Some of the bakeneko and kamitachi have already adopted their first players.” The dragon smirked. *“Before this level, none of the players would have had enough magic in their veins to survive casting a purification.”*

Stheno saw red, and knew she needed the lenses. Even through scrying water, her gaze would have petrified any lesser creature. “This world is a simulation! They don’t have to cast the spells-”

“But they will have to, once we bring them to our world. They will have to know exactly what they can do... and how frail an infected human is.” The dragon’s breath hissed. *“We are at war, dear lady. The elves breed thin and slow, yes - but the rest of the nations of Galifar multiply like rabbits, compared to our kind. In the time it takes one dragon to hatch and grow to leave the nest.... Hah. Not even half that long. In the decades we need to raise one true-born lycan to master the shift, the humans can train a score of simple spearmen and two mage-wrights to arm them all with silversteel potions. We have no time for half measures!”*

“We are youkai, not monsters!” Stheno hissed. “What you have done is wrong! They fear us; they believe they’re dying-”

“And if they assume our Aincrad is a game, they will die.” The dragon gave her a cold look. *“Wrong? This, from Stheno the Fierce? Stheno, blood of Cato herself? Stheno of the Night of Shattered Stone, who slew more than Euryale and Medousa together?”*

“Pointless deaths.” Grief for her dead still clutched her heart, sharp as if it had been yesterday. “None of it brought our mortal kin back.”

“Never pointless.” Red eyes glowed with inner fire. *“In one night, you broke the back of their mage-corps. You halted the Alliance advance, and bought the youkai lords time to savage them, and drive them beyond the Walls of Storm. In one night, you changed the world!”*

So much death. So many lost. Stheno swallowed tears. She hated humans, she would always hate the Five Nations for what they’d done....

But that was the Five Nations. The humans of SAO were innocent.

“And now, we will change it again.” Beniryuu’s voice was a purring whisper, persuasive as only a dragon’s could be. *“So they fear what they might become? Good. We want those who can conquer their fear! Would you have them ours first, and only know fear once your blood runs through their veins?”*

Stheno’s lips tightened, almost baring fangs. She hated dragon charm almost as much as she hated humans. “What. Do. You. *Want?*”

“Only to know what party has sparked your... reasonable concerns,” the dragon said silkily. *“Most of those with a high enough level have decided your quest is too perilous for the likely reward. Who looked beyond the obvious, and won your favor?”*

And if she didn’t tell him, he’d just look in the records of his inscrutable machines. “It wasn’t a party. Just a lonely human boy.” She sniffed, as if the topic were beneath her. “Really, Lord Beniryuu. I’ll slay those who offer me violence, certainly - but a child? What do you take me for?”

“A solo completed your quest?” For the first time in decades, the dragon looked startled. *“How?”*

“He used his wits, as well as his blade.” She smirked at him. “Akihiko Kayaba had best not appear as a foe until the very end, lord dragon. You might find it painful, otherwise.”

“So they’ve already begun to accept that humans can be the enemy.” Ruby eyes were half-lidded, thoughtful. *“Good. We must nurture that spark within them.”* The massive head inclined to her, plots already working through the faint haze of magic about him. *“Good fortune with your guest, Lady Stheno. I wonder if I’ll see him again, in the Black Iron Castle?”* A reptilian chuckle. *“I wonder what he’ll be?”*

In a burst of sun-dazzle, her globe rained back down into the stream.

Stheno caught water in cupped palms, and hesitated. The red dragon was pricking at her pride, she knew it....

Yet she couldn’t help but wonder. It was such a simple spell.

She pictured the youkai races within her mind, and breathed a name into the water. “Kirito.”

Clear liquid clouded, and blackened.

Breath hissed between her teeth as Stheno watched a parade of horror and death. Bakeneko, draconic, lycan, oni; Kirito’s spirit flinched from them all, and so many more.

He doesn’t want power, Stheno realized. He doesn’t long to destroy his enemies. All he wants, is to be himself.

And this was a human Beniryuu had chosen to ensnare in his game? Damned fool of a dragon! Yes, there was enough magic locked in that mortal soul to make a jorougumo spell-weaver drool; magic that would only grow in strength and power, as the young swordsman

used that formidable will to stay alive. But the wisps of emotion in his aura were all wrong for a child despairing of ever finding a place in his own world.

Kirito hadn't wanted to flee his home. He'd wanted to *find* it.

And now you are caught in our war, like the others, Stheno thought sadly. *I wish I could-*

Black water cleared.

...That's not possible.

Perhaps Beniryuu had left some lingering prank-spell in the water. Perhaps her own heavy heart was deceiving her. Surely, even with *twenty thousand* humans, the red dragon couldn't have found....

I have to know.

Gathering fresh water with a scoop of her hand, Stheno cast again.

Afternoon. Kirito blinked at golden sunlight, shading his eyes to look around the garden. Except for one bright-combed cockatrice giving him the evil eye from a tree branch, and a few hens and chicks scratching for bugs and seeds, he was alone.

He breathed in a sigh of relief. Stheno's company had been pleasant, yes. Like talking to another person. But time to himself, when he was safe - that was all too rare. Especially in such peaceful surroundings. You didn't see Kermes Knotweed and Orchil Irises every day-

Wait. What?

He'd laid down to nap near a bunch of simple <<Uncommon Flowers.>> He'd checked that before letting himself sleep; there wasn't anything much more embarrassing than accidentally rolling over a necessary crafting component. But now, awake-

<<Kermes Knotweed. Orchil Iris. Shaman's Fingerprints....>>

The plants even looked subtly different. Some dark green leaves now had lighter sage-green patches near the stems, like fingerprints. Others had leathery fronds and the first hints of red buds that said the root-nodules were ripe for harvesting. The irises had dustings of pollen on their flowers he could smell, like hot sunlight on cedar twigs.

The system's letting my Scan pick up more details. Kirito brushed a finger over one of the Knotweeds, studying it carefully. *Why? And why now?*

Sitting up, he took off one half-glove to look at Stheno's ring.

<<Stheno's Gift: the Cockatrice Feather Ring.

<<Automatic save vs. touch petrification.

<<+10 vs. petrification/paralysis/poison.

<<Col: None. Perm-equipped.>>

So anti-poison and petrification. Nothing about adding bonuses to Scan.

It was the *perm-equipped* part that raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Kirito could think of a half-dozen reasons why he couldn't take this ring off, and none of them were good.

Well, one might be, the swordsman admitted to himself. If this is just the start of a continuing questline - it might need someone who can't be petrified.

And so far, Sword Art Online had been fair. Not easy, and definitely not *safe*, but fair. Kayaba wouldn't have programmed in a cursed item without a warning to a player of what they were picking up. He hoped.

Still doesn't explain why my Scan is picking up these herbs. Unless - I finished the quest. Maybe the experience leveled it up more?

With another glance to check that he was still alone, Kirito opened his Skills list. There was his Scan, and yes, it *was* higher. That could only help the two subtrees he'd already unlocked, Nightvision and Tracking-

Three subtrees, he saw, heart sinking. *Magesight*.

Oh no. No, no, no; he'd gone for a straight DPS build from the start of the game, even in the beta. Sure, he'd talked to people who had indulged in magic. Like Argo, who'd taken to sneaky spell-code in the game like hackers to slipping through firewalls....

But he'd always fought as a *swordsman*. And if Argo's information was correct, there was only one way a person could pick up Magesight.

Swallowing hard, Kirito went through his entire Skills list, one by one.

There was one Skill too many.

Sorcery.

That... didn't make *sense*. SAO magic use came in four Skills you could choose. Wizardry, Mage-crafting, Shamanic Paths, or Potions - which overlapped with Herbalism, if he remembered right. And he'd never picked *any* of them-!

...He was panicking. That was bad.

Deliberately, Kirito closed his Skills list. And forced a smile. "I think I found a bug."

Even the best beta-tester hadn't gotten past the eighth level. <<Stheno's Cave>> was well beyond that. And <<The Lonely Gorgon>> was a complicated quest. You had to be able to sneak. You had to be able to fight. You had to be able to recognize and slip past the <<Magical Wards>> on the <<Scarlet Wizard's Library,>> and then you had to be able to read enough <<Common>> and <<Draconic>> to puzzle out which of the ancient tomes was his <<Bestiary.>> And *then* you had to put together tales, rumors, and Stheno's own words to figure out something that might work, and search the wilderness for <<Obsidian Shards>> a mage-crafter could polish into protective lenses. Which required the Survival Skill, at a level

most people just didn't have yet. He wouldn't have leveled it nearly this high so early, if the first Martial Arts Skill quest hadn't somehow led to a continuing quest line. Every few levels, he'd run into his old teacher again, and Vincent Valentine was a *ghost* in the wilderness.

You needed all of that. And all the while you had to be devious, so the locals wouldn't realize you were trying to be friendly with the man-eating medusa outside town....

Except the Bestiary said medusas didn't eat people. Stheno was a killer, yes. Cannibal monster, *no*. The Scarlet Wizard had to know that.

So why does everyone think she is?

Something to worry about later. The key problem here was, he'd completed a quest meant for an entire adventuring party. And somehow, the developers had missed the possibility that a solo *might* do it.

The Sorcery Skill should have been dumped on a magic-user, Kirito thought ruefully. But I was the only one here. So....

What a *mess*.

Well. Just because he had it, didn't mean he had to use it. Ever. He'd seen the way magic sucked in people in the beta. Even Argo, though she'd kept a fairly level head for someone who could now turn invisible. It was one thing to lean on magic in a game, when you could log out and remind yourself the real world didn't let you throw fireballs. But here and now, with Aincrad their only reality - no. He had to think past the game. He *had* to get home. And given how much he'd seen people *change* these past few months, just to survive... no. No magic.

And I'd better not tell Argo I do have it, or she'll never let me hear the end of it-

His hands prickled.

Kirito flexed his fingers, but it didn't seem to be coming from the ring. Just - everywhere. A pulse in his palms, like the one he hadn't felt since his avatar had first opened its eyes. A crackle, like touching cat fur on a cold, dry day. And then a tingling pain, as if that cat had twisted to sink fangs into his flesh-

Something's wrong with my HUD!

His hit points were fluctuating up and down, pulsing in time with the shocking pain. His Skills and Equipment lists were flickering; there, not there, there again, text on them twisting from Japanese to Draconic and back.

Oh god; he really *had* found a bug.

Bad enough he was locked in a death game at a madman's whim. That he'd forced himself into a life as a solo, a Beater, so the unity of purpose that had brought the players past Illfang would survive. Now he was going to die because of a stupid bug, that nobody had found because Kayaba had been so eager to *murder* innocent people....

It hurt. Like something was reaching inside him and twisting, and damn it, the game was supposed to be *fair*-

Make it stop!

Dark fire blazed in his hands.

Kirito bit his lip to keep from yelping, trying to bat the purple-blue flames away. Which was crazy, fire wasn't solid-

Except this... sort of was. He felt something, delicate as a bit of gossamer ribbon, tickling off of his skin as it fluttered toward the stream.

Pop.

Blinking spots out of his eyes, Kirito held still and listened. For one second, all had been *dark*. Even now there were holes in his vision. Anything might strike through them.

"Hmm." The medusa had a warm chuckle. "Interesting way to wake up."

He glanced Stheno's way, cursing the still-dark splotches in his vision. "That wasn't- I didn't mean to-"

"Hush." Clawed fingers gripped his shoulder, points just pricking the surface of his coat. "Catch your breath. The first casting always hurts." She crouched slightly, dark lenses meeting his gaze. "You're not going to run screaming, are you? Galifar humans think sorcery comes from monstrous blood in your lineage, but I'd hoped your islands knew differently."

Exhaustion hit like a wave; if it hadn't been for her hand, he would have stumbled. His Skills and Equipment lists shimmered, then closed. His HUD-

Two bars where there should have been one. HP was green, but slightly down, just as it got when you fought for hours without taking a break. And below that, in the yellow that marked half-exhausted....

It wasn't there before. I didn't have it.

Kirito shivered. And decided maybe, just maybe, it was the better part of valor to sit down.

Ack.

Ah. Right. Sit, and unlatch his sword harness, so he could sit without poking either of them somewhere unpleasant. If Stheno hadn't attacked by now, she wasn't going to get aggro'd by a few questions. "What's... sorcery?"

"*Huh.*" Stheno settled herself on the green beside him, snakes alert and interested. "That, I didn't expect... shhh, shhh, it's *all right*. Sorcery doesn't mean you're a youkai. All that lives has magic. Wizards tap it through study and practice. Shamans speak with the spirits, the fay, the elements themselves. Potion-makers, mage-crafters - they use skill and hands to draw magic from themselves and the world about them. But in those of us with sorcery... hmm."

She knuckled her chin, thinking. "If wizardry taps a deep well within, in sorcerers that well bubbles closer to the surface. Like a spring." A soft laugh. "And when we're young, and don't know how to use what grows within us... eventually, it bubbles over."

Which implied this could happen again. Damn it. He cradled his sword closer to his shoulder, glad for the familiar weight of steel. "I'm a *swordsman*."

Stheno raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to go on.

That, or the AI just didn't parse it. Kirito sighed, tired beyond what the HP bar could show. "Is there any way to get rid of sorcery?" He hadn't asked for this Skill. If the game was fair, there should be a way to wipe it off his list.

"There is." Stheno glanced away, troubled.

Oh, wonderful. If he'd thought her quest was hard, this one might be deadly-

"Why do you want to?" The medusa folded her hands over each other, as if afraid they'd betray some emotion she wished hidden. Her snakes stirred like a restless wind. "I have seen those who've had power scourged from their spirits. There is something... empty... about them."

Which implied getting rid of Sorcery would cost him at least a level or two. Ouch.

I can win back lost levels. I'm not going to give up my self. "I have allies who have taken up magic since we were brought here," Kirito said quietly. "They're different now. It's hard to describe." His hands curled, fighting not to become fists. "It's as if they forget they can solve their problems any other way. As if they think they were born to it, and just remembering, and it's our world that's becoming the dream. I-" He stopped. Took a deep breath. "My family is waiting for me. I won't let them become strangers." *Not twice. Not again.* "I will go anywhere in this world to defeat the Ebon Wolf and win us free. But I'll do it with this sword."

Stheno's shoulders slumped. "Is that your choice, then?"

"Yes." The AI probably wouldn't get this, but he had to say it to someone. "What good is all the magic in the world, when one bite from a wererat...."

He couldn't go on. He hadn't had to kill a turned player to protect himself, not yet. Not *directly*. But he had led one luckless maddened soul through a nest of Venus Man-traps. That lonely, raging howl, cut off by *crunch* and *snap*-

"There were no shamans in the City of Beginnings?" Stheno frowned. "And of course, there were no Moonswords. There have never been many, and we lost the few that survived in the Last War."

The Last War. He could hear the pain and fear of it in her voice. But the hint was too valuable to pass up. "Shamans can help? I know they can cure wounds, but - lycanthropy?"

“If an infected soul is brought to them in time,” Stheno stated. “It’s not a minor evocation. The shaman must have a strong helper spirit, even to cleanse an infected bite. To cure one the curse has fully taken - that needs the most powerful of spirit-workers. And even they may fail.”

Kirito swallowed, mind racing. *I have to tell Argo this. Get player shamans talking to the NPCs. If there are high-level NPC shamans willing to help us-!*

“But before the Last War bled us,” Stheno went on, “while we still sought to rein in errant lycans, unaware of the depths of the Ebon Wolf’s evil... we found another way.”

Kirito tensed. And guessed. “Moonswords?”

The medusa inclined her head, cobra hoods flaring. “The greatest barrier to a cure is *time*. From the moment teeth meet in flesh, the victim is racing the moon, and the darkness in their own soul. Some have the strength to fight for weeks. Others, only hours. And often the greatest shamans are old and frail. They have no place on the battlefield.” Snake eyes dipped, almost a wink. “Though I wouldn’t try telling Grandmother Tetsutora that. I rather favor not being a pincushion.”

Grandmother Iron Tiger? Eep. “So someone has to buy time to get infected people to a shaman,” Kirito thought out loud. “Which means they have to be there, while the fight’s going on....” His breath caught. “Lady Stheno. What is a Moonsword?”

A wistful smile crossed her face. “A wielder of eldritch power, who can fight.”

If he were in his own body, Kirito thought he might be deafened by the blood racing in his ears. “Please,” he said faintly. “Explain.”

“There are herbs that can be used to clean wounds,” Stheno gestured to her garden. “But it takes Magesight to find them; like a lycan, such herbs disguise themselves as *something else*. Shaman’s Fingerprints is one of the easiest to use. Its virtue is weak, but if the wound is only a scratch, it may be enough. A Moonsword begins with his Sight, and his courage; for while his powers are small he must be *there* before the curse takes hold.” Her shaded gaze met his, fathomless. “But over time, a Moonsword can do more than just delay the curse. The evil in the wound that goes beyond the shift of body, the curse that twists an innocent mind and heart to raving bloodlust and horror - *that* is a monster. And that monster can be *fought*.”

Kirito drew himself up straight, intent. “How?”

“Lycans can adopt with a Bloodstone, like any youkai,” Stheno said plainly. “But when they bite... what is forced on an unwilling soul is two infections, not one. The first touches only the body, changing mortal blood to one of us. The second - that malevolence is a fragment of the akuma that is the curse itself.” Clawed hands curled and uncurled, as if she would rend that demonic spirit with her bare hands. “When a human will loses the battle to survive, that akuma-shard fuses with their soul. Twists it. Taints it. But if a Moonsword can reach a human before they lose that battle - with enough power, you can pull the akuma from spirit to flesh. And if it can bleed....”

“It can die,” Kirito breathed. Hearing that howl in memory. That scream, that meant he would live, but someone else’s loved one had died.

If only I’d had another way. If only-

Wait. “You said, *you*.” Kirito blurted out. “I’m not-”

“But you could be.” She gazed at him, resolute. “You have the strength. You have the will.” A quiet smile. “Most of all, you have the heart. How many humans would help a monster stop killing?”

...It wasn’t a bug.

Cardinal hadn’t dumped Sorcery on him by default. If what Stheno said about Moonswords was accurate - the quest had been meant for a fighter who *didn’t* want to kill. Who didn’t look at a youkai and think *monster*.

Kirito hugged himself and his sword, trying not to tremble. With fear or rage, he wasn’t sure. Kayaba was *killing* people. How could the man have written a quest meant to gauge kindness? “Did - did you give me sorcery, Lady Stheno?”

Cobra hoods furled, as Stheno sighed. “I could have,” she said levelly. “I am a youkai lord. I have that power.”

A youkai lord. Kirito tensed, somehow not surprised. *No wonder she could pull off a TPK. They’re supposed to be as strong as a raid boss.*

“But I did not,” the medusa went on. “I would not force power on anyone.” A soft chuckle, as she ran her fingers over a stray cockatrice feather. “Mind, I may have nudged it a bit. The way your aura was sparking, your power would have surfaced on its own in a few more days. Likely in the midst of a battle. That is far too common, for young sorcerers.” She grimaced. “With the foes now loose in Aincrad, that could have meant your death.” She waved a hand around the garden. “So I let you rest here, where magic breathes in the very air. And waited.”

Sorcery Skill might be a level-based random event. Kirito frowned, trying to think how he could frame this for Argo. *And high-magic areas might add a bonus to the encounter roll-*

“So I did not break the shell. Only-”

Her hand *moved*, too fast to see.

“Tapped it,” Stheno said softly, fingertip touching his forehead, claw pressing down just slightly above. “Given the chance, you hatched out well enough on your own.”

Hand on the hilt of his sword, Kirito swallowed. And let go. He was used to being the fastest fighter in the room. Stheno was *faster*.

“I have not dealt with many human sorcerers.” Stheno withdrew her hand. “But I have helped many of the adopted learn to live among us. So I know the fear you speak of, when you say those who use magic may lose themselves.” She glanced at the hilt resting against his

shoulder. “You did not know you were a sorcerer before you came to Aincrad. Did you know you were a swordsman?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say *yes, of course*. He’d always planned to conquer this world with wits and steel-

But that was when it was just a game. When losing a fight meant you just had to respawn. When getting bitten by a monster... just lowered your HP. Nothing else.

Four months of death, and everything had changed. He calculated his moves before he made them. Checked every angle of attack, every route that might possibly be used to escape. Because now if a fight was going badly, you didn’t stay to the glorious end. You *ran*.

And then they chase you. A wry smile tugged at Kirito’s lips, as he remembered a dark dungeon corridor, a massively overconfident lizardman, and a kukri that had swung so *close....*

Even now, he still felt some of that hot thrill. Knowing he’d timed his dodge right, knowing this was going to *work-*

Kirito swallowed dryly, facing the truth. *I enjoyed that.*

On the one hand, that was no surprise. This was the game he’d longed to play for months, and there was no greater rush than reaching the very limit of your skill, and *winning*. On the other....

“No,” Kirito admitted, to himself as much as Stheno. Swordplay had been a game. Now it was his life. “I thought I knew. But... no. I didn’t know.”

“Life changes all of us,” Stheno acknowledged. “Even an immortal. You should not fear your magic, any more than you fear your sword.”

“Or any less?” Kirito shot back.

“Ha! Just so.” She clapped her hands and rose, pleased. “*Just* so, young swordsman.” She paused, and weighed him with a look. “Or should I say, young Moonsword?”

Kirito stood, slinging his sword back over his shoulder. “I don’t even know how to use Shaman’s Fingerprints.”

“That, I will teach you....”

Werewolves. Klein gutted the last <<Werewolf Guardsman>> with a snarl, not listening to the cheers start as the <<Limping Werewolf Lord>> was destroyed. Because Kunimittz was down, Kunimittz had been bitten, and if Issin couldn’t heal him....

Fuurinkazan gathered around their fallen man, and waited for the verdict. Klein could already see it wasn’t good. The curly-haired tank’s icon had gone dire orange, and his HP kept fluctuating between green and yellow, despite their bakeneko shaman’s hissed spells.

Klein gulped, and prayed. Despite what everybody had seen on Opening Day, lycanthropic infection wasn't *quite* as fast-moving as Kayaba had portrayed it. The reality was more than nasty enough. It was a DOT, and if you didn't get it completely, it kept *gnawing* at you....

If it goes red, we've lost him.

Klein went to one knee and gripped Kunimittz' whole hand. "Hang in there. You fight, got it? We're going to beat this."

From the way Issin's black-furred ears flattened against his head, they all knew he was lying.

Damn it. I wish we'd all asked that nekomata now.

But the two-tailed cat youkai had only been interested in their shaman. And even if the offer had been made, the thought of living in the game as something not quite human was *spooky*....

Only spooky beat *monster* any day of the week. His guild trusted him to lead them, to make the right call - and damn it, this wasn't *fair*.

Kunimittz glanced at his own HP bar, and swallowed hard. "Guys? Do me a favor."

"Kun," Klein said warningly, gripping his katana hilt. Damn it, he could hear someone running this way. If the other guilds knew Kunimittz was about to turn-

The tank's smile was bleak. "Get me to the edge before I go nuts, okay?"

Hell. It made sense, damn it; once a bitten player's HP went red they were pretty much dead anyway. The system took over and tried to make them bite everyone.

But not Kunimittz. Not one of his guild, damn Kayaba to hell!

"Leader." Kunimittz' voice sank. "Klein, please. Damn it, I'm not going to take you guys down too-"

"If you give up now," a familiar voice growled, "I'll kill you myself!"

Kirito?

Klein hadn't even been sure Kirito would show up for this boss fight. The last time the guilds had met, Kibaou had been nattering on about Beaters again, and Kirito had just disappeared on some damn-fool quest.

One of these days, that's going to get him killed. Or worse.

Apparently not today. The black-clad swordsman skidded down to one knee beside Issin. Opened his inventory with a pull of fingers, and yanked out odd green leaves. "Use these on the wound as an augment. Cast again!"

“Augment?” Issin blanched. “I’ve got a little of the Silent Casting subtree, but augment’s more a Potions thing-”

“Then damn it, just cast!” Kirito crushed the herbs on Kunimittz’ bitten arm, whispering words that seemed to ripple the air over the wound and set veins of green leaves glowing with a violet-and-blue fire.

Activate Component, Klein recognized, gaping. *Since when did Kirito pick up magic?*

Issin, bless his furry ears, didn’t waste time asking. He just gripped Kunimittz’ arm tight enough his claws scraped armor, and gritted out the words to Heal one more time....

Kunimittz’ cursor shattered. Klein’s world went gray.

Orange shards shimmered. Coalesced, slowly coming together, orange to red to purple to blue-

Green. And whole again.

Bite and leaves shattered and vanished, leaving unmarked skin behind.

“What’s going on over there?” Thinker came through the gathering crowd, a contingent of relieved Army guys behind him. “Is something wrong?”

Thinker, not Kibaou. Good. Klein was in a mood to hit someone, and if it’d been the idiot loudmouth he wouldn’t have had the will to hold back. “Nothing’s wrong. Now.” *I hope.* “Issin?”

“It worked.” The shaman sagged in relief. “Kunimittz. You’re okay.” Black ears perked up. “What was that stuff?”

Kirito paled. “You didn’t hear Argo’s shout?”

“She has a new bulletin,” Thinker nodded, as Fuurinkazan looked at each other. “It came in just before the boss fight. I checked for keywords, there was nothing on this level’s boss-”

Kirito buried his face in his hands. *“Read it.”*

Klein eyed his solitary buddy, and flipped through his own menu until he got to his messages. That was the kind of tone that usually came with sharp edges piercing you somewhere painful.

Argo Alert - New Bulletin, read the simple message header. The bulletin itself was a good ten pages. No wonder people had skipped reading it right way, if there wasn’t anything on the boss-

A screen capture of familiar dark leaves. <<*Shaman’s Fingerprints.*>> *Must be found with Magesight. Bonus on save vs. infection. Augment for Heal spells, vs. infection.*

Oh. Oops.

Thinker's eyes went wide. "There's a cure?"

"There's a *treatment*." Kirito lifted his head, hands dropping to his sides. "Shaman's Fingerprints isn't powerful, but it's easy to activate. You don't need magic to use it. Though using it to augment a Heal makes the save better." He materialized more leaves out of his inventory, handing them to the astonished guild leader. "Argo has seeds. The last I heard, she'd found a farmer on level 10 who's going to try growing them."

Thinker took the herbs, eyebrows almost brushing curly hair. "A second chance... how did anyone find this?"

Kirito shrugged. "Ask Argo. The herb likes woodland glades. She said something about the developers having a ginseng fixation."

Klein blinked, and did his best not to let surprise show on his face. *Ask Argo, my foot*. This was *rare* info, the kind that could change the whole game. Argo wasn't going to sell who found it in case Kibaou and other morons started screaming about Beaters keeping life-saving secrets again-

Oh. I'm an idiot.

Rare, game-changing info. And Kirito had been gone for days. On a *quest*.

Damn it, no wonder he's being shifty. If people know it's him - ouch.

Gone long enough to have missed Issin getting adopted. Klein almost held his breath, as Kirito looked at Issin - claws, catlike ears, just an overall air of *wild* - and Issin looked warily back. Helping a shaman in the middle of a fight was one thing; Kirito wouldn't cut and run on someone hurt. Now?

This is no place to talk. "So, Issin," Klein said loudly. "What do we need to do so somebody in Fuurinkazan can help you activate that stuff next time?"

The bakeneko relaxed a little. "Well, from Argo's notes, if somebody's got Herbalism...."

...And Kirito was fading back out of the boss room. *Good*.

As the guilds regrouped and everybody started talking about taverns for drinks, Klein swiped open his message menu.

Kirito. Buddy. We need to talk.

Safe in the most warded garden in the capital of true Aincrad, Stheno fed her flock, considering magic, and fate.

"You look pensive, sister."

"Euryale." Stheno nodded to her chainmail-clad sister, careful not to meet gray eyes. From the way silvery serpents coiled and hissed, the Council of Lords had put the younger medusa

in a *mood*. And when she grew angry, Euryale's gaze was deadly. "I was only thinking on our bargain with Beniryuu." Stheno sighed. "After the Last War, I had hoped to go back to my woodland glade. Yet here I remain, caged even as those young humans in the other world are, so you may guard me when my spirit walks in a dragon's waking dream. It's oddly fitting."

Euryale scowled, claws stroking air near the belt coil that held her spare bowstring. "Nothing to do with humans is fitting."

Ah. So it'd been another battle with the Council over the young ones. Not surprising. "Then perhaps we should tell our fellow lords to stop thinking of those of SAO as human," Stheno said, a bit more sharply than she'd intended. Euryale might champion her vision in public, and save her doubts for the privacy of her sister's garden, but Stheno was *not* another weak-willed courtier currying favor. Even if her strength was in divination, not the battlefield.

"Some of them are not, even now. And many more of them *will* be youkai, before Beniryuu's arcane device runs its course. That their adoption is only of the spirit - *for now* - and not of the body, makes it no less real." Her breath caught. "Especially for the warlocks."

"Warlocks." Euryale's scowl deepened. "*Creating* warlocks. This is madness."

Stheno cast her a look askance.

"Your power is controlled, sister," Euryale admitted, grudging every word. "You rule the wild magic that flows through you. But you have a medusa's will, and millennia of discipline to chain your power. How could any magicless human ever hope to do the same?" She snarled under her breath. "Human warlocks, told they're sorcerers instead. Sorcerers told they're wizards! Sister - you can't think this will work!"

"Remaking the rules of magic, so we may shape it in our favor? It might," Stheno said thoughtfully. "With an arcane device, with a great dragon's will to draw all the power of a planar conjunction, with thousands of souls fighting for survival who do not *know* what magic cannot do... it just might."

"But warlocks?" Euryale's lip curled in disbelief.

"The daelkyr went to great lengths to eliminate any Moonswords - and any warlocks who might *become* Moonswords - they could find," Stheno reminded her. "Powers they fear, we should nurture. And if we *can* train Moonswords, restoring the gifts the Gatekeepers struggled to keep alive these six thousand years, only to mourn them as lost to human hate and vengeance... then we may find allies in the Shadow Marches." *And we need allies, sister. We need them. More than you can imagine.*

From the way silver snakes curled, Euryale heard what she did not say. "You say all other paths lead to death and ruin," she stated. "You *say* this mad scheme is Aincrad's best hope"

"It is," Stheno murmured. "May the gods forgive us."

"Forgive us for working our will on *humans*?" Euryale leaned in toward her, fangs bared.

"What do you think the gods made them for? They are weaker than we, they are *less* than we; they spark and die in less than fourscore years, and perish still bleating for someone to save

them. And you and Beniryuu and *Tetsutora*, of all lycans, claim that we should clasp these weakling murderers to our bosom!”

Naked hate. Coiling rage. Stheno stood in the teeth of it, and endured. “They are hope, sister.”

“Humans *destroyed* our hope!”

“Not these humans.” Euryale might rule this city and those within it, but Stheno would not yield. “They did not curse the Walls of Storm to be barren, land and youkai alike. They did not try to spread that taint even to the snowmelt, to poison our land....”

Her throat seized with grief. The Walls of Storm had been cursed for millennia, sad victims of wizard-wars between demi-humans and the goblin shamans who had once called this land home. But centuries ago her mortal kin had discovered a loophole in that baneful magic: though earth and stone of those mountains were cursed never to bear life again, the snow and water were *not*.

Craft magic with elementals of air and water, shape snowmelt to an airy, solid lattice to hold earth away from the mountain’s bones - and that rescued soil *lived*.

It had been hard, painstaking work. But even mortal medusas had time. Inch by inch, decade by decade, green had begun to cloak the mountains once more. The starkest pass through the Wall had become a haven of boreal jungle, inviting trade....

But with trade had come travelers, and the Dark Pack, and disaster.

The way of the world was war. Stheno had seen too many centuries to deny that. Humans and youkai would fight. That was how the gods had shaped them. To think otherwise... as well wish for autumn never to come, or spring to never return.

What she could not forgive - what she would *never* forgive - was that last Making cast by Karnathi wizards. The mountains’ curse surging into snow and water for one awful night, killing and maiming everything it touched....

We’re thousands of miles from their borders. We’ve never threatened them!

But the Dark Pack had, just as they’d threatened every human and demi-human in the Five Nations. And among the human kingdoms, Karnath’s greatest rival was Breland - who were just across the Walls.

Strike down Aincrad’s strongest defenders, Karnath reasoned, and Breland would turn on them surely as wolves on limping deer. And with Breland’s attention fixed on Aincrad... Karnath had a host of opportunities.

And they are taking them. “The next ten years are critical.” Stheno kept her voice steady, even when she wanted to weep. “Karnath *must* be distracted before their undead army grows enough to threaten Aundair. For now, their necromancers only use the bodies the Karnathi

give them. Once the warmongers around the court unleash those hordes, and gain even a city's worth of corpses to add to them...."

"So? Let the humans war with each other again." Euryale shrugged. "It will only profit us."

"It *will not*." Stheno clenched her fists, claws digging at skin. "The paths have not changed! If Karnath wins, the undead hordes come for us next. If Breland is the victor, the battle with us weakens them so Cyran survivors fracture the nation, and the Mournland spreads. If Aundair triumphs, they will tear Flamekeep from its foundations, and the demons prisoned there will bring darkness to us all. And if *Thrane* wins - the Church of the Silver Flame spreads, and is corrupted, and comes for us. We need another way!"

Euryale let out a hissing breath. "And you think these humans will be your unseen path? Sister...."

"If you find another alternative, tell me." Crystal chimed in the sleeve of her dress, signaling that a player approached Stheno's Cave. "I must do what I can."

"Tread carefully, sister." Euryale stepped away. "I am not the only Lord who doubts Beniryuu."

Elegant as a steel blade, she stalked out of sight.

Stheno sighed, and found her comfortable carved-boulder chair. Took the crystalline diadem from her sleeve, and settled it on her brow. "Link start!"

She opened her eyes to another garden, and listened.

"They didn't read it?" An unfamiliar young woman's voice, incredulous and accusing.

"Everyone was nerved up for the boss fight." Kirito's reply was quiet, and maybe a little rueful. "Ten pages. You need to break it into smaller chunks."

"Shorter's always harder than longer, Ki-bou. I can't believe they didn't read it!"

"They did. After the boss fight." From the echoes, Kirito had paused in the tunnel exit. "Stay here. And don't make any sudden moves. The cockatrices aren't aggressive, but the chicks are curious."

"*Cockatrices?*"

"Heh." Kirito raised his voice. "Lady Stheno? You asked me to bring one I trusted."

"So I did." Stheno moved through her garden, plants parting before her to unveil a cloaked, brown-haired girl, with odd whisker-markings on her face. "And so you have. Argo the Rat. An interesting choice."

Argo's jaw dropped. Stheno had a feeling that didn't happen often. "You know who I am?" she almost squeaked.

“Very complex AI,” Kirito said under his breath.

If you only knew. “Your guidebooks have made interesting reading,” Stheno stated. And interesting fodder for her translation spells, as well. If her people were going to take in humans from another world, she wanted to know how they thought. “I knew there were strange humans in Aincrad, though I did not know how strange until Kirito braved my cave. Even so, I knew you were not a wizard as Galifar knows them.” She arched an eyebrow, truly curious. “They hoard their knowledge; at best, they share it only amongst others of arcane bent. You and your fellow lost humans seem to share it. If sometimes for a fee. Is this common in your islands?”

“Ah...”

“Cardinal can read our pulse and respiration, even if we can’t feel them.” Kirito’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Stick to the truth.”

Interesting. Stheno had known Beniryuu’s computer could detect some falsehood without magic, but she hadn’t known how.

Yet you knew, little human. How?

“Yes and no,” Argo said cautiously, eyeing the bright feathers and teeth peering out of the bushes. “On our islands, people like to work together to solve problems. And... being stuck here is a problem.” She looked around, eyes wide and interested. “Though this is one of the most beautiful places I’ve seen.”

“It is my garden, and my allies’, and I do what I can,” Stheno acknowledged. “Once there were gardens more beautiful still, carved from the cursed mountains, the Walls of Storm, by my people’s hands and magic. Before the humans came. Before the Dark Pack struck, and human vengeance consumed us all.” Grief stabbed her. She paused, waiting for it to unclench its grip. “Shall I tell you of them?”

Argo nodded, eyes alight with the hunger to know. “We would be honored.”

Buddha, what a mess. Argo shared some rations with Kirito as they mulled over Stheno’s story. The background info before Sword Art Online had started said humans and youkai were enemies. Some of the game fluff had given reasons why. But this was different.

It’s like talking to someone who was actually there. Who saw everyone they loved... die.

Someone who’d had the power to take one night of terrifying vengeance. Stheno hadn’t tried to gloss over how she’d infiltrated the heart of each army’s arcane corps, armed with an enchantment of *look at me* and her own terrible gaze.

And special squads of stealthy, strong youkai to follow her. Armed with sledgehammers.

“That’s why you hide as just another monster, isn’t it?” Argo asked, after Stheno fell silent. “The Five Nations are still looking for you.”

“They were always looking for me,” the medusa said quietly. “That is half the reason my mortal kin were slain, in hopes that death would slay me, too.... You truly must be from another world. I am Stheno the Fierce, yes. But I am also Stheno of the True Sight.”

Kirito looked up from the blissful hen in his lap, fingers still scratching through glossy feathers. “You’re a seer.”

The medusa inclined her head.

Kirito drew a deliberate breath. “Then how-?”

“I do not See every possible future,” Stheno said levelly. “Who could? I See what I know to ask of. And even then, I see not *a* future, but - paths. Options, taken and untaken. The Karrnathi wizards have ways to cloud divination. And they were clever. They did not *cast* a curse. Instead, they twisted the malevolence already clinging to the mountains’ bones. Amplified it. And struck.” Obsidian lenses glinted as she shook her head. “Now only the minotaurs dare dwell in the Swiftwater Pass, where the bones of my mortal children lie. The Walls of Storm are abandoned, save for those youkai who can resist the venom within the very earth.”

“Which means the Alliance can’t cross them, either,” Argo pointed out.

“They cannot *settle* them,” Stheno corrected her. “But adventurers and armies have recourse to the power of their gods, who can bring forth clean water from the very air. The Five Nations of Galifar can attack us, if they choose.” Her voice sank. “And sooner or later, they will.”

Argo sat silent, furiously chewing over everything they’d been told, and how it might fit into SAO’s ultimate quest. *Humans have killed youkai, and youkai have killed humans. No one’s just evil here. Everyone had a reason for what they did.*

With one big, glaring exception. “So why did the Dark Pack start infecting humans?”

“Because they could,” Stheno answered. “Lycanthropy is a curse, young human. Some lycans choose to fight it, and vanquish the demon-taint within. Others... choose to do what they wish, rather than what is right.” She stretched out a clawed hand, palm up. “And humans are so very fragile. It is easy for youkai to see them as less. As weaklings. As playthings, to be toyed with and broken.”

Kirito glanced at her. “But you don’t.”

Stheno smiled, just a little. “Medusas are fragile, too. We are agile, and fast. We can endure grievous wounds, if we train our magic to heal ourselves. But we are not oni, who can shrug off a dragon’s blow and fight on. Nor are we lycans, who barely notice blades not of silver or magic.” A susurrus of snakes, shifting in dark red hair. “We are not so different. And like you, we know we make mistakes.”

Guilt, Argo thought, looking at that scale-speckled face. “You didn’t stop the Dark Pack,” she blurted out, before she could think it through. *Oh, that was a bad idea....*

“I did not,” Stheno said quietly. “I told myself that I could not. That I was no warrior, to take on trained lycans and live. That they were far away, in human lands, and how could I walk there without causing greater panic than even a vampire? And all of that was true.” Her shoulders slumped. “But I should have found a way. They are evil. And evil must always be fought. Even when it comes in the guise of your dearest kin.”

Evil has to be fought. Argo mulled over that thought. *That’s the core of the game. Human or monster; if it’s evil, you can’t turn away. You have to do something.* She could already think of a few ways that might factor into the later levels-

Kirito set the cockatrice down. “I’m sorry.” He held out his hands. “No one should have to lose everything because of one mistake.”

Cobras stilled as Stheno looked at his open arms, as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Frankly, Argo wasn’t sure she believed it. Sure, under all that Beater lone-wolf attitude Kirito was a nice kid, but Stheno was a *medusa*....

Stheno’s breath hitched, and she froze.

Oh boy. Um. Ki-bou. Snakes.

One cobra rubbed its jaw along the edge of Kirito’s ear, as he leaned into her shoulder. “I wish it hadn’t happened,” he said quietly. “I know it hurts.”

“You are a very strange human.”

“I guess.” Kirito had an odd half-smile on his face. “I know what it’s like to be lonely. And to know you could have done something. And didn’t.”

Okay, now Argo was getting a kind of hair-raising prickling on her neck feeling. What could Kirito have done to make him feel like he had anything in common with a youkai lord?

“So you say-” Stheno cut herself off, as she and Kirito both glanced toward the tunnel exit.

Uh-oh. Argo focused her attention and *listened*; she hadn’t leveled up her Scan as much as Kirito obviously had....

A armor clinking. A low conversation.

“Heh, heh, heh.” Stheno’s grin flashed fangs. “*Visitors.*”

Of True Sight

Chapter Summary

Fuurinkazan meets horrible stony *death*.

Fortunately, death has a sense of humor.

Unfortunately, other souls may not be as lucky....

Chapter Notes

Figuring out the one-more-scene this chapter needed in the middle took waaaaay longer than I ever expected. Oof.

Minotaur statues. Minotaur *statues*.

Klein poked one right above the carved-stone belt buckle, ready for it to roar and charge, ax gleaming.

Nothing. As there'd been nothing from the snaggly-toothed goblins, the centaur with the Mohawk-mane and an attitude, or the petrified sickle-wielding guy in winged sandals. All were just so much speckled white-and-pink granite.

"Um, Leader?" Even Kunimittz sounded spooked. "He's a great guy, but...."

"Horrible stony *death*," Harry One muttered.

Yeah. That was what the villagers had said. Though they'd also admitted the cave seemed to be just an empty cave, now. Given Stheno's Cave *had* been the site of what most people had labeled an unbeatable quest, Klein bet they had Kirito to thank for that. "He's got to be here somewhere."

Then again. Statues. Shadows. Better part of valor, and all.

"Okay, let's head back outside," Klein sighed. "Send him another message-"

"Who disturbs the silence of Stheno's Cave?"

"...Or not," Klein muttered. *Damn it. We would hit this place when the quest respawned. And Argo's guide says the quest-giver here can get nasty.* "Form up. Let's just be polite and try to

talk our way out of this one. If the villagers say they're not being bothered, then we've got no reason to bother anyone back."

He hoped. Heck, it might even work. Argo's guide said Stheno was hard to aggro-

"A human fighter who *thinks*. And I thought unicorns were rare." A slender shadow moved in the back of the cave, gracefully halting just outside the light. "I'd hate to slay such a rarity. But you have intruded on my home. What would you offer, in recompense for this trespass?" Torchlight glinted on red braids and emerald coils, yet her features were still cast in shadow. "Gold? Mystic secrets?" A hand lifted, claws gleaming. "A life?"

Oh boy. Klein glanced at his guild, looking for any ideas. *Dunno what's the right answer. But I know what it can't be.* "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said politely. "We didn't know we were trespassing. If there's something you need, let's talk. But it was an honest mistake. Nobody needs to die for it."

"An honest mistake." Sarcasm dripped from Stheno's tone.

But she's not stepping into the light, Klein realized. *She's not threatening us. Not really.*

His guild could see it too. They were tense, but not wired tight. And Issin looked downright relieved.

"Yes, ma'am," Klein nodded, slow and careful. "We're sorry. And thank you for giving us a chance to say it. If somebody turned up in my living room, I know I'd be all kinds of jumpy." Deliberately, he sheathed his katana. "Is there something we can get you to make up for it? The bakery in town makes an *awesome* lemon Danish." *There. If there's a fetch quest running here, we should have shoved the encounter that direction. Much safer.*

The snake-haired shadow stood there, nonplussed. "Lemon Danish."

A familiar chuckle snickered out of the darkness.

Kirito. Klein sighed in relief as an unharmed Black Swordsman stepped into the torchlight. *When we get out of here, we're going to have a long talk about not leading friends into caves with petrifying monsters!*

"I am only a guest in your domain, Lady Stheno," Kirito said formally, eyes on the floor as he turned toward the medusa. "But if a guest may be so bold as to offer a suggestion? Fuurinkazan are noble warriors, honest and true, who have never faltered when we bring battle to the Dark Pack's minions." The swordsman nodded toward Kunimittz. "In their last battle, that warrior took a tainted wound, and only by the strength of their shaman's power and the grace of your gift was he made whole."

Okay, despite the whole death game mess? Sometimes it was just *fun* seeing Kirito roll with the world.

The leaves come from here. I knew it! Kirito figured that a quest this tough had to be hiding something good-

...*So he faced down a medusa by himself to find it. Argh.*

“One might say, they are already in your debt,” Kirito went on, apparently ignoring Klein’s hand gestures of *going to strangle you later*. “But if you speak with them, Lady Stheno, you may find they have a greater treasure to offer than mere gold, or jewels, or even the rarest magic.” He made a subtle motion with his finger and thumb, almost pulling open a menu. “Their friendship.”

Klein’s jaw dropped. *Is he saying... she’s a quest monster, I can see the gold cursor! Could that even work?*

He glanced at five other sets of eyes. Harry One looked dubious; the others shrugged. But Issin-

Issin looked downright *interested*.

“Do it,” their shaman mouthed. “Remember Aoneko!”

Yeah, but that was different. Aoneko was a youkai lord, a special kind of NPC-

Kirito called her Lady.

With a deep breath, Klein opened his menu, and offered a friend request.

“Hmm.” Stheno stepped into the light, and Klein jerked his gaze down-

Wait. Wait a minute. Did I see-?

A clawed finger tapped *Yes*.

<<Stheno the Fierce has been added to your friends list.>>

“You may look at me.”

Klein took the opportunity to do just that. Platinum wire and obsidian lenses, medieval style, but- “You were wearing sunglasses the *whole time?*”

Stheno chuckled, one hand poised on a silk-skirted hip. “You should have seen the look on your face!”

“Aoneko?” Kirito asked later.

Klein breathed in the green air outside the cave, kind of relieved that Stheno had retreated into the darkness with an ominous smirk and a mutter of *girl talk, heh heh heh....*

Now they stood on a grassy hilltop with a good view of the cave mouth and the low, wet marsh leading away from it, seven relieved warriors drinking in the sunlight. Dragonflies thrummed through the air; one intrepid green-and-blue flyer perched on Dynammm’s helmet to munch a mosquito, before taking off again.

“The youkai lord who adopted me into his clan,” Issin answered. “It was a quest reward, we think. I don’t know if any other party’s done <<The Cat’s Up a Tree>> yet.”

“The background information said it could be possible,” Kirito mused. “Are you okay... no, never mind, you don’t have to talk about it-”

“You know, you’re the first guy outside Fuurinkazan to even ask?” Issin scratched his head, claws lightly tugging apart a stray snarl of hair. “I think I am. It’s kind of weird, hearing so much. And the scents... whoof.” He shrugged. “I’m getting used to it. At least I can dive into a fight with a lycan without worrying about anything but my HP.”

“Then other people will be trying to get... adopted.” Jaw set, Kirito looked out over the marsh.

“For a while there, I was wondering if you had been,” Issin admitted. “The first day after Aoneko touched me with the Bloodstone, I still looked pretty human, even if I felt a little weird. It was the second day that stuff got freaky.”

And that had been a handful and a half, Klein recalled, dealing with a friend suddenly as clingy as a scared kitten. Literally clingy, once the claws had started erupting. Which had given the guild all *kinds* of second thoughts.

But by then it was way too late. And they were not going to run out on Issin. Fur, fangs, claws - so what? He was still there, behind those slit-pupiled blue eyes. Not like one of those poor unlucky bastards who got bit by a lycan-

And then exactly what Issin had implied hit home, and Klein wasn’t the only one stifling an *eep*. The Black Swordsman as a *medusa*? The guy was scary enough already!

“I doubt Stheno would ever adopt anyone. She has bad associations with humans.” Kirito lifted a shoulder, let it fall. “No. After I completed her quest - something else happened.” He hesitated. “I don’t know anyone to ask about this. The other magical Skills have to be deliberately activated.”

“Yeah, that’s-” Issin stared. “You mean yours doesn’t?”

“I can use it deliberately,” Kirito said quietly. “But if the MP starts building up too much - things happen. Like... this.” He turned one hand, palm upward.

In the cup of his fingers, purple flames blazed.

He was *not* going to jump up and run away, Klein told himself firmly. Even if Kirito had suddenly cornered the market on freaky. “Okay. What *is* that?”

Dale whistled. “I think it’s Darkfire.”

A little of the wariness eased out of Kirito’s face. He shook the flames out. “You’ve heard of it?”

“Just a rumor,” the brunet pikeman admitted. “Somebody posted a screenshot of what they said was the dev team’s tease for the 25th floor boss fight. Darkfire - the caption looked like it was on some kind of player spell or effect a lot like what you had. Only bigger.” He rubbed the back of his neck above his armor. “I’m kind of hoping it was just a tease, and they went with some other boss. Lycans are bad enough. The last thing we need is a vampire.”

“Man, that’s for...” Klein trailed off. “Um. Kirito? I really don’t like that look.”

“It’s nothing solid,” the swordsman stated. “But Stheno spoke as if vampires do exist.”

Klein thought he could probably count all the hairs on the back of his neck. They were standing straight up. “Oh, this world just keeps getting better. Did you tell Argo?”

“She was there.” Kirito smirked, just a little. “I know she’ll be interested to hear what you know when she comes out, Dale. Hold out for something good.”

She was there? It might be bright and sunny out here, but Klein swore he felt ice down his spine. Because Kirito was at least implying Argo was still in there, and Stheno had mentioned *girl talk*, and *that* meant-

Klein shuddered, and decided to think about something safer, like slavering man-eating giant sundew plants. *Some things, man was not meant to know.*

“Well.” Kirito looked down at his empty palm. “It’s called the Sorcery Skill. I’m not sure if it’s a quest reward or a random event. Stheno said the power just... wakes up in some people. Humans or youkai. So I thought you should know. In case you run into something that can cast spells without chanting.”

“A whole Skill as a random event?” Harry One muttered, tails of his bandanna rustling as he eyed Kirito. “What kind of game balance is that?”

As far as Klein could see, Kirito didn’t even blink. But he saw Issin’s ears twitch, with the determined expression that meant their shaman thought someone needed a manly hug. And he definitely saw the sidestep as Kirito oh so casually moved out of grabbing range. Damn it.

“And Agil thought *Issin* was going to be more skittish,” Klein grumped, crossing his arms. *See? Not going to grab you. You idiot.* “Something about a long-tailed cat and a room of rocking chairs. Though I guess he’s got a point. Nekomata, rocking chair - bad mix. So you’ve got magic now. So what?”

Kirito’s gaze flickered away. “It’s not important-”

“Then it doesn’t matter if you tell us, right?” Kunimittz tried to look innocent.

Go, Kun, Klein thought, grinning. *If he didn’t have magic, you’d have been screwed. And he knows it.*

“It’s... a little complicated.” Kirito glanced down at nodding pitcher plants below, as if trying to wrangle a bunch of complicated thoughts into simple order. “Do you know how the

NervGear works? Why we started the game without pain, but now, when we get hit, we feel it?”

Klein rolled his eyes. “Because Kayaba’s an asshole.”

Kirito’s face was pale. “Kayaba may not have had anything to do with it.”

Issin whistled. “Okay. Try that again with a few more details. You don’t think Kayaba wanted us to feel it when our HP goes down?”

“I’m not sure he had a choice. NervGear works because the brain synthesizes reality from nerve input, it’s not one to one-” Kirito stopped. Made himself take a few breaths. “When they were first putting out FullDive, there were all kinds of scientific articles arguing about how it worked. Or how researchers thought it worked. Some articles went back a few decades. About researchers deliberately inducing phantom limb feelings in people who didn’t have amputations.”

“Phantom limbs,” Klein said blankly. That totally did not make sense - no, wait. It did. “You’re saying our avatars are, what? Phantom *body* syndrome?”

“Spooky,” Kunimitzz sing-songed.

“In some experiments, they had the subject imagine picking up objects, and used visual tricks so the items moved,” Kirito stated. “Once someone was used to the ‘phantom arm’ - they’d stick a pin where the subject imagined the arm was. And the person felt pain.”

Klein rubbed at the hairs on the back of his neck. That was beyond spooky.

“Those experiments were just for a few hours,” Kirito went on, face grim. “Kayaba’s locked us in. We can’t log out. We’ve been here *months*. The brain is plastic, it can change with your surroundings. And this is the only reality our brains *have*.” He flexed half-gloved fingers, and nodded at Issin’s ears. “If sorcery is a random event, if becoming youkai is a quest reward.... Klein. The longer we’re in here, the less - *normal* - the Otherworld will be. What if we don’t get out soon enough? What’s going to happen to us?”

At least he still thinks we will get out. But it was a damn good question. From a kid who... well, if Kirito was even sixteen, Klein would eat a Tree Slug. Raw. “C’mere.”

“Um, Klein...?”

Klein dragged the smaller swordsman into a one-armed hug, ignoring the harassment window that popped up. Kirito was already thumbing it off anyway, even if he looked dubious about it. “We,” Klein said, very deliberately, “are going to be just *fine*. Because we are Fuurinkazan and the Black Swordsman, and if we have to fight our way out of Aincrad and then back into the Otherworld, that’s what we’re going to do.” He hugged the kid a little tighter. “You saved Kunimittz. We’re all alive. We’re going to be fine.”

Ever since she'd survived the first floor boss fight, there had been days Asuna had almost enjoyed. Days where fighting went well, a stubborn Black Swordsman showed up to party with her while no one else was watching, and nobody *died*.

This was not one of those days.

Asuna looked around the wreckage left in the wake of the twenty-fifth floor boss, the Aincrad Liberation Force mourning their dead, and ice and lightning still crackling in her hands. And no Black Swordsman to be seen.

I hurt. Everywhere.

Worse, she had only herself to blame. Argo's bulletins had put out all the warning signs on Sorcery. Usually after yet another player had run into a new one the hard way.

First: Manifest zones like you. Some like you better than others.

Check. Dungeon areas keyed to ice and lightning, Risia manifest zones, had started getting easier for her to fight in two levels back. While Fernia zones, with their lava and seas of fire, had given Asuna their own short-lived odd boost - though that was more *kill everything here so you can get out*.

Second: Wizardry does not like you, but you start picking up Draconic anyway.

Check again. The words had just been fun to play with; almost as interesting to stick together as different flavors, and growly as a samurai from a period drama. Not like the meek, polite corporate head's daughter at all.

Third: Nervous reactions from NPC wizards and sages.

Okay, that had been legitimately hard to pick up on, given how much time she spent partied with *Kirito*. The scruffy swordsman might prefer steel and silver, but he had no qualms about pulling out darkfire to give his blades extra bite. As he had through most of this fight, taking out Vampire Lord Tiberius' gargoyles and Vampiric Mastiff mobs with a snarl that had had too many fighters pulling away from eldritch flames when they were supposed to be *tanking for the DPS*. Asuna wanted to *hit* somebody.

Fourth: Sudden increase in Scan details after a rest, especially in high-magic areas or manifest zones.

To fight the damned vampire, they'd had to fight their way through three trapped rooms of his spawn first. If she never saw another chess set again as long as she lived, Asuna would die happy. The first safe area they'd found before the main boss room, everyone had dropped in their tracks. Checking Skills lists would have taken a precious sliver of time and energy, and no one had had that to spare.

I should have checked anyway. Asuna flexed her fingers, wondering at how the crackling cold lightning didn't hurt. *I felt something, I tried to aim it at that gargoyle....*

Wonder of wonders, she'd actually *missed* all of her fellow raid members. She didn't know how, half-blind with a malfunctioning HUD and the scream of *enemy-hot blood-kill!* in her veins. But their formation had been broken, the Vampire Lord had taken *full* advantage to drain the life from at least two unlucky players, and if Kirito hadn't tossed in red rowan berries blazing with Irian's Light she would have been the third....

We lost so many people.

Asuna glanced around again for any stray enemies, because *Kayaba is a bastard* was practically an inn toast these days. Only then did she swipe her menu open, and send a message to an idiot swordsman to meet up later. Because Kirito took deaths hard; harder than she thought anyone who'd heard the term *Beater* could ever know. And - they'd lost so many, and the *way* some players had died, shriveled into pale ghosts of themselves before the Vampire Lord deliberately snapped their necks-

I don't want to sleep tonight.

Kirito probably wouldn't sleep, the idiot. He'd go out farming low-level monsters in nooks and crannies no one knew about, where no one could find him and no one could *help* him....

"That was well done."

Asuna shut her menu fast, turning toward the elegant silver-haired fighter. Heathcliff had been one of the anchors of the fight, a bulwark keeping half the formation intact so the Vampire Lord's forces didn't swarm them all. "I shouldn't have let that happen-"

"The game mechanics on Sorcery are awkward for all of us," Heathcliff observed, sheathing his sword. "Though I suppose it does go along with the world lore of Sorcerers as unlucky beneficiaries of elemental powers." A shrug of red plate. "You managed the overflow, and kept your head well enough to reorganize your formation in time to salvage the battle and allow us to defeat Tiberius. Well done."

If by *reorganized the formation* he meant a lot of yelling, and even physically grabbing one of the shaken ALF fighters with, "You, over there! You, back the shamans up! You, *cover the damn DPS!*"

Asuna shook off her hands again, sparks finally fading. "I think they followed me because they were afraid I'd blast them, next."

"It never hurts to be able to terrify your allies into moving, if you must." Heathcliff smiled. "We've won, and the raid did not wipe. I think they'll forgive any stray shocks."

She could feel her cheeks burning. And it hurt, because the raid hadn't wiped on Illfang, because of Kirito, and *he'd* never been forgiven....

"The Knights of Blood could use a Moonsword," Heathcliff observed. "If you were interested in learning that type of magic?"

If a guild offers you a chance to join, Kirito had said, levels back, *take it.*

“I... need to look up the lore, first,” Asuna compromised. “Can I message you tomorrow? We still need to make sure everyone came through the fight okay.”

“Responsible.” Heathcliff inclined his head. “I look forward to your answer.”

Asuna nodded, and headed for the shamans to see if there was any way she could help. Quietly swiping her menu open again.

No reply.

Kirito, where are you?

Tapping smoky pollen off an Orchil Iris into a vial, Sachi held her breath. She was a decent Potions maker, and getting better, but one little sigh at the wrong moment and the valuable grains would be dust on the wind....

Gold sifted into glass, and the vial glowed. <<Orchil Iris Pollen.>>

There. Ready to brew into shades of violet dye, or add to potions, or even - she'd heard - dust onto an ingot while a Blacksmith was hammering out a new weapon. It wasn't *very* expensive, but it was worth getting while the flowers bloomed.

Sachi let herself breathe again, and took another cautious glance around the edge of the woodland pond. Dragonflies, cicadas; a violet-spotted frog hopping off a Sawtoothed Lily pad into dark water. Otherwise their little swampy clearing was as quiet as the black-clad swordsman perched on a cypress branch somewhere over her head.

If he is a swordsman. Sachi frowned, and tried to shake away the thought. Kirito knew how to use a sword. And had, well enough to be one of the Black Cats' main offensive fighters. That was what mattered, right? “Aren't you bored? Everyone else was happy to head for town...” She tried not to worry about that. The guild needed some supplies - and this was a low-level encounter area. The two of them should be *fine*. Just fine.

“I don't like towns much.”

Quiet words. A human a few feet away wouldn't have heard them.

But I'm not human anymore.

She still didn't know how to feel about that. It was... it was kind of nice to be *pretty*, even if it was so different. She loved soft fur. And all her senses were so rich. It was as if the world was jeweled in colors and scents, just for her. Best of all, healing spells had become so much easier to cast after the cougar youkai had adopted her. If she could heal the others, she didn't have to make herself fight. She didn't have to be so scared....

But a lot of players still jumped when they looked at her. Claws. Tawny furred ears, twitching at every sound. A tail almost as quick to twitch, though in town she kept it under her skirt. Other adoptees weren't weird about it, but some of the human players... the way they looked at her was *scary*.

Kirito never looks like that.

But then, Kirito didn't act like most people. Ever.

Sachi put the filled vial into her Inventory, and looked over the clump of irises again. Maybe one more vial. "Why don't you like towns? Everybody does. They're safe."

"Check Argo's Guide to the first level again." Kirito shifted on his perch, a shadow in green needle shadows. "Some of the beta testers said there was an event in the first month of testing. <<The Harpies' Midday Raid.>> For twenty-four hours, the City of Beginnings' guards were missing. Higher-level encounters swarmed the city. A lot of players were overwhelmed and had to respawn." His breath caught. "That's what the guide says."

Sachi swallowed hard, chilled. "You mean... even towns might not be safe?"

"...It's just a rumor." Kirito crouched on the branch, those incredibly black eyes meeting hers. "That's why we stay in inns. And we stay together. As long as we have each other to protect us, even an event can be beaten."

Sachi bit her lip, and put the vial away still empty. "I'm not good at protecting anyone," she admitted. "I'm so scared. All the time. This was supposed to be a *game*, and I'm going to die here-"

"You aren't going to die." Kirito jumped down to the ground. Dusted his hands off, and gave her a quiet smile. "We're going to make it. You're going to be fine."

"But I should be fighting too!" She was trembling now; she couldn't help it. "Everyone keeps protecting me, you keep protecting me, and - I should be doing something in the fights! I'm just so scared...."

"You are doing something." Kirito's hand rested on her head, fingers brushing the edge of one furry ear. "You heal us. You put on buffs. You stay out of the main fight, but that means sometimes you see things we're too busy to notice." He lifted his hand away, serious. "Sachi. I know the guild means a lot to you. But have you talked to Keita? Maybe-"

"Oh no, I couldn't!" Sachi straightened, even if she still felt like shivering. "How could you? The group has to stay together!"

"...Sometimes that isn't the smartest choice."

And now she had to wonder all over again. She'd heard rumors of what had happened on the twenty-fifth floor. Everyone had. Rumors about a black-clad wizard swordsman who'd betrayed the clearers to the vampire and *disappeared*....

Except those rumors couldn't be about Kirito. She'd never seen him use magic. Ever.

Besides. Kirito wouldn't ever betray anyone. He wasn't scared. Even in a death game. "How do you do it?" she asked impulsively. "You fight, and you get hurt... how can you keep doing that when you know you could die?"

Black eyes were unreadable. “Pain isn’t dying.” He took a step back, and brought out a small smile. “If you’re about done, maybe we should send a message to the others and head back to town?”

“Okay...” Sachi bit her lip. No. Not okay. “It’s just that you act like-” *smell like* “-you expected something to happen. And it didn’t, and you’re... disappointed.” Which was scary. She fought because her guild fought, but if they ever decided to stay in town, she’d never go looking for monsters on her own!

“Oh.” Kirito glanced away. “Heh. So much for learning patience.”

“You want the monster to come find you?” Sachi blurted out.

The swordsman turned red. “It’s not like that. Sometimes when I’m out in the woods I run into an encounter. That’s all.”

Sachi gave him a disbelieving look, and gripped her spear. “So what kind of monster is it?”

“He’s not a-” Kirito went even redder. “Have you ever heard of linked quest chains?”

Linked-? Sachi hugged herself, suddenly lost. “You’re in the middle of a quest right now? And you didn’t tell us?”

“No! It’s not like that. I haven’t seen Vincent since-” The swordsman closed his mouth on the answer.

“Since you met us?” Sachi whispered. She’d spent so much time with the rest of her computer club. It was hard to run up against the fact they were partying with someone they didn’t really *know*.

Kirito scratched at the back of his neck, uncomfortable. “He said he had something to look after, and that he might not be back for months. It hasn’t been two months yet.” He shrugged. “He’s an NPC ranger. He doesn’t like people much.”

“An NPC,” Sachi repeated. Not sure how to feel about that, either. Kirito cared about the guild, she could see that. But from the slight shifts in his scent she was beginning to decipher, he also cared about some NPCs. It was weird.

“His quests help with Survival Skill.” Kirito glanced around the clearing, automatically checking for danger. “A few of them have helped me get a toe into Herbalism.” He smiled at her. “Enough to recognize Orchil Irises, at least.”

Oh. That explained a lot. Though it left Sachi with even more questions. Herbalism did overlap with Potions; maybe Kirito had some magic after all....

They hit a nest of Swamp Dire Toads on the way back, and she was too busy to worry about it anymore.

Except.

In the middle of the fight, she could have sworn she'd seen a light like purple fire flaring behind her. Just for an instant.

Then it was gone, and Kirito was taunting the King Toad into snapping its sticky tongue at him, so she could take the last attack with her spear from its flank.

Purple fire.

There had been rumors about that, too.

Or it could have been some weird status effect Kirito had shaken off without a Cure or a Cleansing. He was scarily good at that.

I'll ask him, Sachi decided at last as they passed the town guards and saw the Black Cats' relieved waves. *I will. After we get a place of our own. Somewhere we can all be safe.*

Keita already had plans for that. Oh, it would be so good to have doors they could lock, and not have to depend on an NPC innkeeper....

Then I'll ask him. And I'll listen. To everything.

There was a young Moonsword huddled against one of Stheno's meditation boulders, buried under a fluffy mound of cockatrice copper, emerald, violet, and gold.

Hand on a curious youngling's shoulder to hold her back, Stheno sighed in mingled relief and exasperation. She'd meant to introduce Yui to her garden when no players were around, so the orphaned nestling could learn this was a safe place *before* she had to meet anything as frightening as a human-

But Kirito had dropped out of sight days ago, and no one had been able to find him. Not Klein. Not Argo. Not Stheno herself, even using the low level of access Beniryuu gave youkai lords to his tracking program.

I should have asked Vincent. Yes, he's only been back a few days. And he has enough worries of his own, trying to settle in a newly-turned pack of heroes. But he would have looked.

But she hadn't asked. Kirito's guild had perished, and the swordsman had vanished. It had... hurt. She hadn't expected a human fate to hurt.

The trembling nestling under her hand reminded her exactly why. "Aunt Stheno." A bare whisper. "It's a - it feels like-"

"Shh." Stheno crouched to block the youth from Yui's sight. "Kirito wouldn't hurt you. He wouldn't ever harm a child."

Right now, Stheno was more worried he might harm himself. He'd somehow snuck into her garden without setting off her alarms, and certainly without sending a polite message to ask if she wished a visit. If she truly were the AI-monster he thought her, breaking either of those

patterns could have set off an automatic assault by every creature the Cardinal system could summon into being. Kirito was skilled. He wasn't invincible.

And he knows it.

So. What did she do now?

If he were youkai, what would I do?

"Stay back, little one," Stheno murmured. "I'll deal with this."

One wide-eyed nestling huddling behind a sugar-suckle bush, Stheno advanced on the pile of feathers, and clucked softly. Enough cockatrices scattered after grain to reveal a dark head; black eyes blinked at her....

Shut again, resigned.

Stheno sat next to that grim silence. "I've meant to ask for some time. Why did you never bring your guild here?"

"...I didn't want them to know." Halting words, as if he had to drag them up from lightless depths. "If they knew I was the Beater, if they found out how I failed against the Vampire Lord...."

The twenty-fifth floor. It made her want to throttle Beniryuu with her bare hands. *So many deaths.*

And well and fine for Beniryuu to say there would be no *wasteful* deaths. Years ago, when the youkai lords had first entertained the red dragon's offer, she'd taken that to mean there would be no true death in Beniryuu's net of magic. That any humans who could not thrive in Aincrad, would be released. But after hearing Beniryuu's promise to the players from Kirito's own words, that they would *return to their proper world-*

Dragons lie with truth. And it is lies, all the same. They may be truly dead.

And to Kirito, they *were*. He grieved them. And with good cause. "Vampire Lord Tiberius was a trained fighter in life. That, I knew," Stheno said grimly. "That he was also a sorcerer, with bespelled gargoyles in his service - that, I did *not* know. Would that I had."

Dark eyes searched her face, and looked away. "It wasn't your fault," Kirito said numbly. "Kayaba changed so many things since the beta...."

Odd words. Though after speaking with Argo, and reading the missives sent by the players, she thought she understood the gist of them. "The beta?"

Kirito opened his mouth, and closed it again. Cleared his throat. "We think the wizard Kayaba has used Words of Unmaking, to unravel lore found by other travelers before us. Even the tomes of your own library may have suffered from his spell."

...Which was a very *interesting* translation of what Beniryuu had actually done: changed SAO's monsters, their abilities, and their hidden allies, so even her own knowledge of Aincrad's true history was fatally flawed.

Even when he thinks I am no more than a creation of the Cardinal who slew his friends, he speaks to me as if I were real.

"But we knew the lore was flawed," Kirito said, half to himself. "It was our responsibility to find out what we were up against. We failed." He looked down at half-gloved hands. "I failed."

"Why?" Stheno said tartly. "Because you have been a Moonsword for all of four months, while Tiberius had decades to perfect his sorcery? Even if you had been working magic since your first breath, you could not have won that fight! Not alone."

"I could have done more!" A flicker of anger, breaking through the leaden voice. "You didn't see...." Black eyes closed again. "Thinker's face, when we counted who was still left. Or - the other clearers, I-" He swallowed. "I left the clearers. I couldn't look at them.... The Black Cats didn't know what I'd done. They just needed another swordsman."

"Another - they didn't know you were a sorcerer?" Stheno demanded, aghast. "Why? How could you even *hide* it?" A true sorcerer might keep spells uncast, if need required it. A warlock, whose power welled up from elsewhere - no. Never. She could not go a day without calling light and fire to her hands. The pressure within would be unbearable. A warlock Kirito's age, powers just arising within him? He should be throwing sparks at the slightest stress.

Which is how Galifar kills them.

"I went out nights to practice. Who needs sleep? I..." His voice sank. "I killed them."

"If your magic had burst your will's bonds from *sheer stupidity*, you might have," the medusa said acidly. Harsh, too harsh; but she could hear the crumble of stone statues in his voice. The wail of the maimed and dying. The dry rattle of her kin's bones in Swiftwater Pass.

I should have known.

"You lived alone, *survived* alone, for months before you met them," Stheno bore on, snakes coiling in true anger. "The first day you trusted another player to fight beside you, he left you to be slain by monsters. Do not deny it!" she hissed, as Kirito sat up in alarm. "I scryed your past when first you visited me; I know it is true. You trusted, and it nearly cost your life. You trusted Diabel to lead you against Illfang, and that nearly had you slain by Kibaou's words. You have acted to spread lore amongst your fellow warriors, and seen that flame gutter out as others hoard their secrets to be *heroes*. So you held back secrets from your comrades? I have kept them even from my own sister! There is always a dark night, when your enemies are upon you and there *is* no help. Only a fool discards the last knife from his sleeve."

"I didn't trust them about the levels!"

Folding her hands, Stheno waited.

“I could have told them.” Barely a whisper. “That I wasn’t guessing. That I’d been on those floors before. But I wanted them to trust me. And who’d trust the Beater?” His breath hitched. “And they didn’t, they *never* did, Keita t-told me....”

Did he, then. Stheno bit her lip on what she wanted to say. Kirito didn’t need to hear ill of the dead. Not if he needed to grieve....

But Kirito took a slow breath, any tears only a brightness in black eyes. “No one got past the eighth level in the beta. No one knows what’s on each new level now.” Half-gloved fists clenched. “We could all clear levels faster if we just shared information, so more people could level up. But so many people still live like this is a *game*, and all that matters is being the highest level, with the flashiest equipment. Help *lower level* players? Why?”

Stheno glanced over her young Moonsword. Garb black as a raven; a few muted grays, greens, and blues, the better to blend into shadows. No obvious armor, besides the leather of his long coat. Sword, throwing pikes, and knives all plain, darkened metals, to hide any betraying glint of steel. The preening popinjays he spoke of, like the oh-so-*noble* scions of the Five Nations and the dragonmarked Houses, probably never gave him a second glance.

But if one of Breland’s damnable Dark Lanterns ventured here....

King Boranel’s loyal spies knew deadly skill when they saw it. They’d leave the peacocks be, and head straight for her little raven.

My raven. Stheno shook her head at the thought. *As Argo is my little skulking ash-rat. They’re human. But I don’t want to lose them.*

“That’s what Keita said,” Kirito whispered. “He thought I was different. That maybe a clearer - even a *beater* - could care about a mid-level guild. But he said I was just using them. That I said I’d keep them safe, and I should have stopped them-!”

Enough.

Swift as her snakes, Stheno pounced.

Kirito trembled in her arms. Resistance to poison wasn’t immunity. He knew what her cobras could do.

Stheno kept their movements easy and smooth, as she tucked his head into the crook of her neck. For a nestling it would be soothing; the scent of skin, scales, and hair, the liquid flow of serpents past ears and throat, tongues flicking skin in a feather-light caress.

Human noses were duller, poor things. But they could still feel.

“You are alive,” Stheno said softly. “You are my Moonsword, and I know you did not leave them while breath or hope remained.” She stroked his cheek with the back of her claws. “Enough of could-haves. We must live with what *is*.”

He stiffened. “I....”

“You cannot die,” Stheno said; as if, like a truenamer, she could warp the fabric of reality to make it so. “You must find Kayaba. You *must* live to face him, and break the trap he has laid for us all.” Her voice sank, as she stroked trembling skin. “You are the last of the Black Cats. No one else can bring a reckoning for the dead.”

There was no sound. Only quiet, ragged breaths. But hot tears soaked her shoulder, and he huddled in her arms like a child.

He is young, Stheno thought, rocking him slowly. *But he is no child. Not anymore.*

Soon, too soon, the tears ceased. Kirito swallowed, and lifted his head. “...You said, the trap he laid for *us*.”

Ah. So she had. Not the most skillful slip of the tongue, no-

“Lady Stheno.” Tear-stained eyes were wide. “Are you an admin?”

It's crazy, Kirito thought, through the grief and throbbing headache. *But it's the only thing that makes sense.*

With that cursor, Stheno couldn't be a player. Yet she was too alive, too *real*, to be a scripted program. Even one where Cardinal assumed direct control for a specific quest interaction. She talked to people. She had a sense of humor. She read the messages he sent her, and wrote back, seeming as curious about his home islands as he was about Aincrad. She raged, grieved-

She's killed players.

Kirito slipped out of her grasp and rose, hands in front of him and harmless. Blinked away a red flash of pain; ever since Keita had- everything had just hurt. “I'm sorry. Forget I asked. If you don't know, I shouldn't have asked. If you do - I shouldn't have said anything. People were willing to throw betas to the monsters. What they'd do to... someone else Kayaba trapped....” He tried to swallow. His throat was dry. “You've been kind. I should go.”

“Wait.”

Kirito halted, wishing he could feel his heartbeat. In the Otherworld, it had to be pounding in his ears.

“Are you afraid I'll kill you, too?”

How could he answer that? “Not because you wanted to.”

“I am Stheno the Fierce. Stheno of the Night of Shattered Stone!” Her voice should have frozen the garden around them, spring into hoary winter in an instant. “Do you believe any power could constrain me to act against my own will?”

People were impossible to predict. Kirito had found that out the hard way five years ago, when he'd hacked the wrong file and felt the bottom drop out of his world. But Stheno had always been honest with him before.

She didn't say no.

He could still be wrong. He wanted to be wrong.

That's why I never brought the others here, Kirito realized. If they found out I was a beater, and everything went wrong, I could run. Stheno's tied to this cave. If enough players came after her....

He closed his eyes, willing away images of blood and fire.

"So very silent." There was a wistfulness in Stheno's voice. "Were you always so wary, even in your own world?"

World. Not islands. World, as in somewhere that *was not Aincrad*.

She's not a program.

"Lady Stheno." He had to be very, very careful now. "Is there any lore you have found of the Dark Pack, of Akihiko Kayaba, that we should know?"

"Nothing I can tell you now." Emerald cobras settled almost entirely back into red hair, as a human would have hugged herself against a chill. "Only that his evil runs deeper than I had ever imagined. But you did not need divination to know that."

Kirito's hand almost went to the breast of his coat, where a sickle moon had once marked his guild colors. "No," he whispered.

They're gone. They're gone, I lost them... I'll never laugh with Ducker about snares again. I'll never tell Sachi she'll get home. They're gone, and I'm here, and - I don't want to be here....

He looked down, clenching and unclenching the fingers that had gripped a fatal sword. "Why am I alive? There were so many, I couldn't have killed them all... it doesn't make sense."

"You sell yourself short," Stheno said tartly. "You are quick, and careful. And you are a Moonsword. Legends of their magic may be lost in the shadows, but I know you will find them...." A very peculiar look crossed her face. She blinked, and squinted; as if she'd invoked Scan, though no betraying glow showed through obsidian lenses. "Ah. No wonder my scrying couldn't find you. Kirito? Look in the water."

He'd been avoiding that for days. He didn't want to look at his face - his *avatar's* face - and see the person who'd killed his guild.

But she says she couldn't scry me. Stheno couldn't find me?

Pushing aside thorny vines to get to the quietest pool, Kirito looked. Trees, roses, sky....

He wasn't there.

No! We beat the Vampire Lord, he didn't-

Stheno was at his shoulder, unflinching. Clearly visible in rippling water, resting her hand on what seemed empty air. Only when she touched his shoulder, her hand blurred. "This magic does not come easily for me. My sorcery draws on the bright sun of divination; yours, on the moon-shadows and night of darkfire. But I have fought from the shadows before."

Her free hand traced dark runes in air. With a whisper, her reflection vanished.

But I can still see her. She's just... shadowy at the edges-

Gazing at the hand on his shoulder, Kirito covered it with his own.

...Like I am. "Invisibility?" he got out.

"Nothing so simple." Stheno's voice was brisk. "Mold your magic against mine. We will lift it.... now."

Ow.

He hadn't realized how much his head had *hurt*. It was like taking a sword out of his side.

My MP's so low, it was starting to eat into my HP. I didn't know, that was stupid-!

"It is called the Displacer's Shadow." Stheno sighed. "You must have been able to break contact with your foes, if only for a moment. It must have been a terrible fight."

Kirito blinked, taking apart the spell's name for what it might mean. "The monsters thought I was somewhere else?"

"Blur makes you seem somewhere else," Stheno corrected him. "Invisibility makes you seem not there. The Shadow is not truly akin to either. Invisibility tells the world, *you do not see me*. The Shadow is, *I am not here*."

Which wasn't specific at *all*, damn it. Though it sounded as if he might have been partially incorporeal. Which... would have explained a *lot* about how he couldn't remember if the door had ever opened again....

"In short? You were somewhere else. To ordinary eyes." Stheno's breath was a soft *hah*. "And to most not ordinary, as well. I am Stheno of the True Sight; I see you when you stand before me, even when you wish to be hidden. But your strength was enough to hide you from my scrying. Just as it is meant to hide you from your prey, when you seek those cursed with lycanthropy. When the madness takes hold many do not wish to be cured, and they may turn on all who would aid them." She nodded. "Like the moon in sunlit sky, you can still be seen. But one must know how to *look*."

But if he'd been hard to see, how - oh. "The cockatrices smelled me," Kirito realized.

“They know your scent,” Stheno agreed. “And so they may seek it. But a werewolf pack would get a nasty surprise.”

“This works even on werewolves?” *Oh god.* “I could have saved them-”

“Enough.” Cobras glared at him, echoing the gaze behind obsidian. “You have barely begun to tap that magic. You do not have that strength. Not yet.” One hand cupped sunlight in her palm, kneading it like molten gold. “And you never will, so long as you believe *this*,” light shimmered like diamonds, “is but an illusion.”

Which made no sense. If Stheno was an admin, she knew magic was just a game. “In the isles we came from-”

“Seers aren’t supposed to be obvious,” Stheno said dryly. “But you are *not* where you came from.”

Mentally, no. But-

“Magic is as real as steel, here,” Stheno pressed on. “Your sorcery is *real*. Will you use it? Or will you hand Kayaba the victory, because you fail to use the gifts you were born with?” She took one deliberate step back. “Because for all the future I cannot tell you, this I can: as your magic can cure a tainted bite, another’s can sink its taint deeper. I do not think Kayaba will scruple to use that bane.”

It was like a punch to the gut. Lycanthropy was going to get worse?

We’re going up levels. Of course it gets worse.

“Think on it,” Stheno wished him. “For now - mourn. And heal.” She clucked to her flock, skirts swishing as they fluttered around her. “Pushy, pushy... summer will soon be here. And they will be *impossible* until their molts are finished.”

Which was a hint, blatant as a brick through a window. Not that Kirito minded. Better not to think for a while. The ring kept him from petrifying if their teeth broke skin, but it was better not to get bitten at all. Which took steady fingers, concentration, and personal attention to every hen and chick groomed. Especially to the crook of clawed wings; given cockatrices climbed almost as much as they flew, bits of bark or thorn could get wedged in grasping claws....

Something moved in the underbrush. Too big to be a cockatrice. Far too big to be a pixie.

Casually, Kirito slid his glance that way.

Wide black eyes stared back.

A little girl?

Her eyes went even wider, and she dove out of sight.

“Don’t follow,” Stheno murmured, grooming the most puffed-up, arrogant cock in her flock. “Yui’s very shy. I do want her to meet you. But for now, let’s just see if she calms enough to be in the same garden.”

“Someone hurt her.” It made Kirito angry. And sad. And confused; he’d gotten used to feeling numb, after Keita had... chosen to die. This-

The numb ice seemed to be breaking. It hurt. “Who could hurt a little girl?”

“A very good heart,” Stheno said, half to herself. “I will tell you. Another time.”

He’d have to wait. Damn. He just knew that was going to keep him up nights.

Though fighting his way out of nightmares later, that wasn’t the thought that kept him staring at the ceiling. Black eyes. Black hair, dark as his own. But in that hair, shifting in the shadows....

When did I start thinking a medusa was a little girl?

Tiger Burning Bright

Chapter Summary

Klein has a furry problem. And then a Black Swordsman problem.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hands tied behind him. Feet tied together. Half his guild ready to grab him and pin him by main force. Katana out of his gear and winking tantalizingly on Kunimittz's bedroll, halfway across the safe zone clearing, well out of reach. And those were the good points of the evening. "Didn't know you were into *shibari*, Issin," Klein panted, sweat rolling down his face.

"Funny," the shaman muttered behind him, slathering herbal paste on Klein's bitten wrist. "Keep talking. Keep fighting it. Harry?"

"Added some Bluegum to take down the toxicity a little." Their dashing would-be pirate and herbalist gently shook bits of blue, green, and lurid yellow together in a potion vial. "I don't like this, Leader. This isn't tame stuff like Shaman's Fingerprints, or even Kanzeon's Looking-glass. We're going to poison you, and hope it kills the infection before it kills *you*."

"Yeah, yeah," Klein grumped. "Cancer patients do it all the time." Though damn, he wished they could use some of the nicer stuff. But one, Moonswords were still *damn rare*, despite Argo spreading the news around about how anybody with Sorcery could start picking up the build. Asuna was a good one, but she mostly handled KoB problems. Two, they'd been hit with the sheer bad luck of a random encounter with mini-chimeras just as they'd reached the climactic final battle of the <<Rogue Weretiger of Tinctoria>> quest. Mini-dragon breaths of lightning, fire, and choking chlorine. Screaming were-cats and villagers *everywhere*. He'd barely noticed the bite in the sheer mess of not getting his people chewed to bits, set on fire, or electrocuted. And three....

Argo's latest shout had been dead on the mark. The higher the level, the worse lycanthropy got.

If I'd come up here as a first-level, I'd have been toast as fast as that NPC on Opening Day.

None of which made Klein feel any better about what he was going to do. Wolfsbane was a poison. Finite. End of discussion.

But if you were lucky, if you were very *very* lucky, and just taking the dose didn't kill you... then you might slip out from under the curse. Maybe.

Please let me be lucky, Klein prayed. Not for me; though damn it, I don't want to die. But for them.

Because Kayaba's safe zones weren't like town safe areas. You could bring a bitten player inside. Which was a lifesaver, since you didn't have to worry about repops while you were trying to treat somebody before their time ran out....

But if curing somebody didn't work - safe zones weren't towns. There weren't any insanely strong NPC guards to pounce on a turned lycan and kill them.

And his guild trusted him. They wouldn't abandon him. Not even when it made sense. Not even when he was about to become a monster.

Issin took the Wolfsbane Potion from Harry, and crouched in front of Klein. "Are you sure?"

"Let's do this." Klein took a breath, and opened his mouth.

It burned all the way down. And then it got *nasty*.

We have got to find some better cures....

Just a flicker of a thought, wrapped up in acid and *ow* and pain in his gut and arm like he'd been rolling in broken glass.

Kayaba. Is. A bastard.

But the red haze seemed to clear a little, and he was still gasping for breath. Which meant breathing, which, hey, good thing-

His HP bar was still dropping, yellow and heading down. Issin was dead white.

Oh. Joy. "Didn't-" Klein coughed, feeling like he was due to hack up a lung. "Didn't work. Did it."

"Just hang on." Kunimittz was almost shaking, ready to grab him so they could all hold him down. "It's DOT, if Issin can cast more Heals we'll buy you time-"

"You're going to need those for yourselves." The rope was good stuff, Klein knew; Terrorantula silk and player-made on top of that. It might hold a weretiger. Might. "Don't be stupid, get going...."

His HP flashed to red, and the world caught fire.

Hate and enemy and kill-

No. I won't do that.

He wanted blood, like a man dying in the desert thirsted for water. But that want *wasn't him*.

I'm Ryoutarou Tsuboi. Just a salaryman. But I was good at my job, I was going to be better....

I'm Klein. Guild leader of Fuurinkazan. The guys are counting on me. I won't do this!

He could feel the ropes biting into him, tight against shifting flesh. Hear the rip of fabric, as fur and fangs and demonic will tried to reshape him. It'd be so easy to break loose....

But he wouldn't. He was going to lie *right here*, damn it, against the call of moon and blood and burning muscles, and pray one of his people had the heart to do what they had to.

Damn you, Kayaba! Go ahead and kill me. I'm not going to let you make me a monster!

Bare fingers touched his chest, shocking cold against fur. Klein snarled, lunged-

No! No, damn it-!

Hit the ground *hard*, as someone yanked still-bound feet out from under him.

Even with everything stripped down to raw, red hate, something in that touch had smelled familiar. Like home. Like rescue. Like....

Feathers?

Cold. Sudden, tooth-chattering *cold*, the hate pouring out of him like swamp water out of old bones....

Klein blinked at stray bits of lichen and leaves on the ground, listening to steel clash against armor and wondering when a moonlit night had turned so bright. *I. Hurt. Everywhere.*

Jaws. Hands. Feet. Every place that had muscles, and several he'd swear didn't. His ears had no business aching like that, period. And he did *not* have a tail, thank you very much.

At least he hoped he didn't. Um.

Reaching behind him, Klein felt past shreds of shirt to tattered pants. No tail. Whew.

Wait. I'm not tied?

Well, not anymore. There was still a loop of silk rope on one raw wrist. But reddened skin was healing over even as he watched....

Oh. Fuck.

He was going to sit down and gibber about that. Definitely. Later. Because right now-

Weretiger, Klein realized, looking at the humanoid shape holding off Fuurinkazan and one determined Black Swordsman. *In my armor.*

Only calling it just a weretiger was like calling a Frenzy Boar *cuddly*. Red-glowing eyes. Claws the length of bloody daggers. Muzzle writhing in a constant snarl as it leapt and struck, as if nothing else mattered beyond killing everything that moved.

Dale stumbled back. Set his jaw and his *sasumatu* just in time to take the monster's charge. "What's it take to kill this thing?"

"We can't kill it!" Kirito leaped, in and out in a blur that drew a slash of darkfire across its gut. "Not alone. And we can't let it get away. I don't know what will happen if some other party kills it!" Black hair ducked, as a razor claws slashed by. "Get to Klein, get him moving--"

"I'm up," Klein croaked, grabbing his katana with shaking hands. Cleared his throat, and tried again. "What do I do?"

Kunimittz and Dynammm were drawing the monster's attacks, while Harry and Kirito harried it. Dale was the heavy backup, herding it away from the edge of the safe zone. Issin had been hanging behind him, ready to heal, before his head jerked between Klein and the fight. Swearing, he headed for his leader.

Kirito switched out with Harry long enough for a breath. "You have to kill it!"

"What?" Issin yelped, getting there just in time to catch Klein before he tipped over. "You never said-!"

"I told you it was dangerous!" In and out and dodge; the Moonsword was focused as a burning lance of sunlight. "Klein! This is *your* curse-" He ducked under a swing of claws.

My curse. And I've got to fight it? Klein didn't feel up to making faces at a Green Slime right now, much less killing... whatever the heck that thing was, what pit of hell had it slunk out of-

My curse. A demon weretiger. And the way he felt scraped raw inside... hell. It still had his armor. "That was in me?" Klein stammered.

"Kirito yanked it out of you," Issin confirmed; hands almost fumbling the healing poultice, as if he still couldn't believe it himself. "We didn't have time for questions, he just *cast* and- what the hell are you doing?"

"Killing it," Klein said grimly, raising his katana. He could read the attack pattern his guild had set up; four of them keeping the damned beast centered in the clearing, while Kirito slashed and taunted it in a narrow arc Klein could *see*, clear as if he'd painted lines on twig-strewn earth. "You going to help me, or not?"

"Don't die," Issin ordered. "Here. Take this."

Revigor Draught. Like a jolt of pure caffeine wrapped in cherries and smoke. Oh, he was going to *pay* for this tomorrow....

But he had his footing, he had his sword, and the moment was *now*. "Switch!"

Kirito ducked, blocking one clawed arm up and to the side. Teeth bared, Klein charged for the opening.

Usually, damage was damage. But Kayaba had programmed in some realistic quirks to the game. If you knew what areas were vulnerable, if you knew how to aim....

The razor edge took it in the throat, cutting almost to the spine.

With a final roar, the demon shattered.

“Damn.” Klein had just enough oomph left to sheathe his katana before his knees gave out. “It still had my armor.”

Ivory shimmered into being, a small pile of razor edges falling into his surprised grip. <<Demon Weretiger’s Fangs,>> Klein read, as Issin headed for him with a relieved look and quiet mutters about idiot guild leaders who didn’t know when to lie down and let someone else do the heavy lifting. *Huh.*

Kirito sheathed his own sword with shaking hands, paler than even moonlight should have made him. “The spell needed a sacrifice. I had to give it substance from something close to you.” He shook his head, as if trying to shake away exhaustion; carefully, started to sit down. “Besides, you’re going to need new armor anyway...”

Patting Klein down, Issin swore. “Catch him!”

Breathing hard, Kunimittz and Dynammm nearly ran into each other; the curly-haired tank still caught the swordsman before his head could hit the ground. “What happened?” Kunimittz asked, sounding a little out of it himself. “He didn’t get hit!”

Issin gave Klein’s scarred arm one more quick glance, then shook his head and got up to go check the Moonsword. “Remember how I keep telling you guys magic’s got limits?”

“Yeah?” Klein ventured. He really didn’t want to move. Sure, the soft twig-crunching he could hear hinted someone was heading their way. Maybe a lot of someones. But this was still a safe area. Nobody would be attacking anybody else. Better for Fuurinkazan to just sit here, catch their breath, and get used to still being alive. He felt so *weird*.

There’s a scar. Where I got bitten. That means... but I’m not attacking anyone, my cursor’s green, what the heck is going on?

Issin rolled his eyes. “Kirito told the limits to go screw themselves.”

“He would,” Harry One muttered, as Issin tipped a Dewdrop down Kirito’s throat. The swordsman coughed, and swallowed, but didn’t look much more awake. “No guild, doesn’t even work with a PUG. You’d think the guy *wanted* to-”

Dale punched him in the shoulder, a muffled thump on armor. “Guys. Company.”

Armed company, Klein saw, even if half of them looked like they’d come straight from shaking the dirt off their plows. Some of them carried bows, others carried spears, and none of them looked like people Klein would have crossed lightly. Not even the old lady in ceremonial white-and-black-striped robes, whose otherwise no-nonsense spear had a tuft of silvery feathers swinging from the haft of it-

“Hey!” Klein batted away a poking spear-point. Her icon was still questing gold; that didn’t qualify as an attack? And what was that spear, magic? The tip had felt not just sharp, but *hot....*

Silver. Klein’s heart sank, and he swallowed hard. *The spear’s silver.*

“Hmm.” The old lady lifted her weapon back to parade-rest against her shoulder. “So ye beat the moon-madness. Ye’ll do, cub. Ye’ll do.”

<<Tetsutora,>> her icon read. <<Shaman of Snow Springs.>>

Snow Springs? No wonder he hadn’t recognized any of the NPCs. They weren’t from Tinctoria Village. “Did the headman of Tinctoria call you, Lady Tetsutora?” Klein said warily. “Because we were just leaving, honest.” *Before they chase us out with torches and pitchforks.* Not that he could blame the locals. If Kirito hadn’t pulled off a miracle, Tinctoria would have just traded one rampaging weretiger for another.

“*Lady, ye say! Hah!*” The shaman rapped the butt of her spear against the ground. “Nay, they did not. Many a time we have told them, but let the rogues be known to us and *we* will hunt them. But they believe us not. So ever we must abide at a distance, only tracking those who do evil by scent and rumor, ever at risk from our own neighbors. Short-sighted fools.” She growled, a low sound that made Klein want to flatten his ears just like Issin was, and glance away. No way was he challenging this old lady-

Um. What am I doing?

“But ye are new to the blood, and confused as any young cub.” The haft thumped ground again. “Come. Ye and your pack will be safe with us. Safer, far, than if Tinctoria Village finds ye still within our domain with one new-turned.” She held out a muscled hand, fingers tipped with nails white and thick as the Fangs in his inventory. “Ye may call me Grandma Tiger.”

Warm. Utterly, completely warm, in a fuzzy softness that tickled his nose. Kirito turned his head a little to stifle the urge to sneeze, then nestled in deeper. There was nothing - nothing - quite like being warm after a long time cold.

For a long time, he’d thought he’d never be warm again.

I failed them. They’re gone....

But Klein’s alive.

He clung to that like a lifeline. He wasn’t sure exactly what had happened after Klein had killed his nemesis, but he’d seen the curse shatter. Klein was alive. Klein was *sane*.

Well. As sane as any of us can be, here.

“So you wrapped him up in stripes,” Fuurinkazan’s leader was saying out there where it was chilly. “And maybe I shouldn’t ask, but it’s just a little bit freaky.... are you sure that wasn’t somebody?”

“Heh! Nay, cub.” An old woman’s voice, dryly amused; the same Kirito thought he’d heard before everything had gone fuzzy. “We leave no fur when we die. ‘Twas a mortal beast that grew too fond of horseflesh. We’ve more than trouble enough breeding them to bear our touch, without losing good mares to some lazy young male not wise enough to take our scent as a warning.”

“Those gnarly, spotted things out there are horses?” Harry One said under his breath.

“Magebred dire horses.” From the sound of that set of thumps - a book and elbows on a table? - Dynammm had settled in with one of his favorite SAO hobbies: local lorebooks. “Did you see the little side-claws, up above the hooves? I wonder what else they’ve got in the bloodline. If the locals can breed them to carry weretigers without freaking out... oh, wow. Is that what I think it is?”

“If ye think that be a white drakkensteed, then aye, ‘tis.” The elder’s voice was noticeably warmer. “Snowclaw has been one of our studs for nigh on forty years, now. His colts are too wild for any life save draconic steeds or the battle-lines; his fillies are still a handful, but they and their get do well for us. Have ye handled horses in your own world, then?”

“No, Shaman Tetsutora,” Dynammm said regretfully. “My family used to, in my great-grandfather’s day. But that was a long time ago.” There was a rustle of pages. “Sorry, if this is a stud book you probably don’t want outsiders-”

“That, ye may discuss with Tae, and her sire Lusliat,” Tetsutora said firmly. “’Tis their book; I only borrowed it a time to check a few remedies. The Mistfeathers keep the best bloodlines in our village, but they lost much of their clan in the Last War. And they are proud. Perhaps an outsider might do for them something they are unwilling to ask of neighbors.”

So there are more quests here, Kirito thought. Interesting... wonder if I can find something good-

Tetsutora raised her voice a bit. “And were I minded to screech of spies, young one, I’d sooner point my claw at a half-grown man-cub who has not the courtesy to tell his pack he’s still breathing.”

Busted.

“He’s up?” Klein pounced on the edge of Kirito’s cot, almost tipping them both over onto the floor before the redhead shifted his weight. Klein yanked on the edge of the fur in a brief tug-of-war, grinning into Kirito’s blinking eyes. “You’re up! Damn, you scared me. You just fell over, and Issin said you burned through all your MP into your HP, and I didn’t know anybody could do that, and how did you even *find* us, last I heard even Argo couldn’t keep track of you, though she thought you were hunting wererats on the lower levels-”

All in one breath. Kirito blinked a little harder. Glanced around the wood and bamboo of a village infirmary at a relieved guild and old shaman weretigress. Then back at a wide-eyed Klein. “Did you... have coffee?”

Issin looked positively horrified, ears as flat as they could go. “Oh god, no. Please. Not until he’s had a few days to calm down.”

Kunimittz was stifling snickers in his arm. “Now you know what we had to put up with!”

“Was I *that* bad?”

“Clingy kitten,” Harry One agreed, setting down an empty mug. “But we’ll make it.” He paused, a truly wicked grin spreading across a piratical face. “Unless somebody rolls a ball of string.”

“You guys.” Klein stuck out his tongue at them, then flung up his hands. “They won’t take this seriously. You take this seriously, right? You had to, you’re here, how are you here-?”

“Argo,” Kirito cut him off, gingerly sitting up. He could feel every inch of where he’d hit the ground. *Ow*.

He was up. Mostly. But the red-black and ebony-striped fur under his hands was soft as a down blanket, and he missed it already.

No. Bad Kirito. No taking valuable items from friendly NPCs. The next person Tetsutora has to treat might hurt just as much as you do.

“Argo? But she said you still weren’t talking - whoa, hold it - damn it, *stay!*” Klein shoved him back down before he could try to stand. “Your HP’s been picking up all night, but it still looks lousy. Issin said we should just let you rest. Something about letting your HP and MP get back into equilibrium before we shoved any more magic down your throat... you heard from Argo? I told her not to tell you, damn it- um.”

Kirito glared at him. “She told me that, too.” It still made him angry. “What were you thinking?”

Issin cleared his throat. “By the time we figured out he was infected, he probably wasn’t thinking.” He gave his leader a pointed look, then turned serious eyes back on Kirito. “The rest of us.... You want it right between the eyes? If everything went wrong, we weren’t sure you’d duck.”

Kirito had to look away. “...I’m not planning on dying.”

“Good,” Issin nodded. “Stay that way.”

“We didn’t think there was anything you could do,” Dale spoke up. “What was that spell?”

“’Tis called Lycan’s Shade.” Tetsutora stalked over with a brimming mug of something white and frothy. “No Moonsword has cast it since the Last War. Drink up; you humans are so cursed fragile to heal. ‘Tis like painting eggshells.”

<<Tiger’s Milk.>> Kirito sniffed it cautiously, glancing at Fuurinkazan’s empty mugs on Tetustora’s low table. It smelled like cream, and had a faint taste of... not quite mint.

Catnip?

The shaman was already poking and prodding him with thick nails, gripping his cheek a moment to get a good look at his eyes and otherwise making him feel like a kid in the doctor's office. "Half-grown man-cub with more heart than sense," Tetsutora grumbled. "I know Stheno has taught ye better."

Which dropped jaws all over Fuurinkazan. Kirito shrugged. If Stheno had wanted them to know she taught magic, she'd have told them herself. "She also mentioned that certain powerful shamans were too fragile to keep risking themselves on the battlefield. I notice that didn't stop you."

"Brat." She flicked a finger against his forehead, then stepped back. "Ye were lucky. If ye'd not mastered enough shadow-casting with darkfire to make your spells bite the harder, ye'd not have had the strength to cast and fight."

"That wasn't luck." Kirito glanced at Klein. "Would you stop looking at me like that? It's not like I did you a favor..."

"Okay, fine." Klein dragged up a stool, the better to look him in the eye. "Though I'm sitting here, not trying to eat small children. That's got to be better than the alternative. What did you do? You dragged the curse out of me, made it real...?"

"Part of it." Kirito sighed. "Lycanthropy is two infections, not one. One of them goes after your body. The other - it tries to take over your soul. Or at least your mind."

"Nay; soul be the truth, indeed." Tetsutora wove her fingers together, grim. "A lycan who kills, only kills. One who infects - 'tis the worst crime among us. If ye find a human who wishes to join a pack, then bring them to the Elders, like any other youkai. To twist another's mind and soul awry, so they only joy in slaughter, and the pain of those they love... 'tis unforgiveable."

Klein shivered.

"Easy, cub." She patted the redhead's shoulder. "Ye beat it. Mind, I think ye would have had the strength to beat it alone, did ye have enough time lost in the wilderness. But your pack would have been at risk the whole month ye fought, and even if they stayed careful - 'tis a bit hard on the wildlife."

Klein snorted a laugh, even if he was still shaking. "Guess it would be. So - what? It's easier to zap one infection than two?"

"And harder," Tetsutora reflected. "Most times, healing spells cannot sever the two. Lycan's Shade does." She spread her hands. "Moonlight makes many things real that cannot bear the light of day. A Moonsword can make that curse real, separate, *breathing*. And so ye can beat it." She leveled a glare at Kirito. "But ye cast that spell by the thickness of a cat's whisker. On a stranger, ye would have failed." Shaking her head, she eyed the mug he hadn't quite finished. "Rest. Mend your spirit. And strengthen the magic ye bear a bit more, before ye try such a damn fool stunt again."

So I need to raise my Sorcery or go up a few more levels, Kirito concluded. I can do that.

Though the long-term consequences still frightened him. Klein was right, first they had to get out of SAO alive... but what Kayaba had done was *scary*. The game designer hadn't done anything as blatant as making the use of magic addictive. Oh no. He'd been much, *much* more subtle.

Magic was *fun*.

It didn't start out fun. You learned a few spells by rote. They weren't very powerful, and none of them seemed to connect to the others in any way that made logical sense. But if you kept at it, paid attention, and learned Draconic....

Spells are a programming language. Heh. Draconic++.

Runes and sigils were one way to shorthand bits of spells. Writing them on scrolls was another. Physical components were yet another, acting as mnemonics and substitutes for part of the power cost and reams of code. But you didn't need any of them. Technically, you didn't even need spoken words. If you knew what you were doing.

By now Kirito had assembled a small stack of notebooks on what worked, what didn't, and what he'd theorized might work with the right power and components behind it. Every spell he'd gained access to, he took apart; checking it line by line to see why it worked, and how it might work better.

Lycan's Shade was one he'd just learned from Stheno. Figuring out enough shortcuts to make it work while he was desperately jumping through a teleport gate had been tricky....

An odd icon blipped up on his HUD. One he'd never seen before.

Kirito dropped his mug, reaching for throwing pikes even as the room went blurry. Silver or not, he was going to make something hurt. "What was in that...?"

"Half-grown, indeed. It would hit ye first." Tetsutora's voice sounded like it came through water. "Look after your pack, Klein. I've much to get done today. And ye can do this."

The world was fuzzy. Klein was fuzzy.

If he lived through this, Kirito decided, he really had to laugh about it.

If....

Half-buried in a pile of sleepy guildmates, Klein rubbed behind Issin's ears. The purr went straight to his bones. Warm. Nice. Safe, in a way he hadn't felt since Kayaba had trapped them all; his buddies were here, nobody was bothering them, and....

Damn it.

Klein eyed the unconscious swordsman pinned under his left arm, and sighed. He'd never. *Ever*. Guessed how many weapons Kirito carried on him. *On* him, not just in Inventory.

And he'd definitely never known how flexible a determined, half-drunk teenager could be when he was trying to get at them. Or that a determined, half-drunk teenage *sorcerer* might have a few magical effects ready to fire off with a snap of his fingers, low MP or not.

Just out of reach, Kirito's long coat was currently wrapped around knives, throwing pikes, poisoned needles, component pouches, a bundle of rope, at least one bag of silver dust - could he say *ow* - and a sword. There was no way Klein could ignore that sword.

Then again, there was no way he could ignore the whole *limp kitten* effect of a simple dark gray shirt and tousled black hair, either. When Kirito was out, he was *out*.

...Which, come to think of it, was probably why the kid had fought so hard *not* to let go and sleep. From what Klein had been able to worm out of Argo about the Black Cats, Kirito had fought and traveled solo for all but two of the past nine months. Not just fighting monsters, but completing quests on his own; and that meant nights out of town, with nobody watching your back. No wonder Kirito had hair-trigger reflexes.

Klein glanced at singed holes in his sleeves, and grimaced. *This used to be a good shirt*.

Well, it had been. Before he'd gone all grr snarly furry last night. Which he still didn't want to think about, but....

The world smelled so *alive*. He didn't know if he wanted to bounce out Tetsutora's back door to chase butterflies through the sunshine, or just laze around here on a rug with his guild in a warm patch of gold. Though right now lazing had an edge. Kirito was finally, *finally* asleep, a boneless deadly black kitten, and everyone's scents had calmed and settled. It was... nice.

Settled. Klein frowned. *Did they smell different before?*

He couldn't be sure. Everything had been so raw and confused under the moonlight. And even after the demon was dead... everything had been so new. But - maybe.

Right now, they smelled... *good* wasn't the right word. Fuurinkazan smelled *whole*. Healthy. Cat and human and tiger, and Kirito's odd undertone of feathers.

Weird feathers. Klein took another sniff, trying to track it down. It was strongest on Kirito's right hand, mingling there with the tang of supple leather half-gloves.

Something under the glove? Whatever it is, he's always wearing it; Issin says he always smells like feathers-

"You didn't have to stop rubbing," Issin mumbled, Siamese-blue eyes opening a slit to be miffed at him.

"Yeah, I did," Klein said regretfully. "We need to talk." He gave Issin a hairy eyeball. "You realize, he gets to punch both of us out after this."

“What makes you say- wait.” Issin’s ears twitched. “Both?”

“I’m the leader. My responsibility,” Klein said firmly. He hoped it was firm, at least. Part of him still wanted to chase glittery dust motes. They were so *pretty*.... “And you know what that stuff was, or you wouldn’t have made sure Kirito got it.” He brushed hair off Kirito’s neck, feeling warm skin just a little cooler than his own. “What was it? Why’d you do that? He trusted us.”

Issin disentangled himself enough to sit up, arms loosely wrapped around his knees. “Yeah. He trusts us.” The shaman’s tone was weighted with grief like lead. “Klein. Did you get out of Argo how the Black Cats died?”

Klein frowned. “Some kind of crystal trap. She said Kirito didn’t say much.”

Issin nodded, as if that was what he’d expected. “So you just asked her what Kirito said happened?”

“Well... yeah,” Klein admitted. “I’m not going to listen to some numbskulls who call him a Beater and weren’t even *there*-”

“Keita didn’t die in the dungeon.”

Klein sucked in a breath, trying to keep it quiet. “Okay. Talk.”

“I know a few people who knew Keita,” Issin obliged. “People saw them meet. Kirito looked shook up, and there was an argument. Can’t swear to the words; I’m not sure I’d believe anybody who was there, and I’m *not* going to ask Kirito. But then-” Issin grimaced. “Keita jumped off the railing.”

Klein didn’t have to ask which railing. There was only one kind of railing people talked about that way. And one edged every level, and jumping off it always ended the same. Except.... “Kirito didn’t try to grab him?” Because the Black Swordsman was *fast*. Fast enough to grab even an idiot jumping off the edge of the world.

“You want my guess?” Issin said levelly. “No. He didn’t.”

Klein felt his lips writhe in a snarl. “No *way*-”

“Just... listen.” That dark blue bored into his gaze. “I think he didn’t. Because his guild was dead, his guild leader had just lost it, and he wanted to live. Kirito *wants* to live. He wouldn’t fight so hard if he didn’t. But right then? Right there?” Issin paused, grimacing as he wrestled that scent-flick of anger back down. “Keita went over the edge. If Kirito had tried to stop him... he might have gone, too.”

“Ah, hell,” Klein breathed. Because he could see it. Everybody gone, and Kirito had been so damn *lonely*. “What do we do?”

Issin grinned a little. “He showed up to save your furry butt. I think that’s a good sign.” His smile dimmed. “But he’s been off the radar for weeks. We couldn’t find him. Asuna couldn’t. *Argo* couldn’t - and I don’t think she was just trying to up the price. We know Kirito’s got a

high Hide. And from what Tetsutora told me about Lycan's Shade, he had to have been grinding his Sorcery just to pull it off. Meaning he's been using it. A lot. I think Argo *couldn't find* him." His nose twitched, fine whiskers flicking against his cheek. "Damned if I was going to let him heal up enough to move and disappear again."

"Okay," Klein nodded, taking in that serious look. "Good point. I don't think he should be alone either. So what did you *do*?"

"According to the lore, it was Tetsutora herself who invented Tiger's Milk centuries ago," Issin informed him. "It's one of the reasons the Gorgon Sisters could get Aincrad to work as a kingdom in the first place, instead of just ending up another wilderness full of monsters fighting each other." He shrugged. "It helps mixed-race youkai packs stay together."

"Whoa, wait a minute." Klein held up his free hand. "We're not--"

"Bakeneko, weretiger, humans," Issin summed up. "It does work on humans."

Darn shamans. One of these days Klein was going to catch the firebird-spirit that gave Issin advice and wring some answers out of it. But he sat on his impatience, trying not to bounce in place. "What does it *do*?"

"Changes our scent," Issin obliged. "Just a little. More important, it scoops up the scents of the people drinking with you, and tells your spirit, these are people you can live with."

"It bends people's minds?" Klein almost yelped. Kirito was going to *kill* him.

"No!" Issin waved empty hands in a ward-off. "You think Grandma Tiger would stand for that? Not a chance. It just... kind of stomps on the whole 'you smell weird, I can't trust you' flinch. So we *don't* smell weird to each other. That's it."

"That's it, huh?" Klein lifted a skeptical brow.

"And it... kind of transfers a little energy, too," Issin admitted. "Just a *little* youki. Relax, would you? Please? All I'm hoping for is that we get a week to feed him without him disappearing again. Magic-users may pull most of the power out of the universe, but the lore says sorcerers pull more of it out of themselves than anyone else. Kirito's been burning through his magic like a flamethrower, and he's a *teenager*. Even for a human, that means he ought to be raiding pantries and zonking out at odd moments. Not eating trail rations, clearing all day, and farming mats all night."

All of which Klein agreed with. But. "Even for a human?"

Issin flinched. Sighed, and leaned back against him, worried and warm. "Kirito's got a right to be scared," the bakeneko admitted. "I wake up in the morning and listen to everything. I keep my claws padded when I wash my face. I don't even think about it anymore. This is me. If I woke up and I *wasn't* furry - I think I'd freak out."

"Yeah," Klein said quietly. "Okay. But we're all human here, Issin. We've got to remember that."

The bakeneko looked away. “Humans chased you out of Tinctoria to die, Klein. Or worse.”

“NPCs,” Klein started.

“*Snow Springs* NPCs came to help,” Issin said firmly. “We’re all players, Klein. We can hang onto that. But right now, for us - the most dangerous monster in this game is a human with a magic weapon who hates youkai.”

Damn. That’s going to be messy when we get back. Klein tried not to growl in frustration. *Priorities. First we get back. Then we worry about freaking the mundanes.* “Well, I know one sword we don’t have to worry about.” He eyed black hair. “So how do we get him to stick around? Besides playing the *I’m a hyperactive kitten, help*, card. He’s never going to buy that.”

Issin stifled a snicker. “Oh, he might. But if you want a serious idea... did you see those knives?”

“Kind of a little closer than I wanted to, yeah,” Klein said warily.

“Did you see the green one?”

“Fancy, jade, sure,” Klein shrugged. Though fancy didn’t begin to cover it. It was *beautiful*. Willow-green, leaf-shaped blade, with a coiled dragon as the hilt. A perfect throwing knife. “It’s a MMORPG. Everybody’s got some bling.”

“Everybody?” Issin glanced pointedly at the Black Swordsman.

Klein opened his mouth... and closed it again. Thought about that. “Damn.”

“So.” Issin gave him a crooked grin. “What’s out there, on levels *we* plan to run quests in, that you need jade to kill?”

“You let them hunt a Caller in Darkness?” Vision-sphere or not, it was all Stheno could do not to try to reach through magic and shake the weretiger hundreds of miles away. “They have no clerics, no druids, no holy relics-”

“Tsk! Next ye’ll be wanting them to have a paladin.” Tetsutora’s lips curled in a fangs-hidden grin. A few white strands of hair blew in a mountain wind; Stheno could smell the snow-coldness of the air. “They have jade and a Moonsword. The cubs will be fine.” Her image folded translucent hands, seeming to rest them just above the desk in Stheno’s castle chambers. “Or should I say, the cub will be fine?”

Stheno sat still in her chair. A pity they weren’t in SAO at the moment. Surely she could convince Beniryuu’s dream to let her visit *Snow Springs* for a good spar. “I have dealt with all of *Fuurinkazan*-”

“*Fuurinkazan* does not bear the ring ye crafted.” Ancient eyes studied her. “Are ye that afeared to let others ken ye’ve marked him?”

Yes. Stheno kept her voice steady, even as the air of her chambers seemed to thicken. “He has no desire to be youkai.”

“No desire?” Testutora rocked back on her heels, shocked. “Not one in a thousand humans has the strength to bear the blood of Cato. And ye would let him get away?”

“You’re a lycan!” Stheno snapped. And regretted it. “Tetsu... I thought you of all people would understand. He doesn’t want to be one of us.”

The shaman loosed a rumbling growl, that faded into a sigh. “Aye, I do. But ‘tis not my kind wiped out to a scant handful of hurt souls. We need ye, Stheno. Ye and all of Cato’s blood. Not for power; not even for visions. For *hope*.” One hand gestured east, toward the Walls of Storm. “The medusas are all but dead. That is the tale spread in the Five Nations; from tavern to tavern, lowest hovel to kings’ thrones. One of the monstrous races was wiped from the world in a single night. Why should the others not follow?” Tetsutora’s eyes were grim. “So the humans hope, and they work to bring that dire dream true. We *need* the cub, Stheno. Even if ye hate humans.” Tetsutora took a breath. “Even if ye will hate yerself the more, for taking him.”

Stheno closed her eyes, and shook her head. “I will not. We need hope? What do you think he needs, old tiger? I cannot take that from him.” She glanced to the far corner of her chamber, where dark hair and serpents were almost buried in pillows. “And there is something far more important than bringing another to Cato’s blood.”

“Yui.” The weretiger’s expression softened. “Where did ye find the hatchling? I’ve heard a mort of rumors, and that name-!”

“It’s the name she knows, and claims as hers.” Stheno’s gaze lingered on the pillow-nest. “I will not take it from her.”

“That’s as may be, but ‘tis a mite unsettling,” Tetsutora admitted. “I’d wager half the reason the Council of Lords was wary of Beniryuu’s plan was the humans’ names. Sound straight from Riedra, they do.”

“You should know,” Stheno said dryly.

“Ha! And aye, I should. Who better?” the weretiger chuckled. “But truly. Ye have had the child’s mind checked, have ye not? Ye know the terrible fate some Inspired can lay on a soul. ‘Tis not often it takes on youkai, but if a mind seed sprouts....”

“We’ve checked,” Stheno said bluntly. Even among the youkai, not many knew the true horror rare quori-possessed Inspired could inflict on another mind; implanting a telepathic parasite that would remake its host into something as evil as the quori themselves. And humans called lycans monsters. “Yui is herself. Only a little girl.” She grimaced. “Apparently they found it more interesting to test her abilities untouched, rather than make her yet another of the Inspired’s tools.” She shuddered. “It’s not as if a medusa would be a valuable agent in demi-human lands, anyway. They’d kill her on sight.”

“Which feeds the rumors.” Tetsutora tapped nails against an unseen table. “How did such a young one survive in human lands?”

Stheno smiled, just a little. “With unexpected help.”

The shaman’s eyes narrowed into wary slits. “Why do I have this *terrible* feeling when ye say that?”

“Terrible? Me?” Stheno bit back a snicker. “It’s not my fault if the Karrnathi wizards tend to ignore odd twists of fortune when they cast their divinations. Who would ever expect a werewolf to come through the change sane? Much less with their own heart.”

“Now I *know* ye did something.” Tetsutora leaned back in her chair. “I’ll not ask for details, mind... but ’twould this have aught to do with why the Brelish patrols out of Orcbone have been a mite touchy these past months?”

“Oh, it might,” Stheno said, with a great deal of satisfaction. “It very much might. Let’s just say, the wizards had *associates* in Breland - interesting, how the crowns tend to ignore the dragonmarked Houses at play - and our wolf swordsman might have *been* Brelish, before he took refuge with us?” She narrowed her eyes, reflexively looking away before her gaze could impact Tetsutora’s. “A Brelish swordsman who went missing with a young recruit from Orcbone in the first place, five years ago. Deaths without bodies, blamed on us. And now the live wolf is here, with his own small pack. I *do* so enjoy the irony.” She smiled truly. “We were fortunate. Some of the spells the wizards used to experiment on their captives came from Inspired hands. I caught traces of them in my Sight, and passed word to... a certain elan of our acquaintance. Who happened to arrive to break in, just as the young wolf was breaking those with him *out*.”

“Ah. *That* one.” Tetsutora’s smile was all mischief. “So... the last thing the wizards did see was a flutter of red, eh?”

Or an arrow buried to the fletching in their chests, burning with psychic fire. Or red eyes under a curtain of dark hair. Or nothing at all, save the sudden chill of death. Vincent had his own dark memories of Inspired and wizardly experiments. His reaction to the experimenters tended to be rather... permanent.

Stheno nodded. “That would be the one, yes.”

“Heh. I thought I saw his training in your cub’s stance.” The shaman lifted an admonishing finger. “And *that* is why ye should not worry.”

If Vincent had trained Kirito in anything but woodcraft, yes, but- Stheno swallowed, throat suddenly dry. “That’s why you sent them after the Caller.” It was barely a whisper. “To give them experience fighting psychic attacks.”

“They will be fine.” Tetsutora’s grin was fond, with just a flicker of rueful understanding. “They will thrive. Ye will see.”

Why did they do it?

Half his mind concentrating on slipping soundlessly through the woods, Kirito stalked that question like a cat eyeing a mouse just out of reach.

Why are they worrying about me?

The world was what it was. You got a bad grade. You broke a wrist. You got trapped in a death game....

You find out your parents aren't really your parents.

Anyway. Things happened. You dealt with them, or you didn't. And if you couldn't deal with them... he'd tried to help Sachi.

And look how well that turned out.

The blind leading the blind. He wouldn't be here if he could deal with the real world. Real people. Real family.

So Issin had tried to use a game item to make him part of Fuurinkazan's family. What should he say? *Thanks for the thought, but when it comes to people I roll a critical fail every time-*

Kirito stopped, one foot still in the air. Set it down. Very gently.

Branch-crunching yards behind him, Klein held up a fist for Fuurinkazan to stop. "What is it?"

Kirito drew a deep breath, testing the air for scents of decay. "Listen."

"I don't hear anything-" Klein cut himself off. Glanced at Issin.

"I don't hear anything, either," the shaman murmured, drawing closer to his guildmates. "No birds. No mice in the leaves. No *insects*."

Kirito nodded, and shifted his fingers to beckon the others' gazes. "Look down at the ground where you are. Then look ahead of me."

"The leaves are different." Kunimittz's voice was almost a whisper. He bent, and scuffed some of the fallen duff. "They look like fallen leaves. Over there, they look... withered."

"Ferns over here," Harry One said tightly. "Should be over there; it's wet enough. They're not."

"No spiderwebs over there, either," Dale said suddenly. "It's not the best time to see them, dew's burned off - but they're not there."

Dynammm swallowed. "Over there's dying, isn't it?"

“The undead tend to do that.” Kirito kept his voice low. “Take a good look. Remember where this is. An undead can follow you out of the dead zone. But if it’s not aggroed, it usually won’t.” He paused. “Usually.”

“Okay.” Klein took a deep breath; let it sigh out, bracing himself. “So we know it’s in there.”

Kirito flicked a glance at him, and smiled a little. “We can know a lot more than that.” Activating his map, he took two steps back, and carefully started following the edge of the dead zone.

Fuurinkazan watched him, and started following. “Mapping its territory?” Issin asked. “So we know which way to run if it’s too big?”

“Partly.” Kirito kept an eye on his footing, glancing around for any mobs that might be drawn by the active mapping. “I ran into an NPC ranger... fairly early in the game.” Dark hair and a swirl of red cloak; ruby eyes that held an echo of old pain.

I wonder if Vincent’s an admin, too?

“He asked me to run a few odd quests,” Kirito went on, almost smiling at the memory. “One was to bring him ten Nightjars.”

“Nightjars?” Dale asked.

“Little bird mobs. Look a lot like a piece of dead branch when they hide,” Issin filled him in. “They’re mostly just for flavor. Not much experience, and they don’t drop anything... wait.” The shaman gave Kirito a narrow look. “How could anybody bring him ten Nightjars? They don’t leave anything when they die.”

Kirito kept mapping. Waiting. It wasn’t sunset yet, but soon.

“You had to bring them alive.” Klein pursed his lips for a whistle, then thought better of it. “How long did it take to figure that out?”

“I’m not sure you’d think the quest was worth it,” Kirito said, half-teasing. “There wasn’t much experience at the end. Just a little advice. *Skills mean nothing if you don’t pay attention.*” He nodded toward the dead zone. “Scan tells you that area is wrong. Drained of energy. Drained of life. That’s the cause. But you didn’t need Scan to see the results.”

“Okay, showoff,” Klein grinned at him. “What kind of results are you getting off that map?”

“I need a few more minutes.” Kirito kept walking. “Did you know there’s a mathematics toolkit in the Menu?”

“Math?” Dynammm looked faint.

Klein had already swiped his open, hunting. “Math, huh? I should have known. No way could the merchants skin us so close without accounting... um, where?”

“You can get at it a couple different ways.” Kirito pointed. “Try Trade, then Accessories. Or Extras under Map. Or look under Magesight or Herbalism, Runes.” He rolled his eyes. “Or you could look at the Online Coursework option. I guess Kayaba thought no one would want to try that after Opening Day.”

Klein snorted. “Yeah. Who’s worried about homework when you’ve got monsters hunting down your... whoa. There’s calculus in here!”

“And a lot more,” Kirito affirmed. “I think this is far enough. Let’s get a little farther from the-”

The system chimed, white and dark-stained bones shimmering into existence, and a murder of Skeletal Crows swooped down.

A few hectic minutes later, Kirito retrieved his throwing pikes. He tucked them away, reminding himself to check them for subtle damage later. Right now, it was time for Salve to clean his wounds, just as Issin and Harry One were doing with the rest of Fuurinkazan. You never knew if undead were carrying Filth Fever. It wasn’t as bad as lycanthropy, but feeling like you wanted to throw your guts up for a *week* made it very hard to fight.

Calling up his map again, Kirito studied the arc of the Caller’s dead zone. *Should be enough.* “This only works with territorial monsters. It’s no help with level bosses or random mobs. But....” He touched the curve, opened the Map Extras, transferred the data, calculated the radius, and added another calculation of his own. “There. Stronger monsters hold a larger territory. That should give us a rough idea of how high its level is compared to the rest of this level.”

...Why was everyone *staring* at him?

If I could go back in time, I’d grab myself in that field and shake me into asking more about how Kirito was really doing with the Black Cats. Damn it. Klein glanced at the setting sun as Fuurinkazan plus one waited by the cracked mausoleum, relieved to see they still had a few minutes. According to the Snow Springs villagers, sunlight was fatal to a Caller. *The way he looked, when we asked him to explain how he pulled that equation out of thin air....*

What had followed had been a hesitant, downright shy explanation of some of the common algorithms games used to decide mob behavior. And a somewhat more animated story of a few creatures he’d tested his guesses on, complete with one spectacular underestimation of how it might work for Giant Wasps that had left a chagrined Black Swordsman breathing through a reed as he hid in a lake.

Then it’d been back to almost prying words out, as Kirito admitted he hadn’t had good math to base his first equation on. Just a feeling of what might fit right. Further refined by experience since, sure. But just a feeling. Not something you could really rely on. And the territory equation only gave you a rough estimate of power level. It could be off a level or two either way. It was *not* something you could count on.

You don't want anyone counting on you, Klein concluded. You could be wrong. And then they could be dead.

But it went deeper than that. And Klein could have kicked himself for not seeing it earlier.

You got distracted by that Competent Hero on Opening Day. Just like he meant for everybody to.

Kirito hadn't been running off to join a group. He'd been heading out to *solo*. Only he really did love Sword Art Online, and the chance to let someone else in on the fun - not to show off, as Klein had thought then, but to *share*....

I must have caught him on a good day. One he hadn't had too many people to deal with already.

Because if Issin was right, and this was Kirito *trusting* them-

The Beater's all an act. He's not the tough loner. He's not the life of the party, either. He's the IT guy hiding in the corner farthest away from the karaoke machine, praying he can go home soon.

And Klein had a pretty good feel for how groups worked, in and out of the game. Whoever put their idea out first and loudest, tended to get listened to. Which meant the Black Cats had had one of the best survivors in the game on their side - and he might as well have been gagged in a closet.

...Okay, maybe not that bad, Klein allowed. Still. For all Kirito's survival skills - and the guy was good, the guy was beyond good - his people skills were an utter fail.

Unless you count "skill to get everybody to see me as their hated scapegoat". That, he's good at. Which means damn it, that could not have been the first time-

And oh, that was an *ugly* image. Klein shuddered.

Outside of that, he flunks the people quiz. And he knows it. Damn.

Klein chewed that over, trying to find a solution. Nothing brilliant was popping up.

All I know is, Issin's wrong. We don't need to get Kirito in the guild. He'd just fold up and wilt. We need to get him to realize he can call Fuurinkazan for backup....

Hah! Klein almost slapped himself in the forehead. I'm an idiot. How do you handle IT guys? You send 'em an email. And a problem if you've got one. With a "we need X by" and "anything we can do for you?" attached. If we can get him used to just talking to us about the monsters - Damn. There goes the sun.

At first all Klein saw were faint threads of pale mist creeping over broken stone, no different than he'd see above a lake on a winter's day.

Except there's no pond. Okay, this thing gets points for sheer spooky....

Mist swirled and moaned, twisting into a score of tormented faces that appeared and vanished, moment to moment. The undead fog thickened, curves of green HP bars appearing-

<<The Caller in Darkness.>>

Oh yeah. Kirito's equation looked dead on, and this was going to be *interesting*-

Mist-mouths gaped wide, and howls wiped the world to gray. Where was he... who was he....

"Klein!"

He shook himself, like he'd been drenched in cold water. Right. Klein was his name, and everybody in red was on his side. And that darting black figure against misty gray was important - and why were his hands all furry, and his HP down?

Whoa. This thing can hit you without even touching you!

And leave you dazed, so it took precious seconds to remember that oh yeah, something was trying to *kill* you.

Oh boy. A really interesting fight....

Chapter End Notes

Shibari - artistic knot-tying. Can be sexual in nature.

Sasumata - "spear fork". Closest weapon I've been able to find to what the light-brown-haired guy in Fuurinkazan carries in the anime.

PUG - pick-up group; people who may not know each other forming a party in an online game. May or may not end badly.

I'm proposing jade as a "mundane" ghost touch weapon in this AU, like silver for werewolves; it doesn't need to be enchanted to affect ethereal beings, other weapons do.

Mind seed - nasty telepathic technique used by high-level evil psionics; basically remaking another mind into a lesser version of their own.

Repop - monster respawning after an area's already been cleared once.

Farming mats - going after specific monsters for the components they drop.

A Bad Feeling About This....

Chapter Summary

A quest goes wrong. Very badly wrong.

...It's definitely Kayaba's fault.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Repeat after me.” Kirito looked over a dazed and battered guild leaning against a wrecked mausoleum, still watching the dissipating polygons of a re-killed psionic undead monster. “I *will* spend a half hour meditating, every day.”

The chorus of groans almost made him laugh. Almost.

“I will listen to the villagers about monsters,” Kirito went on, carefully not smiling. “After all, if they’re still alive, they may be doing something right.”

Louder groans.

“I will remember that enchanted weapons may still not be entirely effective for all monsters,” Kirito continued. “Especially incorporeal ones.”

This time, there were a few whimpers in the groans. Good. Pain was a teacher. Granted, there hadn’t been that many incorporeal monsters in the game so far. But the higher the level, the tougher the monsters. They had to be ready.

“Last, but not least.” Kirito did smirk this time. “Claws go into the bad guys.”

Shoulders hunched, Klein dropped his chin onto his knuckles. The tips of his ears were red. “...Sorry.”

“You used your claws, not your teeth,” Kirito shrugged it off. The Caller’s mental attacks had dazed almost everybody, as he’d expected. Most of the psionic mobs he’d met before had been what Vincent called *phrenic creatures*; otherwise ordinary monsters with just a touch of deadly psionic power. The Caller was on a completely different level. If he’d been alone, he wouldn’t have tried fighting it. But he wasn’t alone. He was with Fuurinkazan, and he... trusted them. Even if Klein had gone furry and claws-out. Better Klein figured out what a dazed weretiger’s instincts were likely to do now, among friends. No bite meant no infection; it wasn’t a big deal. “I’m fine... what?”

Still giving him a considering look, Issin shook his head. "I'll have to go reread Argo's Guides for the last few levels. I think I missed a few things." He chuckled. "At least now we know why her Guides are so good."

Kirito tried not to blink. "She gets information from a lot of players."

"I'm sure she does."

Where was a distraction when he needed it- Aha. A shadow in the shadows. "You could have helped."

"You had the situation contained."

Fuurinkazan jumped, all suddenly focused on the low voice out of nowhere.

Ruby eyes glimmered with just a hint of humor, as the elan ranger's tattered red cloak separated from the shadows. Dark leather, a bow at his back and wands at his hip; Vincent looked like any well-armed clearer, apart from the gold quest icon over his head. "So this is Fuurinkazan." A silent nod. "They might survive." He rested his gaze on Klein. "You haven't searched for its treasure yet?"

"Heal up first, loot after," Klein summed up. "We wanted to be sure that damned thing was dead." He paused. "Again."

"Good." Ruby eyes were shadowed. "There was a rumor that a cursed dorje might be found in its lair. I came to see if it was true."

At *cursed*, all of Fuurinkazan sat up a little straighter. "A cursed what?" Klein said carefully.

Silent, Vincent gave Kirito a raised eyebrow.

"Sentira crystal shaped with psionic power, that psionists use like a wand," Kirito filled them in. Gave Vincent his own wry look. "If you know what you're doing, you can sheathe the crystal so it looks like a wand, too."

Fuurinkazan wasn't too obvious about eyeing Vincent's wands.

The ranger smirked. "Even for those of us with night eyes, undead lairs are best explored in the light." He moved one gold-gauntleted hand-

A sphere of pale silver burst into life, bright as a full moon.

"Shall we?"

The mausoleum wasn't large. Even a careful search didn't take long. Dale shifted a stray slab of rock in one corner-

Jumped back, almost knocking into Kunimittz and Kirito, narrowly avoiding the crystal shard that rolled toward his feet.

“So the rumors were true.” Vincent knelt, gesturing for them to feel free to plunder the rest of the silver and gems, while he wrapped the azure-glowing crystal in a square of white silk. “Look carefully. Cursed items almost always show their malice in their appearance. An empowered item may appear well-worn, ancient; even shabby. But magic or psionic energy that still serves an honest purpose will always have a purity to it. A cursed item is *flawed*.”

Klein’s eyes narrowed, picking out what Kirito had spotted as the shard rolled free. “Like... that.”

Vincent nodded, his gauntleted hand tracing a safe inch above the inky black crack in the crystal. “Psionic items work with the will of the wielder. They show their flaws more readily than most.”

Stepping out of the now unoccupied tomb, Vincent looked up at the stars. “The night grows old, and I have newly-turned wolves to look in on. I should not bring a cursed item near them....”

Klein glanced around his guild, getting their nods. Looked at Kirito.

What? Why me?

Klein raised an eyebrow. Shrugged, as if he could wait all night.

Hesitantly, Kirito nodded.

“We don’t know much about cursed items,” Klein admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “But speaking as a guy who just got his head put back together, whoever you’ve got needs all the help they can get. So... is there something we can do to help?”

“Perhaps.” Vincent gave the guild leader a speculative look. “Your friend is a skilled Moonsword. He can face attackers such as your last foe and live, where less disciplined minds would perish. But he is not a psionist.” He twitched the silk-wrapped dorje. “To deal with this, will require at least one with other gifts.” Deliberately, he held up the crystal, pointing it at each of Fuurinkazan in turn-

At Dale, it glowed.

Heh. It wants the one that got away, Kirito thought. Why am I not surprised?

“You have the potential to be a warrior of the mind, as well as of steel,” the ranger stated. “If you are willing, I will leave this in your care. Be very careful with it.” Ruby eyes glanced at Kirito. “And listen to your friend. He knows many of the dangers you may face. Gods know I’ve bounced enough attacks off his skull to teach him.” A slight smile. “You’ll have to talk the Mistfeathers into helping you. And those of dragon blood are always stubborn....”

Klein breathed in the sweet scent of fresh hay, lazily opening his eyes to the Mistfeathers’ barn loft. *You know, this explains a lot.*

Most players went for inns to sleep, or a house of their own if they could afford it. It limited how much time you could spend in the field, but a locked door was the only defense against sleep-PK. Everybody knew that.

Only Kirito had found another way.

Don't act like a player. Act like a wandering adventurer born in Aincrad, Klein thought. Nobody can sleep-PK you if they don't know where to find you.

And who'd expect the Black Swordsman to be tucked away in his sleeping bag in some NPC's hayloft?

We would, now. Hope that doesn't drive him out of good places. Kid is downright paranoid.... Did that hay squeak?

It did. And he could see a curve of a gray-furred ear, smell a distinct mix of fur and earth and grain that somehow summed up to *mouse-*

Klein pounced.

With an ear-itching high squeal, the mouse burst into polygons.

“...Damn it.”

A few yards away, Issin cracked open sleepy blue eyes. “Saying that ‘cause you pounced it,” he yawned, fangs gaping wide, “or ‘cause you wanted to eat it?”

“Issin!”

That sparked a tussle. And some swearing. And a mighty free-for-all in red, with one black shadow crawling out of his hidden nest in the hay to watch, shake his head, and maybe grin. Just a little.

All in all, not a bad way to start the morning.

“Okay,” Klein summed up, as they finished their breakfast with the rest of the Mistfeathers' ranch hands. Fuurinkazan plus two, now, as it'd been most waking hours since they'd left the mausoleum a few nights back. And that was *interesting*. “We got the Willow Charcoal to fire the purifying kiln. We got the Obsidian Shards that Vincent says ought to take in the curse when the sentira heats up. We've got the Winged Serpent Venom to pour onto the dorje before it's fired; nice shot, Tae.”

The draconic archer blushed, red making the pearly scales scattered over her cheeks stand out like reverse freckles. “I'm glad I helped.”

“So are we.” Dynammm smiled at her, only half his attention on whatever Klein was saying.

Got to tease him about that later, Klein noted. Not that he could blame his friend. Scales weren't Klein's thing, but pearl-white hair and feathered wings turned a pretty girl into someone who'd taken a wild back road out of heaven.

A really *mean* back road, between the fangs, claws, and bow that could put a shaft through small trees. Solo or partying with the Siren Sisters, Tae had a reputation as a good mid-level grinding toward being a clearer. She'd proven her skill in the fight with the Winged Serpent, arcing her arrows through the forest to spread the magical net that had let Fuurinkazan capture the monster without killing it. Because Issin, shaman that he was, had pointed out something Klein hadn't even thought of: this quest was about *purification*.

And on top of that, Kirito had confirmed that yes, he knew Vincent. And this was the same elan ranger who'd given him the quest with the Nightjars.

So no killing. Not when they didn't have to; not unless it was self-defense. The Winged Serpent was a strong and dangerous mob, but it'd left Snow Springs alone. They had no reason to kill it.

The net had been a *pain in the neck*.

But Tae had apparently taken her adoption by the Mistfeather clan to heart. And with drakkensteeds as part of their stock, they knew all about capturing flying beasts. Though gathering the venom had still been scary. Maybe more for Kirito than anyone else. And not just because he was the fastest party member, bar none, so it made sense for him to dive in toward the fangs.

That had been scary, but a familiar kind of scary. Kirito knew the risk he was taking, grabbing a mob to get at its teeth. They all did.

Except *this* risk they hadn't seen, because the minute Kirito got his hands on scaled skin-

The serpent had *stilled*, the sudden lack of pull dumping half of Fuurinkazan on their butts. Slit-pupiled eyes had met human black, the serpent's tongue tasting air. Fanged jaws had slowly opened.

And the serpent had just *lain* there, grudgingly letting the Moonsword milk out venom into a potion bottle.

Creepy. Though maybe not half as creepy as how the serpent had then folded its wings and waited until Fuurinkazan untangled it. It'd slithered a few yards away, shaken out membranous wings, given them one last sour look-

Then thundered into the sky. No tail-slashing attack. No last spit of venom. Just leaving, as Kirito sat down like his knees were made out of rubber.

"Oh," Tae had said, a little pale herself. "You're a ranger."

Which had led to panicked denials; Kirito was a *swordsman*, ask anyone. With high Stealth. That was it. Kirito swore up, down, and sideways that he couldn't influence a beast mob, and he never had. Much less get inside its head, the way rangers could-

He'd shut up then, and not even the threat of tickling had gotten him to say anything more. Meaning Klein had had to get Tae aside a little later, so he could pick her brains on just what

a ranger was.

Good fighters, Klein thought now. Ghost through the wilderness like one stray leaf in a forest. But they're more than just stealthy swords. They've got magic from the wild itself. Tae says their Herbalism Skill's got some odd extras; even if Kirito wasn't a sorcerer he'd have ended up with magic just from that.

Only that wild magic was more than just woodcraft and green growing things. Once you got a high enough level, a ranger's wild-link let him touch beastly minds. Including a lycan's.

Kirito calms me down. Just being around, Klein thought. Which is good for us, but - what about him? He's already freaked out about Kayaba making us think we're not human. If he can feel what we're feeling, then even if he doesn't get adopted....

The Beater wasn't all a façade. There was a hardness in Kirito, sharp as glass and just as brittle. If he thought he'd lost the core of his self-

I don't know if we could catch him.

Klein made himself take a breath. *But he doesn't want to die. Remember? He told us that. Have a little faith.*

He shook outworn fear off, going down the quest checklist in his head. "So there's two more things before the Mistfeathers will try taking the curse off. We need a Shiva's Wreath plant to add to the mats pile. And to gather that without it just shattering on us," he nodded at Harry One, "we need Lignum Vitae Oil to purify the knife to cut the leaves. Right?"

"Which means we need to find a downed Lignum Vitae Tree-trunk so we can distill it from the wood," their herbalist agreed. "That should do it."

"Finally." Kunimittz interlaced his fingers behind his neck and leaned back away from their picnic table; Klein thought he almost heard the subtle *crack*. "Anybody else ever been on a quest this complicated?"

"Yes."

Kirito, Klein realized. Of course.

"Stheno, right?" Dynammm downed the last of his cup of water, tossing a friendly wave to the ranch hands getting up from the other tables. "I'm not sure I'd ever have tried picking up that quest. That lady is scary."

Tae's silver eyes were wide, and if she didn't close her mouth soon an insect mob was going to fly right in. "You took a quest from Stheno of the True Sight?" *And you're still alive?* her tense stance shouted.

Klein cleared his throat. "If everybody's done... let's talk about this outside of town."

“I heard the rumors of what she did in the Last War.” Tae walked a little behind Kirito and Harry One as they threaded their way deeper into the misty forest, ready to fire and fall back into Fuurinkazan for cover. “One of the Three Gorgons who founded Aincrad, and she’s a quest monster on a lower level? It just seems a little....” She hesitated, searching for the right word. “Surreal.”

Kirito glanced back at her, then turned his attention back to fallen leaves. Harry One said he’d know Lignum Vitae leaves when he saw them. Which meant their herbalist pirate was focused on looking at leaves, not keeping an eye out for what else might be *in* the leaves. Given some of the mobs Kirito had already encountered on this level, he planned to be a second pair of eyes. “More than being trapped in a game?”

“She’s a legend.” Tae shrugged, like any fan trying to pretend that no, they really *didn’t* want to get their hands on a limited edition. “So is Vincent. You saw how my family looked when Klein said Fuurinkazan was on his quest. How did you ever meet him?” She couldn’t hide a little bounce this time. “Some monster? A flood threatening a village? Oh, maybe it was a necromancer....”

He shouldn’t. He really, really shouldn’t, Kirito told himself firmly, as Tae’s speculation rambled on. Fuurinkazan *thought* they knew him. But most people seemed to find his sense of humor a little... odd.

Well, except for Argo. Who wasn’t exactly known for leaving people laughing. More, *‘throttle that know-everything if it’s the last thing I do....’*

Oh. And maybe Asuna. Though she was just as likely to drag him through town by the coat collar as giggle. And people wondered why he stayed out of towns?

“I mean, that was *Vincent Valentine*. It had to be something world-shaking, but I didn’t hear anything about it from the Guides, or the boss planning meetings-”

...Why did he think Vincent would find her gleeing just as annoying as he did?

Oh well. Maybe she won’t believe the truth. “Second-level quest,” Kirito shrugged.

“*Gurk.*”

Worth it. *So* worth it.

Kirito kept a perfectly straight face, as Klein suddenly coughed, and Harry gave them both an odd look.

“You... wha...?”

Kirito tossed a bit of stick a few yards off the path, so the camouflaged Leaf Rattler struck over there and slithered off, instead of heading toward their party. “Argo could probably point you toward it. For a small fee.”

Oh, she would, all right. And probably wait until she got around a corner to bust out laughing. Tae with whisker-marks on top of her scales....

Don't smile. Don't. Hee....

"She'd charge people for a second level quest?" Dynammm sounded outraged on Tae's behalf.

Kirito tried not to sigh. This was one of many things he wished they could have left back in the Otherworld. Tae was *another player*. Girl or not. A good one, too; even if she seemed to bounce between soloing and the Siren Sisters guild from month to month. For right now they were in the same party, and all he was doing was talking to her. "Information isn't free." Leaf, leaf; was that another Rattler? No, just a little insect mob. Walking Leaf, if he remembered right. "I don't think he likes to be easily found. If you really want to do his quests, you probably want to work at it."

"You're right." She looked aside. "It's just - you should hear some of the stories people here tell around the fireplace. They say he escaped the Inspired. That he's tracked and hunted Essence Reavers; horrible abominations, I don't think anyone would have a chance if they weren't at least level 70. That he once held Swiftwater Pass *by himself*, against a whole Galifar army, until reinforcements could get there."

"That's not impossible." Kirito remembered a map of Aincrad, and Stheno's clawed fingers pointing out details. "There are places where the pass narrows enough that only a few people can walk abreast. A good sniper could bottle even an army in."

Tae blinked; as if she hadn't thought there might be a way a mere mortal could do it. "They say Vincent's an elan, and they're not... natural. But everyone respects him." She swallowed. "When I get back to my real family, I wish they'd respect me like that. Even just a little."

That sobered everyone. You didn't talk about the Otherworld in Aincrad. Thinking about everything you were missing in that world while the game was trying to kill you in this one? Bad idea.

Fuurinkazan traded glances, and Dynammm gave Tae a determined smile. "So how did the Mistfeathers take you in, anyway? I know the system changes your ID when you get adopted. A lot of NPCs seem to know Issin's supposed to be from Mousedeath Village, and now Klein's showing up as *from Snow Springs*, and Shaman Tetsutora says she's responsible for him. But she said you were Lusliat's *daughter*." He spread a curious, worried hand. "Are you okay with that?"

"I guess I have to be." One finger rubbed her bow when she held it. "It's happened to some people I know in the Siren Sisters, and a few other guilds. Maybe the game just thinks we fit the story, or something." She tried to smile back. "It's good, really. Now there's always someplace I can go and be safe... Issin?"

In the middle of Fuurinkazan, the shaman's fangs pressed on his lip. He blew out a breath, and shook his head. "Everybody, *stop*."

Kirito raised a startled brow. Traded a glance with Harry One, and faded a bit off the path, where mist and tree-shadows would let him hide if he had to.

Klein's hand ventured near his hilt, but he kept his stance loose. "What is it?"

“Don’t know.” Black-furred ears lowered. “I just have a really bad feeling.”

“Oh, that’s never good,” Kunimittz groaned.

“Got it.” Klein frowned at the path ahead. “Any particular kind of bad feeling? A *don’t go there?* Maybe a *big bad monster* twitch? Anything?”

“Don’t know. It’s weird.” Issin had his eyes half-closed, lips moving in a soundless incantation. “It’s like... whatever this is, the firebird doesn’t know it.”

Kirito suppressed a shiver. Issin’s firebird was a wise spirit, not an all-knowing one. There had to be some monsters and traps it didn’t know about.

“Or doesn’t want to know it,” Issin whispered. “Something that shouldn’t *be*.”

It’s too quiet, Kirito thought suddenly. *Too... numb?* Silence was one of the best warnings of a mob in the field, and he could hear insects and birds and all the small lives that ought to go quiet if a predator was out there. Yet he couldn’t *feel* anything near them larger than a mouse....

I can’t feel animals! I don’t - that’s not human, I should know if I’d tried to learn anything like that!

Yet he knew he’d felt something from the Winged Serpent. As he’d felt from almost anything with feathers or fur since. As he’d been feeling things for days... but there was nothing large nearby besides Tae and Fuurinkazan, and if there was no hostile mob near, that was *wrong*-

Issin’s lips writhed back, baring fangs as he grabbed his sword. “Daelkyr-spawn!”

The last time he’d felt the bottom drop out of his world like that, Dale thought, Kayaba had just told them the game was for keeps.

This was supposed to be a *cleared* level. He should know; Fuurinkazan had helped clear it. Major quests were marked, the most common rumors had all been tracked down, and anything capable of a TPK should have been eliminated by a clearing guild, or at least flagged in Argo’s Guide. Given the rumors and lore everyone had learned of Aincrad’s history, how some daelkyr had left this land tormented, filled with creatures that made horror movie monsters look cuddly; twisted abominations whose means of killing made Stheno’s petrification and shattering of entire mage-corps look downright *humane*....

Dale gulped. And knew he wasn’t the only one. If there were daelkyr-spawn on a cleared level, something was very wrong-

A buzz of wings, and the world seemed to come apart.

Afterward, none of them were quite able to put together exactly what had happened in the fight. Kirito came the closest; the Black Swordsman’s sorcery had a honed antipsi edge, and darkfire had left at least five sword-slashed <<Psiwasp>> corpses blazing away on the misty ground when they came out of it. But even he only had the basics: they’d been swarmed from

the air by yellow-and-black things that looked like humanoid wasps and felt of *wrong*. Things that had used some kind of mass confusion attack; Dale could remember it peaking every time wing-buzzes had synched together. Just as he remembered feeling that change of pitch in his bones, and bracing his mind, so when the attack came he wasn't dazed witless-

"Everybody, sound off!"

Klein. Sounding scared. With good reason, Dale realized, as the world seemed to clear and voices stated names. Two names were missing.

"They got Dynammm and Kunimittz." Harry One looked ill. "They're not dead, they wouldn't still be listed in the guild...."

"Gods have mercy on them." Tae was shaking; wings clamped tight to her body, wing-claws clenching and releasing her armor straps. "Captured by daelkyr-spawn, *alive*-" She shuddered.

"We're going to need all the healing magic we've got." Issin had his Inventory open, face grim. "Good thing we restocked in Snow Springs... anybody got any ideas on herbs specific against those - those things?"

"Wolf-Foot Fern." Dale stepped forward, glad to contribute something besides screaming panic. None of them had heard as many daelkyr horror stories as Tae had, but he'd heard enough to know they might all be better off in a Ringu movie. "There's not a lot of lore out there on advanced level psionic mobs yet, but that one's supposed to focus you. It gives you a buff against phrenic mobs. Psionic mobs should be like those, leveled up."

"It makes you *too* focused, if you're fighting alone," Kirito said soberly. "That's why I don't usually.... Anyone who uses it should work in pairs. As far as healing goes - Issin, they're abominations, but they're still insect-based. Adding Diatom Dust to healing agents ought to help-"

"We can't take on a whole psiwasp nest!"

"They've got two of our people." Klein leaned in toward Tae, eyes narrowed. "We're damn well going to try-!"

"We can do it."

Kirito was still pale. But he looked sure.

Harry One looked just as dubious as Dale felt. "You've seen these things before?"

"Never," the swordsman said steadily. "But all nest-spawning mobs have common behaviors. Daelkyr-spawn may be abominations, but they still have the basic behaviors of the creatures they were mutated from." Kirito flicked a glance over all of them, ending at Klein. "I've killed Giant Wasp nests before. I have the weapons I need." A grim smile. "But you're going to need gloves."

Oh, *that* didn't sound ominous. Dale swallowed, and wiped a trickle of sweat from his face.

“They zapped you just like the rest of us.” Klein’s gaze was steady. “I’m going after them. But this won’t work if none of us can keep a clear head.”

“I... know how they got through.” Kirito looked away. “I can handle it.”

“We’re going to attack a psiwasp nest?” Tae’s voice shook. “They’re daelkyr-spawn. If they don’t just try to eat you, then - then they want *live bodies*, so they can-” She pressed a white-knuckled fist to her lips.

“We know.” Issin’s tone was soft. Almost kind. “They infest people. They eat you from the inside. Somebody gets infected with lycanthropy, you’ve still got a chance to save them. If a daelkyr-spawn gets inside you...” He shook his head. “You’re solo. Like Kirito. You don’t have to come.” He blew out a breath. “Heck, you’ve heard more daelkyr lore than any of us. If *you’re* scared, I know we should be.”

“Who says we’re not?” Dale said wryly. “But they’re our friends.” He gulped. “Even if we can’t get them out - how could we leave them in a ‘spawn nest alive?’”

She covered her face with her hands, shuddering. “...You’re right.”

Yeah, Dale thought, trying not to shake himself. *Why does that not make me feel any better?*

Fists lowered to her sides, Tae unfurled her wings. “You’re all right. And if they’re going to have a chance, we have to move fast.” She fixed a dragon’s gaze on Kirito. “I don’t care what you say. I *saw* you. You’re a ranger. You can track a hawk on a cloudy day. Do it! I’ll find them. You find *me!*”

A thunder of wings, and she was gone.

A ranger can do this, Kirito told himself. *A ranger can....*

Most players would say his chase was impossible. Tracking by way of Scan needed a trail you could *see*. And both Tae and the psiwasps were flying.

Trail or no trail, if you were on the map, an allied player could still find you. But drop into a pit, or get yanked into the air - and you weren’t on the map anymore.

Giant Wasps have their nests in trees or underground. If psiwasps hold true to that, they won’t show up on the map until we’re in the nest. Great.

So he was Scanning for a trail that wasn’t there. Literally. Tae left no trail of her own - but if he sensed where animals *weren’t*, spotting turned tracks and ruffled beast-minds where a larger predator had passed overhead....

He ducked and dodged down deer-trails and through swaying branches, following feelings as fragile as a spider’s web. He had to make this work. And he had to do it fast. Wings were so much faster than feet, and Tae’s could carry her into a fight she couldn’t win alone.

Kirito smirked, gliding through thorny brush that seemed to ever so subtly part as he ran. *She'd probably say the same thing about my feet.*

Thorns and brush wove back together in his wake. Fuurinkazan was going to have their work cut out for them, catching up. But they didn't have to follow his trail. They were marking where he was on the party map - *he* was still on the ground - and even if he got snatched in the next instant, they could take the shortest path to his last known location. Hopefully bringing all the reinforcements they could get their hands on.

If anyone believes our message in time, Kirito thought grimly. The Knights of Blood aren't going to want to admit that a cleared level didn't stay cleared. The Divine Dragon Alliance won't, either. We might get some of the solos and mid-level players just out of curiosity, if they don't know enough about daelkyr to run the other way....

He shut away that thought, focusing on the wild. Three lives were riding on his ability to track Tae. His determination to shut out what was possible, what was *human* - and just *act*.

Feel the wild. Don't think about reinforcements. Don't think of youkai lords....

Because he'd played a wild hunch, and asked Fuurinkazan to do the same. Either it would work, or it wouldn't.

Either outcome would change everything.

Think about consequences later. For now - Kunimittz, Dynammm, hold on!

Psiwasps.

I'm going to kill Beniryuu.

Two frail, furious thoughts, drowning in the sea of Stheno's fear. Any monster other than that. Gods, any *daelkyr-spawn* other than that. Mind flayers, tsochari who wore living beings like clothes, tainted beasts from the Far Realm; any of those, she could face and fight. But a *hive*....

"Lady Stheno?" Still unsteady on her feet, Argo dug her nails into tree bark to stay upright. "What's wrong? What can I do to help?"

Nothing. There's nothing you can do, Stheno thought, frozen in terror. She'd thought this nightmare extinguished centuries ago. Thought she'd never have to face the scents of paper and acid again, hear the buzz and the helpless pleas of prisoners begging to die, feel the alien flesh writhe, infesting her own-

A small hand touched hers.

:Snow.:

A gray winter's day unrolled in Stheno's mind's eye, soft white blanketing the horrific images into a silent, immobile landscape.

:Snow. Softness falling. Quiet....:

Stheno breathed as if she'd never tasted the garden's air, looking down at Yui. "You shouldn't see those memories, little one." And wasn't it amazing that she could hear her own voice? Back then, it'd been worn to a rasp from screaming.... "They're too horrible."

"I won't look." Yui shivered. "I just don't want Aunt Stheno to hurt so much."

"Aunt Stheno?" Argo murmured, eyes wide. "A nestling? I thought they were all... *seeing* memories?" She frowned, and eyed Stheno. "You've dealt with psiwasps before."

"I have." Gods; even now her voice was wobbly. "They aren't like mind flayers. They don't... infest and turn a body. They just," oh powers, *just*, "use live sentients to... incubate their brood." Her smile felt ghastly. She hoped Yui wasn't looking at it. "For most individuals, the damage one brood does is enough to kill them."

"So we have to get Fuurinkazan out *fast*," Argo started.

Stheno shuddered, trying not to curl into a helpless ball. "I...." *I can't go near them. I can't.*

Still holding her hand, Yui almost shrank away. "Aunt Stheno was in a nest once. They *hurt* her."

"People get hurt in fights-" Argo cut herself off, and looked faintly green. "You said... one brood kills *most* people." The information broker gulped. "But you're immortal. You heal."

It felt like shifting a mountain. But Stheno braced her will, and managed to nod.

"Kayaba is a *bastard*." Argo shuddered. "How long did they...?"

"Euryale said it was three weeks," Stheno whispered. "It seemed... so much longer."

"Whoof." Argo whistled. "You don't have to deal with this."

It was shameful, how much her heart leapt at that thought.

"Fuurinkazan's calling for help from everybody," Argo went on. "I'll just use the teleports to get to Snow Springs-"

"You've just changed. You need more time to find your balance." Stheno made herself straighten, and took a step toward her own hidden teleport room. "You might not get there in time."

One foot in front of the other. One step at a time.

"Come with me."

"Tae."

A bare breath of a whisper near her ear. The draconic girl almost jumped out of her skin, game-trained reflexes clapping one hand over her mouth before she could scream-

Kirito caught her free arm, helping her steady herself on the massive branch of the nearoak tree she'd perched in to overlook the dark mass of the nest. "Fuurinkazan's coming."

Nobody human should be that quiet. Tae took her hand down, still as jittery as if she'd downed a whole mug of that black infusion humans called coffee. "I still can't believe they're doing this," she breathed. "I'm... I'm sorry, I'm just so scared."

More scared than Kirito could ever imagine. Centuries ago, Mahrak Mistfeather had been rescued from a nest like this. She'd grown up with the old stories of what happened inside, the bleak advice to always, *always* carry a dose of lethal poison with you, just in case....

Does taking poison yourself even work in SAO? Wolfsbane's supposed to, but that's not just a poison-

"Tae." A low, urgent murmur. "Look at me."

Black eyes. Blacker than an oni's; black as the obsidian gem-eyes on an earth elemental tearing mountains apart as it roamed free. No human should have those eyes.

He had a trade window open, of all things. "Put on full gloves."

Tae arched a feathered brow. "You're not wearing full gloves." Why was he offering to trade her ordinary throwing pikes-?

There was a darkness on the metal tip, and a star next to their name. The system only did that if there were some kind of... player modification. "What did you do to those pikes?"

Kirito's smile had an edge like Grandma Tiger about to go put the fear of *her* into a goblin horde. "Equip some gloves. You'll need them."

She opened her own Inventory, feeling leather suddenly clinging to her fingers as the gloves appeared. The Moonsword nodded, and tapped *accept* on his trade.

Ten throwing pikes appeared in her Inventory. She tapped on the star to expand its notes.

<<Augmented Cockatrice Venom. Recipe: Secret. Effects....>>

Tae read the details, jaw dropping farther and farther. "You... you carry these *in your coat*?"

"I said I had experience milking venom." Kirito shrugged, black coat silent as silk. "I'm not an archer. If you have to clear a nest, you have to take down mobs fast."

"This doesn't scare you, does it?" Tae said impulsively. "Psiwasps - they're a horrible death. But you...." Words failed her.

Kirito's jaw tightened. He looked aside, then back at her. "Do you want to know what scares me? Some idiot hacker telling Kayaba's servers we're all offline." He laughed, low and bitter.

“I know hackers. I’m surprised it hasn’t happened yet.” He eyed the dark, papery wall of the nest, eyes cold and unreadable as midnight sky. “At least this we can fight.”

What’s a hacker?

Though Tae understood enough of the rest to be chilled. She’d heard the wizard Kayaba’s words just like everyone else in the City of Beginnings. Granted, she’d been distracted at the time by having the blunt, ugly nails and blind senses of a human - but she’d heard.

If they go offline, they die.

Kirito lived knowing his next breath might be his last. What was a psiwasp nest, next to that?

If he can face that, then... I have to face this. Tae steeled herself, and met his gaze again. “I’ve put Sleep Juice on my arrows before. Do you have a vial of that venom?”

Kirito smiled.

“Damn it.” Agil rubbed the top of his shiny head, frustrated. “Field bosses don’t usually have hostages.”

“I’d kind of like to have a wizard fireball it too.” Klein looked over the dozen or so hastily-assembled clearers, and the even hastier map they’d drawn up in this clearing on a deer-path; hopefully far enough away from the nest that roving soldier psiwasps wouldn’t come looking. “But Kunimittz and Dymm aren’t fireproof.”

“We should fix that.” A stocky Knight of Blood chuckled as he stroked his reddish beard; Godfree, Kirito thought his name was. “It’d make messes like this so much simpler.”

On the edge of the group with Kirito, keeping watch for stray mobs, Tae’s wings flared. She bared fangs-

“Don’t.” He kept his voice low as he almost touched her shoulder, but kept his hands in sight, away from vulnerable wings. “Save it for another time. When we *have* time, before we fight.”

“The NPCs aren’t fireproof,” Tae muttered. “And....” She swallowed, face pale.

“If there’s a nest, and they’re breeding, then they have to have taken other people. I know.” Kirito nodded. “Tinctoria Village had a lot of people go missing. I guess it wasn’t just the weretiger rogue.... We’ll get everyone out we can.”

Silver eyes flicked at him, haunted. “Even NPCs?”

“We’re all real here.” He wasn’t sure if a smile would help or not. “It’s the only way to stay sane.”

“All right!” Agil clapped his hands together, drawing everyone’s eyes to him. The merchant had cleared out Giant Wasp nests himself more than once, Kirito knew. It was a running joke among the clearers that the tough gray paper Agil kept his permanent ledgers on was the last

remnant of some of the shop's previous occupants. "Given the numbers Fuurinkazan took down without the psiwasps even blinking," the axe-wielder stated, "there's a *lot* of psiwasps. You look at the size they are and the size of that nest in the Giant Spruce, and there's for damn sure not much room to maneuver inside. Anything we can't lure out here is going to be close-quarters fighting in the dark...."

Kirito let Agil's words roll over him. He already knew his part in the plan. It wasn't the physical part of the fight that worried him.

"A divided mind cannot stand, Moonsword," Vincent had told him, guiding him through one of the meditations meant to ward his mind from psionic attack. "What you hide from yourself becomes a weapon in a telepath's hands. You must know yourself. You must be whole. If you wish to stand in the teeth of a mindstorm and not fail, you must *be* Kirito, the Black Swordsman."

Easy to say. Harder and harder to do, as the game wore on and the Otherworld faded out of players' minds. He'd been such an *idiot* with his family, letting one file drive him away from the only parents he could remember. From the girl who was his sister in every way that really mattered.

I pushed them away. Because I was young, and stupid, and- I wish I'd never put the NerveGear back on that day! I wouldn't be here. Sachi and the Black Cats might still be alive....

Dynammm and Kunimittz were still alive. For now.

I partied with them. They were counting on me to keep my head when the psiwasps attacked. All of Fuurinkazan was. I have to help them. And Tae. She's terrified, I can feel it-

And that terrified *him*. What had Kayaba *done* to the NerveGear programming, that it was passing on not just sensory input, but this... this *empathy* with other creatures? Things that had never been human; people who *should* be human, but were starting to feel more and more like the *wild-clannish-wide senses* he'd tentatively labeled *youkai*....

And damn it, that empathy had tripped him up as effectively as any paralysis dart. The psiwasps had been one blurry bundle of *wrong*. And while he'd been trying to regain his mental footing from that - bam.

Tae... doesn't feel human. But she feels scared. And she's still here to fight.

He couldn't turn away from that courage. He couldn't let Fuurinkazan down.

Which meant this time, he couldn't let the psiwasps take him out of the fight. And there was only one way to strengthen his defenses enough to block that daze attack.

Don't think of the Otherworld. Don't think about family. Let Kazuto Kirigaya sleep. Be Kirito.

It was like folding a puzzle box out of the fabric of his own mind. It was the exact opposite of what Vincent had advised; hiding part of himself away, rather than forming the shield of a

seamless whole. But for a few hours, it should do.

Pressure here, and nudge there... I'm going to pay for this later....

Aincrad. He had to live in Aincrad. And oh, it was a world of wonders; if it were real, he'd leap at the chance to *live* here....

But it wasn't. And none of the players had asked to die.

Don't stop.

Images of the Otherworld were folding away. Cars and stoplights, microwaves and awful manga, the numbing frustration of homework that never fit what he wanted to do.

Almost there. Let everything start with the City of Beginnings.

The plaza, and the players, and Kayaba. The brief images of the local news Kayaba had let them see, to prove he was telling the truth-

And there Kirito froze, puzzle-box still gaping in his mind. Because he'd seen them, hanging in the images. His sister, frozen in shock. And... his mother, face buried in her hands as she wept.

I can't leave them. I can't-

"Huh." Dale's voice, over his right shoulder. "Feels like you're building walls... but you're stuck? Let me help-"

Click.

One shove of hand and mind, and the box locked tight. There was an awful feeling of *absence*, and he was going to be so angry about that later-

"Hey, everyone." Argo's voice carried up the path; half teasing, half serious. "Room for one more?"

Kirito straightened, seeing the tall redhead stalking behind the information dealer, emerald cobras ducking in and out of her hair. "Lady Stheno!"

I was right!

Theoretically, the game designers could have planned for this. The Psiwasps' Nest might be an unmarked part of the quest, intended to trigger an NPC's help. Vincent showed up on multiple levels; there was no reason other youkai lords couldn't do the same.

Only theory needed to have its eyes checked, because an NPC intended to help should have been striding tall and confident, boosting the morale of faltering players. Stheno stalked, claws clenching and releasing at her sides, all too ready to flee back down the path and away.

She's afraid. She's so afraid.

Kirito stepped forward to bow to her, while Agil and the rest were still gaping. “Milady. How can we help?”

“Come back alive.” Stheno’s voice shook. But she straightened her spine, and flashed the assembled mini-raid a stark glance from obsidian lenses. “Hear me, defenders of Aincrad. You face an evil our kingdom has not seen in five hundred years. A scourge upon the world we all thought dead and dust. For I... I suffered at their claws, and....” She shuddered, and dragged in a breath. “And my sister, Euryale of the Thousand Blades, took her ghastly - final - revenge.”

Agil nodded, obviously listening hard. As were they all, Kirito knew. When an NPC, a *youkai lord*, offered you information before a boss fight - none of them had lived this long by not paying attention.

Even if some of what they were hearing made Kirito want to grab someone and shake them until answers fell out. Defenders of Aincrad? When all the youkai lords knew they weren’t from this land?

“How this nest arose, I do not know. But we will discover it,” Stheno went on grimly. “For now - if the nest falls, and the queen believes she cannot escape, she will invoke a mystic trance. In that state she will resemble an amber statuette, and hope to escape searching eyes.” She raised clawed hands, tearing at the sky. “Bring me that statue!”

Chapter End Notes

In the Eberron setting, daelkyr are nasty, reality-warping bad guys from another dimension; they might be best described as FF7’s Hojo on LSD. They *make* things. They’re blamed for the creation of mind flayers - and given the lovely details of those monsters’ feeding and reproductive habits, that should be enough to make any sane player run screaming. Daelkyr-spawn would therefore imply anything that shouldn’t exist in a sane world.

TPK - Total Party Kill.

Game Unbalanced

Chapter Summary

...And there is a boss fight.

(Win or lose, the players are of one mind: Kayaba needs to *die*.)

“You’re sure you can bring both of us with you?” Klein kept his voice low, even as the start of Agil’s frontal assault on the entrance raised a buzzing, clanging cacophony. Argo’s spell-buff had let all three of them leap onto the concrete-hard side of the nest, touching down on the gray-and-oily-black surface as close to the nest’s captives as possible.

If Argo scryed it right, Klein told himself uneasily. If Kirito can pull this off without killing himself, and move us through the wall without opening the wall, so we don’t set off any alarms....

Though none of that was what really bothered him, was it? Not with those hints of movement under Argo’s hood.

“I could take all of Fuurinkazan through, if I didn’t have to fight afterward.” Kirito’s voice was even lower, taking full advantage of youkai hearing. “Klein. Focus. You have to keep your mind centered, or the psiwasps will take you down. So Argo’s a medusa. That gives her a *better* chance to back us up in this fight. Odds are if we fight at all it’ll be hand to hand - and anything that gets close to her head is going to get bitten.”

So Argo’s a medusa. Klein shook his head. *Easy for you to say.*

Except it wasn’t easy. Klein had seen Kirito flinch when the Moonsword got a glimpse of what lurked under Argo’s cloak. And wondered if it was time to *run*. Kirito didn’t turn his back on people he trusted, Klein had seen that himself-

Sun had glinted off Argo’s obsidian glasses, and he knew why Kirito flinched.

Don’t know if he knows, though. He trusted Lady Stheno. Klein grimaced. *Partly because he thought she’d never adopt anyone. Now she has. So what’s Argo got that Kirito doesn’t? Can’t be just being a girl, there’s supposed to be medusa guys, too....*

Kirito had one hand on his arm, and one on Argo’s, black eyes squinting in silent concentration. Darkfire sparked under his fingers, rippling outward in a blur that made Klein blink and sneeze, scents suddenly faint and oddly fiery-

Still gripping their wrists, Kirito stepped forward.

Um. Wall?

But he trusted Kirito. The world was all faint-scented shadows anyway. Could he really say what Kirito was walking into was a wall, and not just another shadow?

Here goes everything.

Shadows and not-solid and stepping out onto a down-curved papery surface, air a dark, fetid mist of wasp-stink and fear-

Klein dropped down fast, crouching on the roof layer of the freshest comb, waiting for Argo and Kirito to catch their breaths before they started carefully cutting through from above to free the trapped victims. If Argo was right, and Argo's info was almost always right, he ought to be right about over Kunimittz.

Though even the thought of getting his guys *out* of here couldn't distract him from the hairs standing at attention on the back of his neck, as the difference in upright clearance between a psiwasp and a human really hit home. This was the newest comb, where parasitized victims ought to be. But less than five feet above that was the *second* newest, filled to the brim with pupating larvae. So close above them that-

The papery cover on one cell shattered, and dark mandibles lunged for him.

Well, Dynammm thought, trying to ignore the literal squirming in his gut, the good news is, I found the Lignum Wood.

It was all around him, part of the paper-pulp hemming him in upside-down with the blood rushing to his head. The cinnamon-and-peppermint scent Harry One had described crept through the acid and fear, made him think he just might get out if he tried-

:Sleep sleep chew chew tasty stay....:

The world grayed out.

Psionic parasites. Can't fight them.

Except Kirito swore you could. If you focused. If you honed your mind to a pure blade of will, sharp as a diamond edge.

And there was one thing he could hang onto. One thing he wanted more than anything right now, even escape.

Going to kill Kayaba, I swear-!

Static crackled, prickling his fingers like the near-miss of a magic missile. Air rushed past his face from above, and someone's hand clamped onto his ankle. "Dynammm!"

Rough. More a growl than a name. But he knew that voice. "K-Klein?" Dynammm coughed; an awful, wet sound, and he didn't want to think about that-

A horrid grating sound echoed from above, and Dynammm's eyes widened in the darkness. Once you heard flesh being turned to stone, you never forgot it.

Something slammed into the paper comb above him, an insectoid claw punching through to scrape stone edges down his ribs.

"Gah!" Klein flinched, yanking up on Dynammm's ankles as the petrified psiwasp kept going, weight tearing it through the cell lid below. "Watch where you throw those things!"

Kirito's answer was a wordless yell, cloth and leather snapping with the kind of speed only a Skill ought to grant. But there weren't any flashes of light, and there wasn't any pause for a cooldown. Kirito just kept moving.

He solos the front lines, Dynammm thought, gasping for air as Klein finally got him over the rim. *How high a level is he?*

:Sleep prey sleep don't leave the nest-:

"Fuck off and die!" Dynammm gritted out, struggling to lift an arm and crawl. There wasn't room to stand up, even if he could; he thumped into a familiar head of bushy curls, and coughed again. "K-kun?"

"Argo's cutting us loose," Kunimittz said thickly, nudging him away from another gaping cell and toward other groaning bodies. Stone was grating and Klein was snarling and *things* were buzzing overhead in the darkness like something out of *Attack of the Killer Cicadas*. "People have some kind of... distraction going outside... damn it, get these things out of our heads!"

"Second that," Dynammm muttered. The world kept graying in and out. Which was almost a shame, because it sounded like they were missing one hell of an interesting fight. Klein was roaring, the whole comb was shaking under them-

For one instant, the darkness went purple-white; lightning striking from Argo's fingers to the thorax of a black-faced, horribly humanoid shape.

<<Pollista the Psiwasp Queen.>>

The queen's icon was purple.

We're dead.

"Switch!"

The fading glow was just enough light to see Kirito and Klein charge the queen.

They're out of their minds. We're dead. She's purple, no one's getting out of this unless they run-

Only if Klein ran, he'd leave two of Fuurinkazan behind. And that was not happening.

Buzzing rose behind him, and chitinous claws gripped Dynammm's shoulders, trying to drag him away from the fight. He struggled, for all the good it did; punching at the mind-blurrer on the outside and gritting his teeth against the invading *:sleep:* on the inside.

Through the buzz and yells and clashing he could still hear Argo chanting; loud and sharp and longer than any spell he'd ever heard Issin cast. What was taking her so long?

"Everybody, grab onto something!" Klein snarled.

"-Fflam sīllif bod!"

And there was light.

Blue flame sliced through the nest wall like a giant's sawblade, severing the lower part of the hive in one roar of elemental fire.

They did it. Stheno found herself gaping, as dark paper began to fall. *They actually did it. Modified a fireball from a sphere to one flat disk, and set it off exactly where they wanted it.*

She'd heard Kirito and Argo hashing it out, in those last few minutes revising their hasty rescue plan. But she hadn't believed. Who could? Modifying an enchantment was highly advanced spellcasting. It could take months, even years, to perfect a new variant of a spell. Everyone knew that.

Argo and Kirito had done it in less than ten minutes.

That... magic doesn't work that way, it can't-

Instinct bashed stunned reason over the head, and reminded her that getting back might be an excellent idea.

Thump.

And there was the second major spellcasting part of Agil's plan in action, as the bottom segment of the nest crashed onto the first of several of the Divine Dragon Alliance's *floating disc* spells. A fifty-foot drop might not kill a healthy high-level player, yet it would be lethal to a parasitized victim. But multiple *five-foot* drops-

Thump. Thump. Thump....

Above, the rest of the nest was merrily burning away. Stheno felt an unexpected smile creep over her face as the crackle of flames reached her ears. The last time she'd faced a real nest, she'd been too sick and numb, watching the healers cut into her own flesh to rid her of the larvae, to appreciate the spectacle of Euryale's fury unleashed.

This was a simulation. Not a real nest. But real enough for her heart to leap in vicious joy. *Yes; burn, damn you all!*

A horrid buzzing filled the air, and winged shapes rose from the flames.

We're screwed.

Agil kept the urge to panic locked down tight; if any of them had the chance to make it out of here, he had to keep his head and run the raid. So far the plan had... *worked* wasn't the word he was looking for, not with a field boss with a purple icon soaring up out of the flames. But it'd done what he intended it to do. Hit a teleport crystal with a psiblast, and if you were lucky, it might just toss you somewhere random. If you weren't... sometimes they just didn't work at all. So he'd given Argo the go-ahead and had the DDA get ready to set up the floating discs. If her shaped spell worked, they'd get everybody they could down to the medics in more or less one piece. If it didn't - hell. Fireball had to be a better way to go than eaten alive.

"Bows and spells!" Agil yelled over the buzzing. "Keep her down!" Because flying bosses were the worst, bar none. The queen could hover up there all day flattening them with mind-stunning attacks, while the few people they had with wings or rings of air-walking would never be able to take her down alone. Their only chance was to force her down near the surface, where people could bring enough weapons to bear that it didn't matter if a few of them got stunned.

Maybe we'll get lucky, and someone will fry her wings off or web them together-

A wand-wielding wizard screamed as a psiwasp bit through his arm, and the last floating disc shattered. Before the comb could hit it.

Damn.

Arms like furry constrictors around him and Klein swearing and *impact-*

Their avatars didn't technically breathe. Kirito felt as if all the breath had been crushed from him anyway, squeezed out by a too-friendly clutch of clawed hands.

...Ow.

Kirito gave the world a moment to stop spinning so much, and squirmed free of the arms wrapped around him like a cat with an overgrown kitten. Blinked to focus on his HP bar. Not good - but not as bad as Klein's. "What were you thinking?" *Don't you dare die on me, I couldn't bear it, not another party member-!*

"Hey, *weretiger?*" Klein coughed, scrambling to find footing on the wobbly paper comb. Easier said than done, even with his uncanny balance; the impact had crumpled some of the hexagonal structure, leaving what was intact tilted at odd angles. "Unless there's silver spikes under us, *I* get better."

As if that were even the *point-*

Shadow above!

Kirito rolled aside, as the queen's acid stings shot a smoking line where they'd been.

Shoot. Keep shooting.

The gloves made Tae's fingers feel thick and clumsy as she hovered, but she didn't even think of taking them off. Not when most of her targets froze in midair as gray statues, dropping to shatter pieces over any luckless player in range.

Most of her targets. The hive's warriors kept taking arrows meant for the queen, soaking up her fire. The pair of her shots that had gotten through had only left stony patches at one chitinous shoulder and through an armored leg. The queen was hurt, but not dead. And with a purple icon, hurt wasn't nearly good enough.

Purple icon. At least we know we're screwed. Back home, we'd just be shooting at a monster, with no clue how... outleveled... we are.....

Her next target was suddenly occluded by a rising fireball. Tae folded her wings and dove right; SAO might not fully mimic real magic, but even if superheated air didn't fry you, the backwash would still toss a flyer for a deadly loop.

Poison level comes from three factors, Tae remembered, spiraling outward from the fight to rise again. How nasty your components are. How good your recipe is. And how high-level your venom-crafter is. The queen's purple. No poison we come up with should even touch her! Either she's using psionics to give an illusion of being hurt, or-

Or one ranger's Augmented Cockatrice Venom *was* high enough level to hurt her.

But that means-!

Below, Kirito raised his sword, and cried out words that shivered her bones.

Damn System Assist-!

Kirito could hear his own voice calling out the spell, but he couldn't stop it. A few months ago he wouldn't have even had a clue what spell Cardinal was using him to cast; only that whatever it was, somehow reaching this point in the quest had triggered it at a dramatically appropriate moment.

Something about - calling on the mercy of the wild?

A shadow stooped out of the sun.

And a dark part of him had to admire Kayaba. Because this was the way the world *should* work, your good and evil deeds coming back to you; the evil at the moment of your greatest triumph, the good when all seemed darkest-

The Winged Serpent snared Pollista in its coils, and plummeted down.

We might win this.

Dale found himself grinning as he fought through the swarm of guardian psiwasps, shoulder to shoulder with some heavily armed Divine Dragons. Issin, Harry One, and a KoB healer took the opening, getting past the guardians at the edge of the comb to start dragging victims out of the fight. Archers were taking careful shots at the queen, and Kirito and Klein were still darting in and out of Pollista's range, whittling down the queen's hit points as the Winged Serpent squeezed that deadly stinger, acid spattering harmlessly to the ground.

We can do this. We can get our people back, get out alive-

A buzzing blast limned his sasumata in purple lightning, and steel screamed.

"Get down!"

Issin felt a hot sting in his back, and a tearing heat in one ear, as the three of them went face down into papery fibers. Judging by the pings and pangs, their armor had deflected most of the metal shards. But some-

Oh, hell.

"Don't move!" Issin ordered, as the KoB herbalist tried to rise. "Harry-"

"Got it." Harry One braced a hand right in the crook of her shoulder, keeping his hand between steel and a vulnerable throat. There was a piece of a familiar forked blade lodged in her shoulder, way too close to too many vulnerable target points.

"What hit me...." The healer glanced back toward Harry, and froze. "Urk."

"Yeah." Issin grimaced. *Damn it, I wanted to save this for the infected....*

But if Vail wasn't on her feet, none of the victims they'd rescued might survive.

"I've got her," Harry One assured him. Planted his other hand against her back, bracing against any involuntary lunges. "Vail? Hang on. This is going to be a bastard."

Setting his teeth, Issin flipped the lid off a potion. Seized shattered metal, and pulled.

Backup blade. Dale forced himself to think, even when mandibles were heading for his throat and the whole world felt trapped in cold molasses. *Need to pull out something-*

Mandibles crunched.

...Wait, I'm still alive....

It was shaped like his sasumata. It moved like his sasumata; only lighter, faster, as if it were a living part of his will. But no human smith had ever crafted silver-blue translucent energy, lightning sparks dancing inside it like shattered thoughts.

Vincent said, a warrior of mind as well as steel.

And even though the psiwasp was still buzzing, the pressure on his mind was gone.

Teeth bared, Dale stabbed his mindblade forward.

Agil hacked the wings off an incautious psiwasp, and wished he had time to gawk. He'd kept up with the other clearers; he'd seen Klein in action plenty of times. But the samurai was outdoing himself today, slicing almost as fast as Asuna could stab. And as for Kirito-

One-hand no-shield style. Plain longsword. Anybody else would have dumped steel for something special by now.

Except Kirito didn't *need* enchanted weapons. Darkfire limned his hands and blade, sparking and burning with every strike.

Asuna's blows carried ice and lightning. One Moonsword Agil had heard about in the Valiant Blades guild had red flames, and Yulier in the Army was said to have moonlit rainbows. As far as Agil had been able to winkle out of Argo, the special effects didn't matter. The power was always the same. Wild magic, pulled straight from the fabric of the universe, eager to heal or kill. Magic that *didn't run out*.

Moonswords? Are damn scary.

But scary as Kirito was, those two were still in trouble. Though they might not be able to see it yet. Agil was back here out of the main fight for a reason.

We're whittling the nest down. But it's still spawning warriors every minute, even though it's on fire. As long as we're fighting to keep the warriors from killing the captives, we can't get in and help them. And those two are good, but they can't take a field boss all on their own. Pollista doesn't hit them much, but she hits harder than they can hit her, and her warriors keep soaking up everyone else's distance attacks. They can't kill her fast enough. We're going to run out of healing magic-

"Hey."

Scruffy wolf, was Agil's first startled thought, taking in the guy in dark blue and leather armor who'd just sauntered up to him, while the other two in his small party hung back with Lady Stheno. Wild spiky black hair, violet eyes, a lazy grin that had just a hint of sharp teeth in it...

And a blocky monster of a sword on his back, like a zanbatou made good.

Youkai. Has to be. Nobody human could use something like that.

"This a private fight, or can anybody jump in?" Half-gloved fingers waved toward the desperate duel with Pollista, then toward the writhing victims Issin and Vail were trying to keep alive while Harry fought off circling psiwasps. "'Cause I'm thinking, Vincent said things might get messy if we stick our nose into the *fight*, but if you guys had a few more hands to keep the bad guys off *their* backs...."

Vincent? Don't know any players named Vincent, Agil frowned. Don't know these guys, either, and I should know about everybody strong enough to be on this level-

A second look, and Agil had to keep himself from flinching. Labeled green icons. *NPCs.*

Keep it together. “You friends of Lady Stheno’s?”

“More like, friends of a friend,” the werewolf grinned at him. “Don’t look now, but I think my girlfriend beat us to it.”

“A firebird shaman.” A woman laughed softly behind him, as Issin stripped armor off stricken players to get at the parasites infesting them. “You could do this yourself, if you’d just had a little more time to learn.”

“They don’t have time,” Issin started to growl. Who was she, and why hadn’t Harry shooed her off while he was fighting psiwasps?

Idiot. Why do you think?

“They will. Cast again.” Slim hands wrapped over his, wafting the scent of vanilla orchids, and cool, deep forests. “Cast one more time.”

Faster. Kirito ducked a chitinous claw and a buzz of mental force, weaving his strikes in and out of Klein’s blocks. Both their HP bars had dipped past yellow and were eating into red. The Winged Serpent was hanging on, but Pollista had opened deep gashes in emerald scales, despite Kirito’s best efforts to draw her strikes away from their ally. *We have to move faster-*

Something warm splashed down his cheek.

What the-?

Thunder rumbled, and fire rained from the sky.

Dynammm stared up at the firebird in the clouds, gold and ruby and sapphire flames raining down, and felt the gnawing in his guts finally start to ease. “*Awesome.*”

And here came something even more beautiful. Tae, an empty quiver over her shoulder and flame-drops running over her wings. Touching down with tears in her eyes... and a knife in her hand.

She knelt by him where Issin and others had dragged them clear of the comb, peeling back his clothes from the psiwasp’s angry red infestation. “This is really going to hurt.”

“Hurt means alive,” Dynammm gasped out. “I’ll take it.”

“Well then....” She took a deep breath, and gave him a shaky smile. “I’m Tae Mistfeather, and I’m here to rescue you.”

It did hurt.

But even as she cut, he was laughing.

“Switch!”

Kirito staggered back out of the melee, leaning on Klein as they both wobbled away from the fight. *Don't care if it is an avatar. Everything hurts.*

The fight had lasted over an hour. But the main hive was burned to ash, the severed comb was a sodden mush, and a wizard with a bandaged arm and a grudge had just taken down the last spawned psiwasp warrior. Pollista was going down.

And from the wide grins on Issin and Harry One's faces, the rescued victims were going to make it.

Worth it. Worth everything.

“Not going to try for the last attack bonus?” Harry smirked as they got nearer.

Kirito arched a skeptical brow. *Ow.*

“Hell, no,” Klein groaned. “Somebody else can finish it off.” He looked over his guild; Dale sharing a waterskin with Kunimittz, Harry poking an NPC's bandage, Issin waiting for them with a wry look and a couple of potions. And a little ways off, Tae fussing over Dynammm's bandaged chest.

Klein shook his head, a goofy grin softening his face. “Got all the bonus I need, right here.”

“Damn straight.” Issin gripped Kirito's shoulder. “Sit.”

Not worth arguing about. Kirito sat down carefully, even when his knees wanted to fold like overcooked noodles. He heard shattering polygons, cheering....

He glanced back in time to see Stheno summon a blinding ball of sunfire, shattering Pollista's statue into lifeless shards.

“It's over.” Kirito sagged back against Issin's hands, wanting nothing more than to crawl into the Mistfeathers' hayloft and not come out for a week. “And we still need to find the Lignum Wood.”

Why was half of Fuurinkazan grinning at him?

“Guys?” Klein slugged back some water, giving his guild a look askance. “Want to clue us in?”

“Wasps.” Kunimittz pointed at the comb.

“Paper,” Dynammm added, leaning on Tae’s shoulder with feathers brushing his face. “I bet we’ve got just enough left over.”

Kirito blinked.

Klein gaped. “...All *right*.”

We found the next quest item. Here. Kirito shuddered.

Klein gave him a wary look. “We haul off the comb, distill the oil, get the last mat, and finish the quest. What’s wrong?”

Kirito shook his head, trying not to think too hard. Because if he started thinking about the psiwasps being a *planned* part of this quest, he’d start screaming. And that wouldn’t help anyone. “This encounter. It wasn’t balanced.”

“Kind of noticed.” Kunimittz shivered. “She was *purple*.”

“Who was- Pollista?” Kirito said quickly, trying to recover.

Not quick enough, from the twitch of Tae’s ears. “She wasn’t purple to you, was she?” the archer said quietly. “That’s why your venom could hurt her. If we hadn’t had that to help us take down the hive....” She swallowed hard.

No, no, no! Don’t depend on me. Don’t ever depend on me. “The youkai lords showed up. That’s what made the difference,” Kirito said harshly. “Without that healing spell we’d never have taken Pollista down. Not at our level. Kayaba... SAO hasn’t done that before. Encounters are *balanced*. If you’re high enough level to clear a floor, you should be high enough to survive a quest in it. This quest was leveled *wrong*.” *Argo, where’s- there!* “Argo, you *write* the guides. This doesn’t fit! No one’s *ever* seen a field boss this high-leveled in a quest!”

The medusa information broker hesitated, then drifted over to them. “Ki-bou’s right,” Argo admitted. “Quest bosses should have been red for everyone in your party, or you shouldn’t have set off the quest. This doesn’t fit.” She looked over her shoulder, and grinned. “Though maybe this guy was supposed to even the odds.”

He felt the Serpent before he saw it; a cool satisfaction that the hated intruders were no more, stabbed with red bits of pain.

You came to help us, Kirito thought, eyeing dried blood. The healing fire seemed to have cleansed the Winged Serpent’s worst wounds, but no forest predator could afford to be weakened. *Let me help you.*

Tongue flickering, the Serpent raised its head to look him in the eye. Slithered closer, and rested its chin in his hand to lap up the potion he offered. Blood flaked away, leaving new scales behind.

Shaking out membranous wings, the Serpent left them in the dust.

“Heh.” Klein poked his shoulder. “You made a new friend.”

“I didn’t do anything.” He rounded on Klein, suddenly furious. And it wasn’t Klein he was mad at, he knew that. He’d thought he understood SAO. He thought he’d had a chance to survive. That he could help other people survive. That they could get home. But now- “It was a System Assist! The program *used* me to cast that spell. I didn’t know it; I didn’t even know that could happen! The quest used us to get the results Kayaba wanted. It loaded the odds against us, and then back *for* us, and how the hell are *any* of us going to survive if Kayaba changes the rules? I’m a *sorcerer*, Klein! There are things I can cast without a chant; things that can kill people! If the next quest sets off something in the program that dumps all of my MP into one Darkfire blast-”

Everyone around me is going to die.

I can’t do this anymore.

He stabbed up a menu. Hit *Dissolve Party*.

And ran.

Favored Enemies

Chapter Summary

Stheno brings up game balance. Beniryuu doesn't take it well.

Meanwhile, a few players put some pieces together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's dead. Stheno stalked away from the fragments of a dragon-crafted nightmare, trying not to let her knees shake. Later she might rage, and weep. Right now there was no room in her numb heart for anything but exhausted relief... and slow-growing, gnawing terror.

They should have died. They should have all died. A psiwasp nest - it took Euryale leading our forces to destroy the last. None of these players are as strong as she was! None of them could be. The game isn't even half over.

They should have died. Without Aeris' Healing Rain to aid Issin's firebird - many of them would have.

And Aeris' interference had cost them all. Every true youkai here had an icon hanging in their field of view; a red hexagon, scribed with *Actions under GM review*.

I'll review you, you fire-breathing lizard. Perhaps there are rumors of nests in Xen'drik. But there's no reason to throw these children against monsters none in Khorvaire have seen for centuries!

Unless the ancient red dragon knew something they didn't.

Stheno chafed her arms to ward off the chill, and looked for her adopted ashrat. Argo might claim she was fit to fight, but no one adapted that quickly to becoming youkai. In the true Aincrad it might not have mattered. In SAO - it could be deadly.

There.

The edge of the clearing where the nest had hung. There stood Argo, and the lump of sodden comb, and Fuurinkazan. And one young draconic lass half hiding behind Dynamis as Klein blistered the air. "What's happened?"

"Doesn't ever think, need a damn *leash*- um." Klein scratched the back of his head, bandanna bright in the afternoon sun. "Lady Stheno. Kirito just took off. Again."

Stheno stopped short, taken aback. “He left you in the midst of a quest?” She could hardly believe it. Yes, the boy was a loner. But he was a responsible adventurer. He’d never leave his party in mortal peril. Certainly not after he’d just rescued two of them from a horrible fate by fighting with all his heart and soul-

And magic. Stheno hissed a few curses of her own, rubbing at the base of a snake to ward off a threatening headache. *Beniryuu said adoption would affect their spirits. But he never said his magic would avoid affecting those still human. Kirito is a warlock. You know what that means.* “How long was he using darkfire?”

“Pretty much since we hit the nest,” Issin told her. “He doesn’t pull punches in a boss fight. Why? He never... burned through all of his magic.”

“Of course he didn’t,” Stheno sighed. If he had, the damage would be so much easier to heal. “Sorcerous fire is not spellcasting. It is opening a channel in your own spirit for forces from beyond this world. Using too much, for too long, wearies the soul. A short fight is no more taxing than a battle-rush. An hour...” She winced. “I have done so, in the past. It is never wise. One feels worn thin. Heart-weary. As if all the world is sealed under a pane of glass. The magic we bear is not wholly of this world, and if one uses it too long, all about us feels alien and alone.”

“Oh hell, that fits,” Dale breathed. “Klein? I think she’s saying Kirito’s... depressed.”

Klein wrestled with that a long moment, fingernails sharpening as his fists clenched-

Easing back to human bluntness, as the weretiger shook his head. “No,” Klein bit out. “He promised. He’s going to stay alive. Summoning that Serpent just spooked him. He’s alive. We just have to find him.”

“Good idea, Leader,” Kunimittz sighed. “But how? This is *Kirito*. The kid’s a freaking *ghost* in the field. Harry can’t track well enough to find him. Who can?”

“Track a ranger with a ranger.” Tae rose, and bowed to Stheno. “Lady Stheno. You hold Kirito in some regard. May we beg of you your grace, to contact the elan Vincent Valentine?”

Stheno smiled. “Look behind you.”

“...Augh.” Kirito kept it to a pained breath, even when his head felt like it was about to split. Prying out Dale’s little push was taking a lot more effort than it should-

Something seemed to pop, like a dislocated shoulder finally settling back into its proper joint. Blinking away tears of pain, Kirito leaned back against the rough bark of a towering longleaf, and considered his options.

Same as they’ve always been. Solo. Show up for the boss fights; everyone knows they’re taking their chances then. Outside of that - stay away from people.

He was going to miss Klein.

I'd miss him more if he were dead. Just... pick a direction and start walking.

He might be out of cockatrice venom, but he saved that for critical fights anyway. He had all the other supplies he needed. Right now all he wanted was a defensible spot, so he could take a nap before he decided which level to head for next.

Kirito opened his menu, calling up the map of this floor. The teleport plaza in Tinctoria might be an option. Those villagers didn't have any reason to connect the Black Swordsman with the weretiger-infected samurai they'd thrown out earlier. And Fuurinkazan probably didn't want to go back there.

Kirito traced the best route that way, and frowned. *Or I could just head for the stairs down. It'd take a day longer, but... that's why people don't go that way.*

Most people. Orange players had limited options to get to a new floor. You couldn't use a teleport plaza unless you could get into town to begin with. And if you were orange, the NPC guards would drive you out of town with everything up to and including *meteor strike* spells.

So, not the safest route. But probably the one to take, if I'm going to steer clear of Fuurinkazan-

The message icon on his menu lit.

"You unmitigated idiot."

Lips curled back from a dragon's fangs. "Tread carefully, Lady of Shattered Stone. Your interference has already-"

"My interference?" Stheno hissed at the image in her watery globe. "I scryed the nest's beginning. You set it off after they cleared the level!"

"Danger can appear in the most unexpected places." Beniryuu smirked at her, steam rising from red nostrils. "We should not teach them to assume they have found all the perils of a land-"

"They *have* no clerics!"

Massive eyes blinked. "Surely you would not wish to draw the gods' attention to this little game." Ivory glinted in a wicked smile. "Euryale would never let you put Aincrad's seer at such risk."

So it is still a game to him. Stheno quelled the chill in her heart, and smirked right back.

"Your game is out of balance, *Kayaba*. You know full well, no adventurers of Aincrad would assault a psiwasp nest without clerics and druids standing fast with them; to heal, to fight, to drive the undead and the abominations back into darkness. But you have given the players none of that strength. Instead, you've made healing magic rare and expensive. And the Moonswords whose magic claws back the darkness, rarer still." She shrugged, deliberately casual. "It's your game. Yours is the will that shapes the rules of this world. But without

divine healing, without the power of the wild to help our warriors grow and survive... it is not truly Aincrad.”

If there was one flaw dragons had, it was pride.

“...Aeris will not be allowed to interfere again.”

Stheno nodded, grateful for obsidian lenses to keep her eyes unreadable. Most creatures would never risk a medusa’s gaze to gauge their truthfulness. Beniryuu would.

“It would not be unthinkable for stronger potion recipes to be found. If they were willing to experiment.” A puff of flame, as a human might blow smoke rings. “I’m surprised you ventured near enough to watch the fight. Your history with psiwasps was... interesting.”

“You hardly challenged the players with an impossible foe just to see my reaction, Beniryuu,” Stheno stated. “Why psiwasps?”

The dragon’s laugh rumbled like thunder. “Why not?”

Crouched in the shadows of a granite boulder, Kirito watched Vincent manipulate an impossible menu.

Player: Kirito. Multiclass option: Yes. Sorcerer/ranger. Prestige class: Moonsword. Feats: Iron Will, Pass Without Trace, Psionic Resistance....

And on, and on. The skills list alone had almost made Kirito break cover. The eight or so he knew, like Herbalism and One-Handed Sword, were highlighted. But there were dozens he didn’t know. The names alone made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

Autohypnosis. Concentration. Escape. Knowledge - abominations. Knowledge - Aincrad. Knowledge - psionics....

Things he’d seen. Things he’d done. Things that did not show up in his official character stats.

...At least, not in the stats a player could see.

The five minutes Vincent had mentioned in his message ended. The elan closed the menu, and took a breath. “Lady Stheno should be keeping our GM occupied,” he said plainly. “And she has ways to cloak some of the system records. We can talk. For a time.”

Kirito stepped into the rock-strewn clearing, avoiding tender herbs as much by habit as conscious thought. “...You’re admins. The youkai lords. All of you.”

“No.” Ruby eyes met his. “That would imply we had some control over SAO. And what we can do is limited. We can grant quests. We can give advice. We can, at times, adopt a willing player. But we cannot fight beside you. And we cannot save you.” Vincent’s gaze was fathomless. “That, you will have to do yourselves.”

“How can we?” Kirito demanded. “He’s changing the rules. He’s changing *us*. People are starting to think they’re not human anymore. Klein... Fuurinkazan’s a youkai pack now. I can feel them slipping.”

And I’m part of Fuurinkazan. Not officially, but Klein doesn’t care. What happens when more of them turn youkai?

He wanted to bury his face in his hands and hide. He didn’t. “Why is Kayaba doing this?” Kirito said fiercely. “Why is he trying to - to pry us open, and pour someone else inside....”

“Trust your instincts.” Vincent’s movements were silent as a falling leaf. But a forehead rested against Kirito’s, warm and solid. “He is trying to do exactly that.”

Kirito froze. *No. I won’t lose my self-*

“But like a dragon, he does not understand the resilience of the human spirit. And youkai are more human than most of them wish to believe. You have the strength to face this.” Vincent stepped away, giving him room to think. “Shall I tell you a tale of Aincrad? I warn you, you will not think well of us afterward.”

Answers. Even if I don’t like them - we need answers.

Silent, Kirito opened his inventory. And materialized a recording crystal.

“Hmm.” The glint in ruby eyes was a cat’s subtle smile. “Well played.”

“Stop the world,” Dynammm groaned, curled up half-naked on burlap over a pile of hay. “I want to get off....”

“Tell me about it,” Klein sighed, leaning back against another bale of fresh alfalfa. The Mistfeathers had been pretty understanding, all things considered. Lusliat, the head of the family, had frankly stated the last thing Shaman Tetsutora needed was a cranky youkai pack in her infirmary, apt to commit homicide if strangers got too near Dynammm while he was turning. But if Klein thought he could keep his pack under control, he was welcome to the north side of the ranch hayloft. Defensible, hidden, and about as cool as you could get in an Aincrad summer afternoon outside of an icehouse. And *speaking* of ice....

So while the rest of the clearers were partying hard with Zack, a short blond tiefling, and his fire-rain girlfriend, Fuurinkazan plus one was up here with barbecued pork, fresh bread dripping with butter, odd crinkly greens that tasted like a tango between spearmint and kale, and enough iced lemonade to float a barge.

Dynammm hadn’t had much in the way of an appetite these past few hours, but he definitely appreciated the lemonade.

Tae gulped back tears, watching the skin of the fighter’s bare back redden and swell. “I’m s-”

“No more of that, ‘kay?” Dynammm gripped her hand, obviously trying not to squeeze too hard as another spasm shook him. “You didn’t know. Who could have known? S’not like...

any player's ever adopted somebody before...."

Tae shuddered. "I should have! Father let me hold a Bloodstone. He's never let me do that before. A-and then it just *pulled*...."

"First Klein, now you, Dynammm." Issin nibbled on a rib, whiskers flicking. "New sets of armor are going to take a bite out of the guild budget."

"Ouch," Harry One agreed. He didn't just look like a pirate; he had a mercenary way with numbers that had surprised even Agil into giving them a bargain, once or twice.

"We got a good bonus from the nest raid," Kunimittz shrugged. "And we're going up levels anyway. We'd have to trade it in sooner or later."

"Point," Dale agreed, rubbing a sasumata made of thought between his fingers. "If we have to get higher-level armor made anyway, getting it made light for a flyer won't cost that much more."

Dynammm's going to get to fly. Klein couldn't hide a grin. *This is going to be awesome.*

Though there was one *tiny* detail they still needed to get straightened out. "Tae? Said it before, but I'm going to say it again. Good job following those wasps."

Pearly scales glowed against her blush. "I - I had to. Someone had to."

"Just one thing wrong with your plan," Klein said seriously. "You didn't have any backup. Not in the air. Kirito's fast, but he can't fly."

Tae winced. "You're right," she said in a small voice. "That was stupid."

"Not stupid," Klein said firmly. "Just, not good. You could fly. We couldn't. Somebody had to chase them." He shrugged. "So, looks to me like Dynammm could end up in the same mess, if the monsters keep getting worse. We can all try to get rings of air-walking, but those aren't cheap, and I don't know if any player wizards can make them yet. That means the only ones out there are drops, and you never know when those might run out of charge. So...." He looked around his guild, one brow raised in a silent question.

Five nods. And if Dynammm's was a little fever-fuzzy around the edges, his smile was bright enough to light the whole loft.

"Tae Mistfeather." Klein held out his hand. "We'd like to invite you to join Fuurinkazan."

She blanched, cheeks almost as pale as her hair.

Huh?

"I want to." Tae chafed her hands over each other, pearly claws ticking against each other like a distant keyboard. "But there are things you don't know about me." One tear trickled down her cheek, followed fast by another. "Things you wouldn't ever believe."

Klein drew a breath to object-

Feathers. Human. One of ours.

He grinned instead, glancing toward the black shadow silently pulling himself up into the loft.

Kirito rolled up to his feet, looking over them all; lips tightening, just a hair, when he saw Dynammm. “Tae Mistfeather. Of Clan Mistfeather, of Snow Springs. They might believe more than you think.”

“I...” Tae shivered, bundling herself in her wings for warmth. “I’m not from your world.”

Hay was good, Klein decided. Stiff enough to catch you when your knees felt floppy, but enough give so passing out wouldn’t hurt you. Passing out definitely sounded like an option. “Say what?”

Dynammm was grinning, sweat and all. “So that’s why you thought Star Wars was a play.”

Tae’s wings fluffed up, spots of angry color blooming on her cheeks. “You said it was a play!”

“No, I didn’t,” Dynammm objected. “I said it was a *movie*.”

“That’s what I said!”

“Wait.” Kirito held up empty hands before the argument could escalate to *did not-did too* levels. “Tae. If what I heard is true, then we’ve been enchanted to understand your language.”

“Enchanted?” Issin said in disbelief.

“Just as you’ve been magic-touched to understand ours,” Kirito pressed on, keeping his eyes on the draconic girl. “When we say *play*, what do you hear?”

He was serious about this, Klein realized, shocked speechless. Kirito actually believed Tae might be from another world-

She never complains about forks.

It was a little thing, in a world full of monsters. But it was weird. Even after months here, Klein couldn’t shake a guilty sense that he should be using chopsticks, like any other grown man. But only a few places in Aincrad seemed to know what chopsticks were. And if you used them, all the NPCs looked at you funny.

“A play is a play,” Tae said, uncertain. “A story on a stage with actors. What else would it be?”

Kirito nodded. “And what do you hear when we say *movie*?”

Klein listened. Hard.

“Argentia-plega?”

He heard the sounds. They definitely weren't Japanese. So why did his brain keep insisting he'd heard *eigu*?

“Lledrith-arian,” Kirito said firmly. “The game translates into what you know. Once you know enough Draconic... I've heard a few things. *Silver illusion*. What is that, where you come from?”

“It's... illusionist plays,” Tae said quietly. “Sometimes with players, sometimes not... they make stories with magical images, to show you things ordinary actors could never do on stage. Have a dragon show up. Or see someone turn to stone. Things like that.”

As if it were normal. As if there were nothing else a movie could be.

“Definitely have to get you to see Star Wars,” Dynamm said wryly.

Harry One had to shake his head before he found his voice. “Are you saying... you're from a world where there really are FX wizards?”

Tae swallowed. “I... this was a mistake. I shouldn't have said anything-”

“Tae.” Kirito opened his inventory. “Harry. If you won't believe her - maybe you'll believe this.” Materializing a recording crystal, he tapped it.

“It's not uncommon for young rangers to panic after their first summoning.” Vincent's voice, low and deliberate. *“Many of us have no elder mentors when we first nurture the wild lands. We protect the wild, knowing it will kill us if we are careless, or even unlucky. It shakes the soul to find that it will begin to care for us in return.”* A soft breath. *“A Moonsword draws on magic even more inhuman than the wild. I should have considered the reaction might be more intense. But there are none left who could have warned me. Or you.”* A low growl.

“Karrnath missed Stheno, despite their darkest magics. But Breland's Dark Lanterns are skilled, and the gnomes of Zilargo had their own reasons to add assassins to the pot. By the end of Galifar's Last War, all your predecessors were dead.”

Kirito's voice echoed from the crystal, even as the Moonsword himself sat by Klein. *“You think they'll try again?”*

“When they learn of you? Yes.”

“Oh, great,” Klein muttered. “More people out to get us just because we're... wait a minute.”

“Even though I'm human?” Kirito's voice asked.

“Especially because you're human.” Dry humor rasped in Vincent's tone. *“Powers such as yours come from an ancient bargain with dragons. The humans and demi-humans of Khorvaire have good cause to be wary of such creatures, and all magic that springs from them. Dragons believe in the Prophecies. And they're known to take measures to see them come true.”*

Klein pursed his lips in a silent whistle. *Swim with a shark before you soar with a dragon, one Aincrad saying went. The shark just wants to eat you.*

“Aincrad’s in the Prophecies.”

“In several of them,” Vincent acknowledged. “Perhaps. No one knows for sure.” A quiet shush of wool over leather, as if the cloaked elan had leaned back. “Nine years ago, Aincrad beat the Five Nations back, almost at the cost of our existence. Many youkai clans were obliterated. Some races, like the medusas, are all but extinct. Those of us who lived, despaired.” A sigh. “So when the ancient red dragon Beniryuu approached the Council of Lords... they listened.”

Kirito’s voice, low and determined. *“What did he say?”*

“I was not there.” If that wasn’t a quietly disgruntled ranger, Klein would eat his bandanna. “Years passed. Strange rumors spread, of some subtle magic the Council of Lords wished to see accomplished.” The claws of a metal gauntlet clicked, curling into a fist. “Then last year, in the Month of the Holly... I was asked to visit a dream.”

Klein held his breath.

“What dream?” Kirito asked, as if he had to drag the words past clenched teeth.

“You already know.”

Klein reached for lemonade, throat dry. *If he’s saying what I think he’s saying... oh man. We are so screwed.*

“I have aided those I met in this dream,” Vincent went on. “Both those born of Aincrad, and those who might choose to become of Aincrad. And I will continue to do so, while the magic that lets me visit this dream lingers.” A deliberate pause. “But one day we will wake.”

“One day we’ll go home,” Kirito insisted.

“Dragons’ lies are darkest when they lie with truth,” Vincent stated. “Beniryuu’s enchantment brings your mind to this realm. It cannot bring your body... yet.”

“Beniryuu’s enchantment?” Kirito pounced. *“We were told - the Dark Pack-”*

“The red dragon has taken human forms in the past,” Vincent growled. “A mage. A merchant. Even a crafter of... games.”

Dead silence in the loft. Klein smelled fear, and anger, and winced even imagining the curses his guild was keeping behind closed teeth.

“For now, his magic binds you in a waking dream,” the elan went on. “But I am one of many who have been sent on missions to acquire... very odd things.” A hiss of breath. “The Council of Lords seeks to build an eldritch machine. I have not been informed what it will do. But I know what the Council wants.”

“...Lady Stheno called us defenders of Aincrad.”

“Did she.” Vincent sounded thoughtful, but unsurprised. “Rangers are defenders of the wild. It has its rewards; but we are not as most men. Even those of us who are human.” A slow breath. “I would be honored if you would choose to fight with us, Kirito, Black Swordsman of Aincrad. But I know what it is to be tormented into becoming other. Fight for your life. Fight for your soul. Beniryuu may slay you, but he cannot change who you are.” A dry chuckle. “In the meantime... let me see if you’ve done damage with that recklessness at the nest....”

Kirito switched the crystal off.

“It sounds too crazy to be true,” Kirito said into the numb silence. “A real Aincrad. Dragons plotting with youkai lords to force human gamers to... what? Learn to live in their world?” He paused; Klein saw him swallow. “But if it could be true... there’s one thing I’ve never been able to figure out.”

Fuurinkazan glanced at each other. “What?” Issin prompted.

Kirito drew his knees up to his chest. “What happens to an infected player?” Black eyes were distant, numb. “Why do they turn on us?”

“System takes ‘em over,” Klein shivered. “Makes ‘em an NPC....”

His guild was looking at him. Partly worried glances, as if to reassure themselves that yes, he was still alive. But the way those glances lingered just a little too long, with subtle nods of respect- weird. “Um. Guys? Clue me in. I was kind of tied up at the time.”

“You fought it,” Kunimittz said quietly. “You failed the save. You turned. But you didn’t attack us.”

Klein had to look away. “I was trying not to,” he said thickly. Oh man, he did *not* want to remember that. “Everything was all blood and fire and wanting to kill... but I knew it was you guys. I had to fight it. I couldn’t... couldn’t just let it use me to kill you.”

Issin’s hand from one side. Kirito’s, tentative, from the other.

Calm.

Like cool water for a parched spirit. Klein took a deep breath, and let the fear out with it. “You’ve got to teach us that trick, buddy. You’re like the best fluffy blanket *ever*.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kirito turn red.

Harry One snickered. “More like one big black ball of fluffy yarn... ahem.” He straightened his face, eyes still dancing. “Leader, he’s right. You fought it. If the system just took you over as an NPC, there’s no way you could have.”

Because when you came down to it, SAO was a computer program. At its base, it was all about numbers. There were no coincidences, no last-minute lucky breaks, no heroic saves from pure willpower. Just numbers.

“I hate to bring this up.” Dale glanced uneasily at Tae. “But why aren’t we asking somebody who should know?”

That quick, *calm* flashed into *determination*. Klein tensed to move; Kirito probably wouldn’t hurt anybody, but he’d heard Agil’s story about the first boss fight, and the Beater-

Dynammm reached up and pulled her close, fever and all. “She’s a player, Dale. She doesn’t know anything that will help, or she’d have told us.”

Dale grimaced. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, he does.” Kirito’s voice was steel. “Use your brain. The youkai lords are *quest-giving* NPCs. Whether they’re admins or not, they’re not floor bosses. They get to respawn. All the quests do. Beniryuu made a deal with them. He wants something; they want something. I doubt he’ll kill them. Not if he wants them to build this eldritch machine.” He looked the draconic girl in the eye. “You’re a player. You have as much to lose as any of us.” Black eyes softened. “Maybe more. No one’s going to attack our families in Japan. But if the Five Nations decide to invade Aincrad again....”

Wrapped in Dynammm’s arms, Tae crumpled, tears flowing free.

“Hey,” he whispered. “Hey, it’s going to be okay.”

She tucked her head against his cheek, shivering. “I’ve been so *scared*.”

Dale blinked, and reddened. “Seriously? You think - but people don’t just go around killing other people! Not when nobody started a fight-” He cut himself off, jaw clenched and grim. “But Tinctoria Village threw us out. We were there to help them. They were marked as *friendly* NPCs. They could have called for a healer. They could have done something!”

“No, they couldn’t.” Tae scrubbed at her tears. “They don’t... humans don’t h-*have* shamans. And farmers don’t have strong clerics. They’re all in the cities. If there’s no forest with a druid nearby....” She wrapped a wing around Dynammm, and shuddered.

“Then they don’t have anybody who can treat someone who’s infected,” Issin said heavily. “All they can do is protect themselves.” He eyed Klein. “Guess we should count ourselves lucky all they did was chase us out.”

“I don’t think luck had anything to do with it.” Kirito tapped fingers on one knee, brows drawn down in dark contemplation. “They knew Fuurinkazan was strong enough to kill the monsters attacking their village. And they knew you wouldn’t kill a bakeneko youkai. It doesn’t take a high-functioning program to calculate that trying to kill Klein would go... badly.”

“No shamans. No high-level healers at all?” Kunimittz closed one hand around his other fist, thinking. “And no Moonswords.”

Tae nodded, swallowing her tears. “They’re just legends, now,” she said, voice ragged. “My father says they almost all died driving the daelkyr back to the Plane of Madness. The last

one he'd heard of was a medusa, Connlan of Swiftwater Pass. And...." Her shoulders slumped. "The Karnathi killed them all."

Dynamm held her. "So Lusliat really is your father?"

"Sometimes." Her voice was soft, even to Klein's ears. "Other times he's just a golem. A... programmed NPC. Is that the right word?"

Klein winced. "That's got to be awful." Though he guessed *awful* didn't come close. Something that looked like your father, but part of the time it wasn't... *horrific* sounded a lot closer.

"That's not the worst." Pale, Tae rubbed her hands over each other. "I've asked him. If we're really dying." She gulped. "He *won't tell me*."

Ooof.

Kirito rolled the recording crystal between his fingers. "I'm going to give this to Argo. If anyone can figure out how to tell people what's going on without everyone panicking, she can." He paused, glancing away.

Now or never. "We'd appreciate it if you help us finish the quest first," Klein said, trying for casual. "We got this far with you. You ought to get part of the XP when we finish it. But whether you do or not...." He opened his inventory, and materialized one of the pendants Grandma Tiger had given him when they all staggered back to Snow Springs.

<<Bond of the Pack: Weretiger's Fang.>>

One of the <<Demon Weretiger's Fangs>>, set in mithril and strung on silk as red and white as Fuurinkazan armor. Razor-sharp ivory had been carved with Draconic sigils, inlaid in ruby enamel and sealed in transparent lacquer with a glitter of gold.

"This used to be part of my demon." Klein kept his voice steady with an effort as he cradled the pendant in his palm, all too able to imagine what would have happened if he'd lost it that night. "Shaman Tetsutora says if you have this, you'll know if I'm in trouble." He shrugged, face serious. "And if some crazy monster nobody's heard of before carries you off while you're going solo - then we'd know. And maybe we could do something about it."

"...Okay." Kirito opened his hand, as if he expected someone to drop a wasp in it.

Klein resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he pressed the pendant into a gloved palm. *Don't care how he takes it, as long as he does.*

"Such enthusiasm," Issin said dryly, as the fang vanished in a glow that meant Kirito had equipped it under his coat. The shaman had caught Dynamm from the other side as another spasm shook him; now he cast a minor heal that eased Dynamm's white-knuckled grip on Tae's arm. "You're a Moonsword. A lot of your magic's aimed at fighting lycan infections, right?" His whiskers fanned out as he braced his guildmate; flattened back as reddened skin

discolored and stretched. “Don’t suppose you’ve got anything that could help this go any easier?”

Kirito looked at Dynammm, and Tae’s worried tears, and their entwined hands. “...Let me check some notes.”

Somehow, it didn’t surprise Klein that Kirito had a lot of notes.

Argo says they keep poking what they know about Draconic, Klein recalled. Issin’s bought some interesting augment phrases off of her...

And Kirito had stopped flipping, lingering on a specific page. Klein leaned forward, even though he knew he wouldn’t be able to read half the words floating in air. “Found something?”

“Maybe.” Kirito’s lips moved soundlessly, shaping the words. He frowned. “The spell wasn’t meant for this. But darkfire’s tied to the Plane of Shadow, so maybe....”

“What does that mean?” Dynammm managed, panting. “I thought all the outer planes were tied to Aincrad’s moons. And there’s no shadow moon.”

“Shadow’s not an outer plane,” Issin filled him in, handing Tae a cloth to wipe some of the sweat off her boyfriend’s brow. “Shadow’s a part of this world; just like the ethereal plane is, where you find ghosts and spirits. Just kind of... sideways to us.”

“Sideways, and behind,” Kirito agreed; half-gloved hands fingering air, testing out the motions he’d need to cast. “Shadows holds reflections of everything in this world. Even magic already at work. Argo has some ideas for double fireballs....” He let the words die, and took a deep breath. “I have a spell meant to let you adapt to a deadly environment. Like a blazing desert, or a hoarfell, or even a typhoon trying to drown you.”

“Um.” Klein scratched his head. “That’s not exactly what we’ve got here.”

“It all depends on how you define *environment*.” A fleeting grin lit Kirito’s face. “If you’re caught in a fireball - that’s an environment, too.”

“So you think,” Dynammm sucked in a breath, “you can use a spell to adapt to an adoption?” He whistled. “Heh. Sounds like it wouldn’t make anything worse. Go for it.”

Kirito nodded. Raised his hands, and whispered.

Klein had heard enough spells tossed in boss battles to pick out a few words. *Reflection* was one of them, though he’d usually heard that in illusion spells....

Violet fire blazed around Dynammm. Shadows tilted the wrong way; the world flickered blue-gray and cold. Klein heard Dale gasp, and saw Tae’s breath frost white-

With a sound like a knife through cartilage, darkness unfolded from Dynammm’s back.

Flames flickered out. Shadows swept back to where they should be. Klein drew a breath, feeling summer's warmth seeping back into the hayloft. A loft which seemed a bit smaller, given all the black feathers spreading out over there.

"Oof." Dynammm blinked, trying to untangle black wings from pearly white. "Um. Help?"

Tae sniffled, and giggled, carefully easing her wing out of the feathery snarl. "Don't think about it too hard. It's a little like hugging. Reach out, then pull back. Slow and easy."

"Definitely take it easy." Issin ducked away from one flexing wing, then leaned back in to rub clawed fingers over a few black scales freckling Dynammm's face. "Spasms quit, your pupils look okay again..." The shaman felt his forehead. "Tae's a little warmer than we are. So it feels like you've still got a little fever. Outside of that, looks like you're over the hump." He glanced at Kirito. "How long does the spell last?"

"It's already over." The Moonsword straightened, catching his breath. "It lasts a few hours, or until it absorbs a certain amount of damage." He rolled his shoulders, as if trying to shrug off a phantom ache of wings. "If it was expended that fast... you might want to keep another heal ready."

Ouch, Klein winced. Leaned back against hay, watching the rest of the guys lean in and snark as Tae fussed and fidgeted with Dynammm's wings, running claws and wing-claws through feathers to get them to lay just right. And thought about guilds, and idiot stubborn solos, and obligations. "You know we'll pay you back for the venom, right?"

"This wasn't a boss fight. It was a rescue." Kirito fixed him with a stern look. "I would have gone in for anyone."

Yeah, you probably would have. And the kid thought he didn't like people. "Still--"

"If you want to pay me back, help me get the mats to make more," Kirito shrugged. "Argo says the Knights of the Blood Oath found a new wizard's library near their latest headquarters. I want to spend a few hours away from the front lines to do a little research."

Oh, and that didn't sound ominous. "Research?" Klein said warily. "Into what?"

Kirito's smile was cold as shadows. "How to slay a dragon."

Chapter End Notes

tiefling - someone with a bit of demonic blood. Yes, thinking of Cloud's canon wing in KH....

Come to the Fluff Side

Chapter Summary

Love in the stacks. Or, well, shy like in the stacks.

(Asuna would like it to be known There Is No Guy. Just a sometimes-fellow party member. Honest.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nobody was supposed to be laughing in Caerulus' library. Asuna knew that. But the book she'd winkled out of the animated bookcases was so... so....

Covering her mouth with her hand, she rested her head on the study desk and tried not to snicker too loudly.

"Is it good?"

Ack!

The library was a safe area, Asuna reminded herself, almost banging her head on the desk's built-in shelf. Even for sneaky darkfire-casting too-quiet solos. "Make some noise when you walk!" *Now* she could feel the brush of Kirito's shadows against the blizzard lightning and freezing wind that was her own magic. A feeling she'd been avoiding for days, not sure why. Or maybe she did know why. Because she was still sitting here, frozen, unable to turn around when she knew he'd already seen....

"Sometimes I forget how." Kirito stepped closer, a black-coated shadow at the edge of her vision. "You're a draconic?"

"So?" Wings clenched, almost banging into wood; Asuna shoved her chair back to turn, determined to take the offensive. "You're a...."

Kirito raised curious brows. Obviously taking a good look at sky-blue hair, pointed ears, and the scales scattered like sapphire glitter on her cheeks.

"Human," Asuna finished weakly, clawed fingers closing on the back of her chair. "I'm sorry, I thought - you were so *quiet*, and a lot of the clearers...."

"Half of Fuurinkazan's turned," Kirito agreed, black eyes shadowed. "So has Argo." A smirk crossed his face. "You might want sunglasses the next time you meet her face to face."

“Sunglasses?” Asuna said suspiciously. “What kind of youkai is she?”

A hint of amusement danced in dark eyes. “If you don’t know, I’m not going to spoil the surprise.”

Which meant he wasn’t going to tell her. Not unless it suddenly became critical to surviving a dungeon. Darn it.

...And now she couldn’t get her frazzled nerves to calm down. She’d been avoiding people outside the Knights all week, not wanting to see the curiosity or fear in their eyes. Desperately not wanting to see the reproach for not being there when Fuurinkazan had needed help, because she’d been feverish and dazed. The commander himself had ordered her to rest, she couldn’t help anyone by running onto the field when she couldn’t even see straight.

And Kirito was just watching her.

I’m not a mob you need to figure out! I’m still Asuna. I’m still me-!

“*Playing With Fire: Khorvaire’s Dumbest Adventurers?*” Black brows climbed a little higher. “Is that about us?”

“None of the names match the memorial.” Oddly disappointed, Asuna tapped the book to turn the page. “And I think Argo would have spread the word if anyone had spotted an albino red dragon.”

“An albino....” Kirito leaned over her shoulder to read the page, eyes widening. “No. They *didn’t*.”

Asuna stifled a snicker. “They did.”

“But... smoke, it’s living in a volcano, scorch marks-!”

“White dragon,” Asuna said gleefully. “They came wrapped in cold resistance.”

“Of their fate we shall say no more,” Kirito read out loud, “save that when the cowardly - but far wiser - hoard thief Aurum Plainsrider crept within the dragon’s lair, he narrowly avoided death in a cunningly-placed pit trap, treacherously filled with the glassy shards of,” the swordsman couldn’t help but snicker, “broken ketchup bottles....”

She ended up hanging onto his shoulder as they both broke out laughing. “W-we... this really isn’t funny....”

“Crispy-fried knights.” Kirito’s shoulders shook. “I wonder if they peel like shrimp?”

“You’re *horrible!*” She’d been thinking exactly that. Anybody who assumed a mob had one set of abilities when all the clues Kayaba had left in the game said it had another-

“No I’m not. And neither are you.” Kirito smiled at her, quiet and serious. “We lost most people that stupid in the first month. Lucky for us.”

Asuna stiffened. “Lucky-!”

“If you think you know what you’re doing, and you don’t, people are going to die.” Kirito stepped back, looking away. “If you’re lucky, you’re the only one that dies.”

Which sounded like something Kirito knew. And the pain under those words squeezed her heart, especially when she knew that set of shoulders meant, *said too much, moving on to go find monsters to kill-*

Impulsively, she gripped his wrist. Saw alarm flash over his face, and looked down, where a black sleeve was caged in sapphire claws.

Claws. Asuna swallowed, throat dry. *He’s human. Why would he want me to touch him?*

What else did she expect? She didn’t know herself in the mirror; how could he see the girl who’d helped him kill Illfang?

I should just go-

This time, he caught her hand.

What do I do?

“Fuurinkazan is something else,” Kirito said quietly. “They got Issin through his change. When Kunimittz was bitten by a werewolf, they helped him hang on until I got there with healing herbs. When Klein was bitten... even as a turned weretiger, he held on. He kept himself from attacking, just long enough. I don’t think he could have done that if he didn’t trust them. Care about them. That guild is special.” Black eyes met hers for one shy instant. “Isn’t there one person in the Knights that cares about you?”

“That’s - that’s none of your business,” Asuna sputtered, feeling her face burn. “Who says there’s not? I like libraries! Some of them have cookbooks. And most of the time, they don’t have snoopy Black Swordsmen cluttering up-”

“Then whoever’s preening you must have had a Blind cast when they weren’t looking,” Kirito shrugged, letting go of her hand. “They’re doing it wrong.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. It’d better be something blistering, to cover up that first impulse to blurt out the truth; yes, she’d been born wealthy, but they were all here on Aincrad now. She didn’t waste time preening in front of a mirror anymore-

“Really!” Caerulus himself rumbled the word as he rounded the nearest stack; an azure-scaled, slightly disheveled half-dragon in the sober black and brown robes of a scholar. You had to look closely to pick out the charm bracelet on his right wrist that held magically shrunk weapons and wands, or the subtle lump in his left sleeve that Asuna knew was a shrunk spellbook. “And where did you learn about preening? A book? A loremaster? I admit, I’ve not been able to give the young lady the benefit of practical experience.” He rustled the membranous wings cloaking his own shoulders; batlike shapes of scale, bone, and skin, all in shades of twilight and midnight blue. “I’ve never yet found lore that explains why

the blending of human and dragon blood can be so incredibly different when the human outweighs the dragon. Humans are furred creatures, not feathered; you'd think if dragon scales gave way to anything, it would be fur. Which would make draconics look like werebats who got into a dye vat, so perhaps that's for the best...." He paused, one talon of a finger raised in thought. "And yet, some speculate that the griffins may have been an offshoot of some pre-sentient dragon lineage. And fully feathered draconics don't seem to have been born before the Year of Blood and Flame, over six centuries ago, when the Silver Flame itself was first manifested in Thrane. So we cannot rule out coatl involvement. Servants of good they may be, but if their offspring the shulassakar are anything to judge by, there's little they enjoy more than slapping we mere mortals in the face with their grand and glorious piety...." He coughed into a fist. "Ah, never mind a grumpy old dragon. There are probably worse fates than being an innocent bystander caught between a transcendent shulassakar paladin and the fiend he's sworn to destroy, but I haven't survived any of them. Yet." Scaled eyelids blinked, like a flicker of twilight. "So you have distinct opinions on preening, do you, young swordsman? Very unusual in a human. *Very* unusual."

Kirito shifted on his feet, as if he were caught between curiosity and an all too reasonable impulse to dash for the door. "I know some draconics."

"I don't doubt that. But the chronicle I've been reading - Thinker's Aincrad Newsletter, is it? - implies your bands of adventurers only met draconics a few weeks ago. And no one has that good an eye for feathers without a bit more experience-" Caerulus inhaled. And chuckled. "Well, well. You do know what you speak of. It's not everyone who can groom a cockatrice."

"A cockatrice?" Asuna echoed, aghast. She'd never seen one, but - Kirito was *deliberately* touching things that could turn him to stone?

"Check the *Compendium Symptomatica Animalia Mystica*," Caerulus instructed her, waving her deeper into the stacks. "Under *G*."

"G?" Kirito looked just as baffled as she would have been last week.

"For granite? It's indexed by tracks and symptoms," Asuna explained. "The author wrote it for adventurers who were trying to figure out what might have attacked a village."

"Indeed, for granite," the half-dragon nodded, toothed maw bent in a pleased grin. Which faded slightly, taking on a befuddled air. "Or was it *F*, for fluffy?"

Asuna blinked at that. *Fluffy?*

"Well, you'll figure it out." Caerulus rubbed his hands together briskly, then waved them off. "Shoo, shoo; and don't let him fall off the balcony, young lady. As for you," he leveled a talon at Kirito like a stern uncle, "be gentle, and do it right. I want to see our young Knight happy to fly."

"G, for granite." Asuna tapped a page to turn it as she sat at the balcony table. Wrinkled her nose, as the breeze tickled it with a stray rose petal from the climbing bushes defending the balcony railing. "Fluffy, what was he thinking... oh." She tilted her head at the delicately

detailed ink sketch of a cockatrice in flight, petrified caterpillar in its teeth. “They look like little velociraptors.”

“If you have a bird that turns things to stone, why not make it a fossil bird?” Kirito set his grooming kit down on the table beside her, and gingerly sat next to her on the bench. He wouldn’t have expected a balcony on the top floor of most libraries, but it made sense; Caerulus could obviously fly. In its own way it might even be a test for players who wanted to consult the books; did they approach politely from the ground level, or try to use the half-dragon’s private entrance?

And... he was stalling. Which was silly. Asuna couldn’t turn him to stone with a nip if she didn’t like what he was doing.

She could just tell me to never see her again. And she’s so upset. “Did someone force you to change?”

“What?” Asuna glanced at him, ears flattening in indignation. “I just... had a chance to be stronger, to look after the Knights. We can’t all just go on solo dungeon crawls to level up as far as we want! Some of us have people we’re responsible for....” She trailed off, obviously unhappy.

True. All of that was true. “Getting adopted does seem to add a few levels,” Kirito agreed. “Lucky for all of us, in that mess with Pollista. She outleveled almost everyone but Klein.”

“Just Klein?” Asuna tapped her claws on the table, slowly.

Kirito gave her his best wide-eyed, *no idea what you’re talking about, lowly level forty* look.

She flushed. “I’m not trying to pry. It’s just... the boss battles are getting more complex. There are more creatures to fight. We need bigger raid groups, and they have to be organized. The raid leader has to know what people can do if we’re going to win.”

And most of the time these days, the raid leader was Heathcliff. Never mind that Asuna was usually the one doing all the real work in planning the fights and getting stubborn guild leaders to take less than glorious positions when the plan needed that to work. “Does it matter that much? I’m always a scout or a distraction. I’m not a tank, or a healer like a shaman or potion-crafter. I go in, I hit what needs to be hit, and I get out.”

“I guess you’re right.” Asuna glanced away. “I just don’t want to assign you to something you can’t handle because I don’t *know*.”

The fang hung heavy against his chest. “If I get in over my head, Klein would try to get me out,” Kirito admitted. “So I won’t.”

Asuna’s shoulders straightened. “All right. I believe you. It doesn’t tell me where I should put you in a boss fight....”

Kirito rolled his eyes, and muttered a sincere wish in Draconic that Kayaba mistake poison ivy for toilet paper. “That’s part of the problem. The level boss fights are almost always in

dungeon rooms. I'm better off fighting outside. Some of the magic I have won't work outside the wilderness."

Asuna frowned. "You go into boss fights when you're already at a disadvantage?"

"I can call darkfire anywhere," Kirito shrugged. "I track and scout bosses. It doesn't matter who takes them down." He eyed frayed wings. "I'm not the only one fighting at a disadvantage. You have a flight gauge, right?" Tae said it pretty much approximated what draconic flight could actually do. They needed magic as well as muscle power, and if they ran out of either, they were grounded.

"I - yes. Why?"

"Check it while I work." He opened the kit, equipping Metal Preening Claws over one half-gloved hand and taking the lid off a vial of Meadowfoam Oil. "You can get a kit like this from anyone who deals with messenger birds. Or griffins. For Meadowfoam Oil, try an apothecary, or a hairdresser. Or you can make it yourself if you have the right mats...."

Asuna was frozen on the bench, eyes wide.

Idiot. She's going to have to turn her back on you. No player wants to do that. "It'll be a little awkward, but I could start from the front, so you can see what I'm doing?" Kirito offered. "Dynammm says it feels like someone shampooing your hair."

"...Okay."

Kirito moved in a little closer, deliberately reaching for the wing-claws to groom the tiny feathers near the joint first. *Covert feathers aren't a threat. Get those straightened out first. Then move onto the secondaries. Don't touch the primaries until you're sure she's calm. Threaten them, you threaten flying; she'd hit you before she realized she was scared. Just move slowly.*

He breathed in the scent of down and quills, and started carefully preening out the dust.

It was like someone flicking tiny bits of sandpaper away from her skin. Feather by feather, it didn't feel like much, but as Kirito worked her wing relaxed, like a hand that'd gripped a sword too long.

The oil did feel a little like shampoo, as Kirito kept wetting the tips of metal claws and working it into tough feathers. Its scent was limes, with a faint not-quite-there hint of morning glory.

He moved a little closer. She didn't say no.

"Go ahead and use some of the oil," Kirito offered, still working. "Get in around the base of each shaft, and get out anything that's been caught in there. Then pull the feather between your thumb and finger, so you oil the outside and zip up the leading edges. Slow and easy."

Hesitantly, Asuna drew a feather between her claws, just as she remembered doing as a younger girl with fallen crow feathers. Only back then the marvel of barbed filaments catching on each other to form one thin, air-catching surface had just been a wonder she could see. It hadn't brought this quiet, steady sense of relief, like brushing out tangles she hadn't realized were there. "You learned to do this on cockatrices?"

Kirito ducked his head, the system painting his cheeks flaming red. "The tame ones can be friendly. If they know you won't hurt them." His voice dropped. "They're warm."

Something warm, that didn't want to attack you. That didn't want to manipulate you, the way she had to push and cajole and almost threaten people, every day. Asuna swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. "Could I see them?"

Kirito's hands went still on her wings. He glanced at her, eyebrows up; *are you serious?*

Whatever he saw in her face must have been *yes*. "I can ask." He opened a message menu, typed up something brief, and sent it. "I don't know how long she'll take to reply."

"She?" Asuna raised a startled brow. "Argo?"

"No." Kirito shrugged. "She likes her privacy. If she says yes, I'll tell you."

Curiouser and curiouser. But Asuna nodded, and turned, so Kirito could get at feathers he hadn't been able to reach before. Because this was Kirito, and she did trust him....

And she could feel him through a Moonsword's magic, the same way she could feel any youkai she touched. He wasn't afraid of her. He wasn't disgusted. Just worried - worried for *her* - and hopeful he could help.

"You thought I'd hate you?"

Asuna swallowed against a prickle of tears. "You saw what happened on Opening Day."

"We all did." Calm, steady strokes through her feathers. "You're not a monster."

"How do you know?" She tried not to shudder. "Changing... it hurt so much. And then everything was different."

"I was there when Klein and Dynammm turned. I know." Kirito teased metal claws through the feathers joining her back, delicate as butterfly feet on her finger. "Did Caerulus give you any Tiger's Milk?"

Asuan frowned. "What's that?"

Kirito's breath hissed between his teeth; a swift flicker of hurt and anger. "Come to Snow Springs with me?"

Asuna craned her head back to glance at him. "You killed the psiwasps. That level should be clear again."

“That’s what we thought last time.” Kirito hesitated. “The Mistfeather clan is there. They’re draconics. And I think you’d like Shaman Tetsutora.” He gave her a wide-eyed, woebegone look, like a kitten left out in the rain. “Think about it?”

She did, as he fussed and plucked and preened everything back into order. Snow Springs was on level 40, behind the front lines. She’d only meant to take a few hours away to read. She should get back to leveling....

What if something like Pollista happens again?

It was possible. They hadn’t cleared enough levels to be sure, but from the information Argo and others had gathered, Kayaba seemed to spike the difficulty every ten levels. Put that together with the horror on level 25, and she wasn’t the only one who dreaded level 50.

All of which meant Pollista might not be a fluke. She might just be the first warning of worse to come.

If she was... the Knights of Blood couldn’t clear Aincrad alone. They had to rely on other clearing guilds to help. And those guilds in turn depended on other high-level players stepping up when another clearer fell. If new high-level monsters were going to pop up in cleared levels - monsters that could wipe out that vital base of recruits - then the Knights had to rethink their whole strategy.

Kirito let the last primary feather slip through his fingers, and scooted back on the bench to give her room. “Now check your flight gauge.”

Settling her wings back over her shoulders, Asuna sighed. It’d been nice to have someone paying attention just to her, yes, but it couldn’t make that much of a....

Her flight gauge was full. Her flight gauge had *never* been full.

Black eyes danced at her open-mouthed surprise. Face carefully straight, Kirito cleaned off the Metal Claws and started packing everything back away. “Tae says a good preening adds 20% to her flight time. It’s like item durability. The better you take care of your wings, the better you’ll fly.”

Daring, Asuna stood to spread her wings, feeling the difference in how they caught the breeze wafting over the balcony. No more ribbons of chill sneaking through her feathers to shiver her back. Now azure feathers spread like a slice of sunlit sky, warm and calling for the high winds....

She was up in a thunder of feathers, wings digging into the sky to find the thermal that had to be there. All the stone in this city would have soaked up heat since dawn. There would be a rising wind.

There was.

Beautiful.

Kirito watched Asuna dance in the wind, heart in his throat. He didn't want her to hate herself. He didn't want her to be afraid.

But if Vincent's hints were right, and Kayaba - Beniryuu, whoever he was - was trying to create new youkai for a real Aincrad....

I'd love this world, if it wasn't trying to kill us. It's beautiful. It's wide and open and everything we do matters.

But it doesn't have my family.

He wouldn't leave Suguha behind. He *wouldn't* abandon his parents.

And he could almost taste the irony, that he'd had to get stuck in a death game with people turning into youkai before he could admit Kirigaya Midori and Minnetaka were his parents. No matter who he'd been born to.

I'm already adopted. Once is enough.

So far, though, he hadn't stumbled across any way to derail Kayaba's plan. It was possible there wasn't a way; not from inside the game Kayaba himself had designed.

But that wouldn't be fair. And outside of messes like Pollista, SAO is fair.

In fact, if what Vincent had told him was true, the Psiwasp Nest might have *been* fair. He'd had the chance to follow up on Tae's comment about rangers. He'd avoided it. If he'd paid attention - if he'd had his head in *Aincrad*, instead of insisting he was only a swordsman - then he might have felt the psiwasps coming. And if he'd accepted that he did have the wild's magic, instead of mentally sticking his fingers in his ears because he didn't think that was human....

Then they wouldn't have dazed me, and we'd have fought them off. Kirito grimaced. We could have taken the nest on our own terms. It wouldn't have been an easy fight. We still might have lost people. But that's a risk we take in every boss fight. It could have been fair.

And Kirito was beginning to suspect SAO *had* to be fair. Whether Kayaba liked it or not. The laws of magic demanded it.

He's trying to transform humans into youkai and yank us all into their world, Kirito thought. It doesn't matter how he's justifying it. People don't know what they're getting into; they didn't when we came into the game, and they don't now that they're being adopted. That makes SAO - all of it - malevolent magic.

Not like a lightning bolt, or a fireball; those were *harmful* magic, yes, but no more evil than a dragon's claws. This was *deceptive* magic. Magic you couldn't dodge and couldn't fight. Magic meant to warp your free will, and never let you have a chance to know something was wrong until it was too late. In layman's terms, a *curse*.

And since no sane being wanted to be cursed, malevolent magic cost its user. It cost a *lot*. Because you were working against the innate magic of life itself....

I know how to tell Asuna.

It'd still be a gamble. She was already afraid of what she was.

But she needs to know the truth. She'd never forgive me if I lied.

His messages chimed.

Startled, Kirito took his eyes off falcon-patterned blue wings long enough to open the menu. Two messages, within seconds of each other. One from Shaman Tetsutora, oddly enough. And one from-

Kirito took a deep breath, and cupped his hands to call into the sky. "Asuna! She said yes!"

Asuna shaded her eyes with her hand as she stood on the weathered dock, staring out over an endless expanse of blue water. She breathed in, and shook her head; not a taste of salt in the air. But she'd swear she just saw a seal dive under the surface. "You said Snow Springs had a *small lake*."

"It *did*." Pale, Kirito tore his eyes away from the fathomless deep; heading back to shore at a fast, careful walk, as if he thought gray wood might collapse out from under him.

Or, Asuna realized, watching how his eyes flicked at the water, as if he thought an aquatic mob was heading their way. Fast. "What is it?"

"I don't know." His tone was tight. Controlled. It scared her more than any Knight's panic. "I don't know what it is, but it's big and it's *smart*. And it's fast-"

"Idiot!" Hoping her STR was high enough for this, Asuna grabbed him and *leapt*.

Her wings bit into the wind. She had one second to grin, because without his preening she never could have managed a downbeat that solid-

Black whipped through the air, wet and razor-edged.

"*Yeek!*"

Blizzard-lightning and darkfire blazed, a double strike of blue sparks and purple flames. Long strands of slithery sharpness flinched away, splashing back into the water near the dock as the pair of Moonswords tumbled to the pebbled beach.

Rapier, wings - move!

Kirito was already on his feet, hurling fistfuls of darkfire to sizzle and ice the surface of the lake nearest them. "Run?"

"Run!" Asuna agreed, feet flying.

They hit the village edge still at a dead run, only skidding to a halt just outside Shaman Tetsutora's infirmary. "That was," Asuna gasped, looking around at startled villagers.

"Too close," Kirito finished, breathing just as hard. "Tentacles... didn't see enough to know what it was... maybe that *Compendium* has something...." He trailed off, blinking, as he evidently noticed what she'd already seen.

They're staring, Asuna realized. Not at me. At Kirito.

The shaman's door banged open. "Inside," the elderly weretiger growled, fangs visible. "Now."

Jaw set, Kirito followed her in. Asuna took one more look around, seeing how the furred and feathered villagers seemed to relax a little.

This can't be good.

Asuna shut the door just in time to muffle Kirito's yelp from the listeners outside. "Lady Tetsutora!"

"Did I not say ye should not call me that?" One clawed hand gripping the swordsman's shoulder, the weretigress finished rubbing something thick and black, with a glitter like shed scales, across the nape of Kirito's neck under his hair. "There. That should throw it off the scent for now."

Asuna breathed in, noting something oddly missing. "Kirito, you... you smell like a draconic."

"Mistfeather scales," Tetsutora told them both, wiping her hands on a much-abused towel. "The beast would never believe a weretiger scent. Not when the cub here always smells of feathers." Her growl was audible, though her fangs were receding. "I asked ye to come here *first*."

"I know." Kirito's gaze flicked toward the door, and the lake far beyond. "But we saw... what happened?"

The shaman sighed, her own glance going to the silver spear by her door. "Tinctoria Village is no more."

Asuna felt a chill prickle down her spine. One of the villages on the 40th floor was gone? *Please tell me there was no one there when it happened... oh, no. Please, let no one have teleported there!* "How?"

"Was anyone rescued?" Kirito asked, hard on the heels of her words.

"'Twould seem a certain Power took offense to the Lady Aeris granting her Healing Rain to a firebird shaman," Tetsutora growled. "In the midst of night, the very heart of the earth where Pollista's nest fell, cracked and shuddered. The mountains themselves trembled, and Risia's moon blazed bright as day, and... the waters washed all away."

Asuna tried not to gulp too loudly. Her power as a Moonsword flowed from that endless plain of glaciers, blizzards, and deadly lightning. Any of those on Aincrad might draw Risia's power near, forming a manifest zone that warped the world to unearthly chill and snow. This sounded worse. "The water... Risia's endless ice...."

"Dump an ice-river into lava, and aye," Tetsutora agreed. "The spirits tell me the portal to Risia is closed. *Mostly*. But time to time, it flickers to life again... and time to time, something may swim through." She drew a rumbling breath. "A few of Tinctoria were lucky enough, fast enough, to survive. But we've had to bid them move on. That beast in the water hunts human scent." She narrowed slit eyes at Kirito. "And ye leave that ointment *alone*, Moonsword. I've no wish to tell young Klein one of his pack wandered off and got eaten." She crossed her arms, and *hmped*. "Ye've hunted with Vincent. Ye know what to do."

"Just humans?" Asuna pounced. "It's not hunting youkai?"

One bushy white brow arched, as the weretigress eyed her.

"Shaman Tetsutora, Asuna the Lightning Flash," Kirito put in. "A leader of the Knights of Blood."

"She who bears the blood of Tournesol." The shaman's gaze lingered at Asuna's throat, as if she could see the Bloodstone equipped under Asuna's gear. "'Twas a Moonsword of rare heart and courage, that lass. Honor her memory with your deeds. And no. Not yet," Tetsutora said darkly. "I've whispered to the winds to watch it. Ye will be cautious?"

Kirito nodded, eyes shadowed. "You're certain this was because of Aeris' help?"

"From the lips of our Lady of Shattered Stone."

Asuna frowned at the odd oath. Something about it sounded familiar.

Stheno of the Night of Shattered Stone, she recalled the legend. *Lady Stheno, one of the three Gorgon Sisters of Aincrad, before a human king of Galifar slew Medousa and left Euryale and Stheno bereft. And this is Shaman Testutora; Grandma Tiger. The weretigress who brought her people out of Sarlona alive, fleeing the Inspired.*

Legends of Aincrad. And one of them felt within her rights to drag Kirito in by the scruff of the neck like a too-curious cub. Asuna smiled, oddly warmed.

"I'll be careful," Kirito assured the shaman, bowing to take his leave. Lowered his voice as he gave Asuna an aside glance. "Why does everyone think I'm not careful?"

Asuna granted the weretigress her best curtsy. "You solo the front lines."

"Carefully!"

The mobs that popped up outside of Snow Springs were mostly small but fast. Asuna took out the majority of them while Kirito mapped this part of the level all over again. "I need to talk to Argo and some of the mid-level guilds." She skewered the second-to-last Shock Lizard in mid-leap with a simple Linear, listening to the scuffle and *meep* behind her,

followed by the chime of dissolving polygons. “If the levels can change this much, we have to keep updating the maps. Or no one will be able to level up fast enough to join the clearers when we need them.”

“Huh. Good idea.”

He hadn’t drawn his sword. He hadn’t used darkfire; she’d have felt that magic unleashed. And he wasn’t even breathing hard. “How do you *do* that?”

There on cue, the innocent blink. “Do what?”

“Grr....”

“The setting’s starting to look right.” Kirito stepped carefully between flowering pitcher plants, halting for a moment as something small and snaky scurried away from them. “This should be fed by the spring that goes underground in her cave. Now we should start going uphill.”

“Starting to? It doesn’t look the same?” Asuna followed in his footsteps; it was just a bit squooshy around here. “So it wasn’t just the lake that changed.”

“Heh. No.” Kirito smiled a bit, dodging a red-winged dragonfly bent on stuffing its mandibles with mosquitoes. “The cave we’re looking for used to be twenty-eight levels farther down.”

Asuna blinked away a drift of pollen. Shook her head, ears twitching. “Something from *level twelve* got moved here? How? Why?”

“Maybe a Dark Pack wizard wanted all the troublemakers in one place.”

“What Dark Pack-” Asuna cut herself off, realization trailing an icy finger down her spine. *Kayaba*.

She followed Kirito into the lava cave with caution, going back to back with him as a Dire Wolverine materialized beside a pink granite statue. Its growl vibrated like a small engine, fangs bared and drooling.

“We don’t want the bones.” Kirito’s voice was quiet. Unafraid. “Scavenge away. But after you’ve picked this site clean, I doubt there will be more.” He shrugged, not looking away from red eyes. “This den is too big for you to easily defend. Try digging around outside.”

Asuna swallowed as the Wolverine advanced, almost convinced she could feel her heart in her throat. “Kirito! Talking to a mob isn’t going to-”

“Take the bones. Go.” Kirito’s voice was suddenly hard. “Or we’ll eat you.”

What’s this we stuff, you crazy swordsman?

She could almost feel the program calculating the odds. It was a little less than their level, judging by that touch of pink in its icon. And they had it outnumbered. But it was probably

programmed to defend its lair, and Kirito still hadn't drawn his sword, the idiot....

The Wolverine sniffed the air near them. Growled low, and galumphed away down a cave passageway like an offended cat.

Asuna realized her tongue was getting dry, and shut her mouth. "What just happened?"

Kirito headed across the smoke-stained chamber; not hurrying, but definitely not dawdling. "The system's decided I'm a ranger. A fighter who belongs in the wilderness." Black leather shifted as he shrugged. "If I don't attack a beast mob, most of the time it won't attack me."

"So you didn't equip your sword." Asuna followed, strangling the impulse to kick him in the shins. "I don't think I could gamble like that."

"It's not a gamble," Kirito admitted, stepping into a shadow. "You know how Moonswords can feel other youkai. It's part of our magic, so we can pick out people who've been infected when they might not even realize they weren't bitten by a *wolf*." He gave her a sidelong, uncertain glance. "Rangers can feel beasts that way. At a much longer range."

Stepping farther into shadow, he vanished.

Shaken, Asuna reached for the shadowed wall. And touched only air. *A secret tunnel?*

She ghost-stepped her way inside, doing her best not to leave any trail to the entrance. Kirito said their host liked her privacy, and Asuna meant to honor that. "The mobs we ran into were all small. And you kept changing direction."

"I didn't want to meet anything big," Kirito nodded. "It's not polite to keep a youkai lord waiting."

You've known a youkai lord since level twelve? Asuna wondered. *What kind of youkai lord keeps cockatrices... oh.*

A thousand hues of green surrounded the tunnel exit, splashed with fruits and blooms in all the colors of the rainbow. The air shimmered with brilliant shades of a tropical rainforest, yet it was no warmer than it should be for Aincrad's summer fading into fall.

"Stay still," Kirito advised, materializing handfuls of Roasted Crickets from his inventory. "They know me by scent and sight. I don't want to startle them." He poured some of the crickets into her hand. "Here, chick chick chick!"

Silence. Even the insects stopped buzzing.

Chirring feathers swarmed them.

"Just remember, most of the rumors are wrong," Kirito told her, letting stern, quail-sized hens land on his shoulders to sniff him over. "The *Compendium* had it right; it's their venom that petrifies people. And only the adults can do that. If a chick bites you the site will go numb and gray, but only for a few hours. You can actually build up a tolerance."

“Good to know,” Asuna managed, wide-eyed. The *Compendium* had said wild cockatrices were mostly green, the better to blend into the jungles of their native Xen’drik. But here she saw black, white, bronze, spotted and striped - all the metallic colors of the rainbow. The chicks were even more colors. And fluffy.

One pale-blue chick with a head-tuft of black like a punk rocker landed on her wrist, talons catching on cloth as it walked right into her hand. Wing-claws gripped a cricket a third its size, as the chick cheeped and gobbled.

Soft, and small, and... all they want is some food and petting....

Asuna’s breath hitched; she blinked as the world went blurry. Her throat felt tight, and she almost thought she was sniffing. Except field leaders of the KoB didn’t sniffle.

Kirito let her lean on him as she bawled.

“That’s one of the reasons I believe Vincent,” Kirito said quietly, as Asuna scrubbed stray tears off her face. “Humans need to touch something that’s not going to kill them. Dragons... they don’t need anyone.” Kirito took a deep breath of herbs and feathers. “If I couldn’t come here, I think I’d go crazy.”

“Believe him?” Asuna managed.

“I’ll... tell you in a bit.” His fingers lightly tapped her shoulder; *no danger, but be ready*. “What do you think, Lady Stheno?”

Asuna gulped, trying to pull herself back together and look like a proper Knight. Which was going to be a little tricky, given at least one chick had decided to nest in her hair. *Lady?*

“I think it’s not the first miscalculation Kayaba has made. Let’s pray it’s not the last.” The redheaded medusa regarded her from behind smoky lenses. “You are Asuna the Lightning Flash?”

“I am.” Asuna curtsied. “Forgive my lack of formality, I only knew I was visiting one of Kirito’s friends.”

“Why, so you are.” Stheno’s smile was fond, if a little distant; more a visiting aunt’s than a mother’s. “I see the chicks have taken to you. Good. I’ve wanted Yui to meet a few more people.”

“Yui’s here?” Kirito looked a little pale, and sad. “I can go-”

“You will not.” Stheno crossed her arms, every inch the stern aunt. “Yui needs to learn that not everyone who looks human wants to hurt her, or she’ll break Vincent’s heart. And she’ll need his teachings, when she’s older. There are so very few of us who can train her gifts.” She reached out a hand. “Do you have younger sisters, Asuna?”

“No,” Asuna admitted, letting Stheno guide her and their fluffy entourage toward the sound of running water. “I have an older brother, but I don’t....”

Her voice died, as she stared. Bloodstones, dangling from a Jade Vine that rose out of a clear pool toward the sky. *Thousands* of them.

When... how....

Asuna swallowed, feeling as if she'd taken a spear to the gut. *How many of those were medusas?*

Kirito had known Stheno since level twelve. Yet he'd never been gifted with one of those stones. Why?

"You're missing the real treasure," Kirito murmured behind her. "Look down."

Blinking, Asuna did. And started, stifling her gasp with a quick hand.

On the shore of the pool, cupping a handful of water and tadpoles, was a small, dark-haired girl in a white dress, black snakes curling up from long hair.

Galifar thinks all the mortal medusas are dead.

Evidently, the Five Nations had missed one.

So small, Asuna thought. *She can't be more than nine. Which means....*

"She hatched out after the Night of Shattered Stone," Kirito said softly, confirming her guess. "Vincent brought her out of Breland a few months ago. Human wizards had her. They... weren't gentle." Like a shadow, he drifted into nearby greenery. "I'll just stay over here. I could use a few more herbs."

Asuna blinked at him, taking in the garden around them while the medusa nestling stared at her. She could spot half a dozen mystical components in as many breaths, and magic was warm as sunlight against her skin. "Is this a manifest zone?" She wasn't going to walk any nearer to Yui. Not until the nestling had time to decide she was not a threat.

"In fact, it is two." Stheno looked pleased at the question, as she gestured toward the Jade Vine. "Within the pool, there's a light touch of Irian, the Endless Day. It nurtures the vine, and the Bloodstones, and bolsters my own enchantments at need." One hand swept out, encompassing the rest of the garden. "Outside of the pool is the strength of Lamannia, the Twilight Forest. Which is good for my plants and my flock. Youkai hands tame them both to our advantage; Lamannia's power ensures they never become too tame." She knelt by the nestling, who'd carefully let tadpoles slip back into the water before she hid behind emerald skirts. "Yui? This is Asuna. Would you like to say hello?"

Black eyes widened a little more, and ducked behind silk like armor.

"It's all right, you don't have to." Asuna sat down on some Lynxmint; given what it'd done to her poor pots the last time she'd tried to cook it, the rambling mint was more than tough enough to take it. "But if somebody knew more than I do about cockatrice chicks," she raised a hand to her head, where tiny talons were pricking at her scalp, "I could really use some help."

Little black snakes poked their heads around emerald cloth, tilting up to get a good look at the indignant chick tangled in her hair. Black eyes peeked around next, as if Yui wanted to be absolutely sure her snakes had seen what they'd seen.

In a whisper of cloth and bare feet, Yui came closer.

Asuna smiled, tucking one finger under her braid where the chick was trying to scratch around for bugs. "Help?"

Careful little fingers reached into her hair-

Pain and fear and Zack was warm and funny but the wizards were hurting Cloud and the wolf was eating Zack inside and he yelled, he yelled at her to stay away and hide where the wolf wouldn't get her, so she touched the wall and made the stones move and squeezed inside, trying not to feel the wolf swallowing Zack up with the moon-

Silence. Silent like snow and green leaves; like the minds around her had never been silent. Red eyes and red cloak and a gentle touch that whispered protect.

"It's going to be all right. We'll take you somewhere safe."

Asuna blinked, looking at the little medusa with a black-tufted blue chick in her hands. The little medusa who was a psionist. Whoof. "That was Vincent? He seems really nice."

"He's a ranger." Yui gave the chick one more pat, then let it fly to join the rest of the fluffy horde. "He looks like a human, but he's not. His mind's all wild, but it's quiet. Safe." She reached out, brushing clawed fingers over the outside of a blue-patterned wing. "You're pretty."

"You're pretty, too," Asuna smiled. Not something she'd ever expected to say to a little girl with snakes in her hair. But she was. "You like feathers?"

Yui nodded, a shy smile on her face like sunlight between clouds. Then she straightened, serious. "You should wash your hands! Aunt Stheno says so. Not everybody has a - a tolerance?"

"That's right," Stheno agreed, as Yui splashed her hands in the pool and Asuna joined her. "Touching them won't petrify you," she raised her voice a hair, "but it will numb your hands if you're not used to it."

"Sorry." Kirito sounded sheepish. "I never noticed."

"That's because you've never handled them without Battle Healing," Stheno said dryly.

Asuna started. That was the players' name for the Skill, but how would an NPC know that?

"By this time, even if they bit you, you'd probably shrug it off in less than a minute." Stheno paused, and smirked. "*Ranger Kirito.*"

Yui jumped. Looked up at Stheno, a thousand questions in dark eyes.

The youkai lord nodded, and held out a beckoning hand. "Let her sense you. Vincent says the way rangers immerse themselves in the wild makes your minds... less edged, was how he put it. For those with psionic abilities, it's like putting a hand out to grasp cool water, instead of cutting ice."

Kirito hesitated, then crouched, closing his eyes as Yui reached out to touch his cheek.

"...Oh." Yui sniffled, and reached higher to comb claws through his hair. "Aunt Stheno wasn't wrong. You're not someone who hurts people. You're just sad."

Kirito opened his eyes a little, and smiled. "Zack helped save some of our friends, too."

"He did?" Yui lowered her hand, fingers entwining with each other in anticipation.

"It's a scary story, though." Kirito said thoughtfully. "Would you like to hear a different one? It's a little scary too," black eyes glanced at Asuna, "but there's a beautiful princess in it."

Asuna squinted her eyes at him. "There'd better be a scruffy-looking scoundrel, too. Or it's not *Star Wars*."

"Well, I don't know if he's a scoundrel." Kirito scratched the back of his neck. "But I guess you could call him scruffy-looking." He took a deep breath. "Once upon a time, there was a bored, evil red dragon...."

Asuna listened. And swallowed. And finally hugged herself, chilled to the bone.

It's SAO.

Kirito never mentioned any names. No Kayaba, no Klein; no players or level bosses by name. But the Flame-Haired Samurai and the Sky-Blue Rapier and the Merchant with an Axe....

And, of course, the Scruffy Swordsman. Who didn't seem to think he was a hero at all.

"So the stolen heroes reached the stairway to the Shakudo Castle," Kirito said quietly. "But there they had a choice to make. Ninety-nine mazes they'd traced. Ninety-nine monsters, each more horrid than the last. This would be the hundredth. And what do we know about a hundred, in magic? Especially with dragons."

"It's ten times ten," Yui nodded. "The only thing stronger is thirteen times thirteen. That's when older dragons pay attention to young dragons, because they might be old enough to have good ideas."

"Ten times ten, and a spell is woven to an end," Kirito agreed. "So the heroes had to choose. If no one defeated the red dragon, all of them would be trapped forever, withering away in magical chains. But if they ventured onto the hundredth floor, if they pitted their spell-wrought strength against the spell's master... then for them, the curse would be complete. They would have saved the others." Black eyes were shadowed. "But they could never go home."

Asuna couldn't move, even when Yui sniffled. She almost couldn't breathe.

That can't be true. This is a computer simulation. It's a game.

But there were so many odd bits popping up in Argo's Guides and the various player newsletters. Background information on eldritch machines, and the rules of curses, and anonymous stories of what it would have been like to be a youkai-turned-human on Opening Day. And on top of everything else, there was Argo's standing reward for information on things that just didn't *fit*.

What if it's not a game?

"I'd like to think the faerie lords snared by the red dragon's charm had more honor than that." Stheno hugged Yui to her, stroking small snakes. "If their assistance was required to cast the curse, then they would still hold some power within it to break the chains. Even those heroes they would wish to keep with them, out of friendship... no lord should hold a hero as a prisoner."

Kirito gazed at obsidian lenses, and nodded. "That sounds like a good ending."

"But it's sad," Yui whispered. "Everybody made friends in the mazes. When the curse falls apart and the mazes shift back into the Feywilds - they would still need help."

"Help must be asked for, not forced," Stheno said firmly. "Though the faerie lords might hope that some heroes choose to join them forever." She sighed. "It's a sad story now, yes. But if the story isn't finished yet - sometimes we can find a way to make it better."

Asuna was very quiet after they left Stheno's Cave.

If she wants to talk, she'll talk, Kirito told himself. *No sign of that Dire Wolverine. Maybe it did move on-*

"Is that what you think is happening?" Asuna's fingers gripped the hilt of her rapier, claws deep pools of sky against steel. "We're... we're changing into something else?"

She's scared. I'm scared. "Vincent said the spell affects our minds, not our bodies," Kirito stated. "We've still got a chance to break the curse."

"...You mean, you do."

Her voice was so small. Like a whisper in a hurricane. Kirito wanted to kick himself. "Don't kid yourself. I'm in this just as deeply as anyone. Maybe deeper. I'm not just a Moonsword. I'm a *ranger*. That means...." He had to swallow, throat dry. "If you get back, you need to get used to being human again. If I get back... the world will be dead. I won't be able to feel anything. I might as well live with plastic plants and a computer screen, it wouldn't be any different--"

He cut himself off, all too aware how his voice had risen, ragged and hysterical. And it was crazy to think that way. He'd lived for fourteen years just as numb to the living world as any other human. He could get used to it again.

I have to.

“I have a family in the Otherworld,” Kirito said shakily. “We’re going to beat Kayaba’s game.” His fists clenched. “We just need to figure out how.”

“But if we’re going to do that, we need to talk to the youkai lords who helped cast the spell in the first place....” Asuna paled. “If Aincrad is real, if the history and lore is true, then - Stheno, she-!”

“She’s killed thousands of humans.” Kirito nodded, holding Asuna’s gaze so she’d look at him, not a game story turned horribly real. “Karnathi wizards wiped out the medusas in Swiftwater Pass so Breland could invade Aincrad. And they did. They poured right through the pass, and hit the villages on the other side.” He had to take a breath. Knowing what he knew now, no wonder Tae called Vincent a hero. And loved Tetsutora like her own grandmother. “One of those villages was Snow Springs.”

Asuna shivered. “But it’s just a village! They’re farmers!”

“Farmers. Fishers. Hunters and crafters,” Kirito agreed. “And a clan of draconic horse-breeders. Villagers. *Civilians*.” He had to look away, nightmare scenarios playing out in his head. “But they’re youkai. Even the children.”

Asuna looked as sick as he felt. “No....”

“I’ve talked to someone who was a child here when it happened,” Kirito said carefully. “That person had never seen Shaman Tetsutora in full tigress war-form before. That person didn’t see much, the clan threw village children onto mounts and told them to *ride*, but... they saw what the village looked like, days later. Blood and bodies everywhere.” Kirito shuddered. “Some of those bodies were family.”

Poor Tae. He could understand why she’d volunteered for what was supposed to be just mystical training-

His gut knotted, as he realized his fellow party member had stopped looking sad. Blue brows were drawn down instead, in a frown of pure concentration.

Uh-oh.

“So she hit them from the rear,” Asuna said, half to herself. “Take out the magic-users. Take away the buffs. Make sure the soldiers knew all they had to keep them going was their own sword skills and any healing potions they happened to have. Galifar armies are used to clerics and adepts coming with them. Regular soldiers don’t carry potions. They’re expensive.” She smirked then, amused and just a touch bitter. “They’d have to solo monsters. Ouch.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way.” Kirito touched a tree to steady himself, feeling the whisper of small lives in leaves and furrows of dotted brown mulberry bark. Thinking of Opening Day, and magic, and dragons. “So it’s revenge.”

“What?” Asuna stopped, eyes wide. “We’ve never done anything to him!”

“We didn’t have to. We’re human.” Kirito nodded, fitting together facts and lore. “The Five Nations almost wiped out Aincrad. That would have wrecked Aincrad’s role in the Draconic Prophecies, which means the world Kayaba wants would never be. He told us he wanted to see Aincrad made real. He’s using humans to create what the Five Nations would have destroyed. It doesn’t matter what world we’re from. To dragons, humans are humans-” He cut himself off, almost reaching for his sword. Hissed a few words in Draconic, and grimaced. “No. Humans, demi-humans, youkai - to dragons, we’re all *two-legs*.”

“We’ll have to show Kayaba we’re not like any two-legs he’s ever met.” Asuna clenched a fist. “We’ll win. We’ll get you back to your family.”

Kirito had to smile at that, warmed-

Wait. “What about your family?”

Asuna’s eyes glimmered. “I....”

Hesitantly, Kirito lifted his hand from rough bark. Held it out, offering wordless comfort. She was a Moonsword. She knew what a willing touch could do.

Clawed fingers closed around his.

Lonely. Always lonely. Silken bonds and silken manners and scraping off edges of self to fit in-

Kirito blinked back tears. “I didn’t know,” he whispered. “I didn’t... you don’t want to go back.”

“Of course I do,” Asuna choked out. “They’re my family. But....” She sniffled, and wiped her eyes. “If I showed up just like this, they wouldn’t notice until the company guests started staring....”

Her head fit against his shoulder, warm as sunlight.

Asuna let him hold her a moment more, then took a steadying breath. And growled. “You shouldn’t smell like this. Not like-” She reddened, and almost flung herself back away from him.

Kirito blinked, bewildered. “If I’m going to come back here, I’ll have to. Until we can figure out what that boss is, it’s too risky to smell like a human.” He frowned. “But you’re right. Tae’s part of Fuurinkazan now. If I smell like a different Mistfeather, it might put her on edge. I should just make the Scent-Hiding Potion myself, with some cockatrice scales-”

“No!”

Asuna looked almost as stunned by her denial as he was. “No?” Kirito dared.

“I mean... cockatrices are small, low-level mobs, right?” Asuna waved a hand, as if gathering up her words. “You’d smell like prey. That might be worse.”

“It might,” Kirito admitted. “I’m not sure a Winged Serpent would be any better... Asuna?”

If she’d turned any redder, she might have exploded. “W-what about a different draconic’s scales?”

Where’s a repop when you need one? “I guess that would work-”

“Then I’ll trade you,” Asuna cut him off in a rush. “Scales for information on Tiger’s Milk. I still don’t know what it is.”

You want me to smell like you?

Kirito managed not to say it. Barely. It wasn’t a bad idea. Asuna was a clearer. And he didn’t want to waste time being hunted by Wyverns that thought he was a cockatrice-sized snack. “Let’s get back to the village, then. The legends say Shaman Tetsutora invented Tiger’s Milk....”

He told her the rest as they walked, glossing over how Fuirinkazan had swept him up with it in the first place. That was pack- *guild* business. Not hers.

Yet.

Kirito shook that stray thought off. Asuna could do so much better than one scruffy Beater.

So why does she want to mark me with her scent?

“About time!” Lisbeth put down her hammer, watching one of her favorite customers try to sneak in. “I heard you were finally up and around. Swords don’t maintain themselves, you know!”

“I had... things to think about.” Asuna braced herself, and stepped up to the counter. Opening her inventory, she materialized a few piles of odd mats.

Cockatrice Feathers. Lisbeth pursed her lips in a silent whistle, thinking of a few recipes she was finally going to get to try. *Terrorantula Carapace*. And - *Tiger’s Milk*? She poked the odd bottle out. “I haven’t seen this in any recipes.”

“I don’t know what it might do if you tried to forge it,” Asuna confessed. “Though if you were trying to make a magical item that tied people together....” She trailed off, a little red.

Lisbeth sniffed, snowy whiskers flaring in suspicion. “You found a guy!”

“What? No!” Asuna waved her hands wildly, turning redder. “There’s no guy! Just a - a solo I like to party with... to fight with! That’s all!”

Lisbeth snickered, watching her friend’s mouth dig her in deeper. “You know what they say. The best part about fighting is making up....”

“Liz!”

Boy, your home must have been a serious no fun zone. Lisbeth sighed. “Okay, okay....” She gave Asuna a sidelong glance. “But he is cute, right?”

“N-no, not at all,” Asuna stammered. “He’s more kind of... scruffy-looking.” Her ears were still red. “Especially when he has cockatrice chicks scrambling all over him.”

“...What?” Lisbeth managed. Because, seriously. Cockatrices?

“Long story.” Asuna waved at the Tiger’s Milk. “I was hoping we could share this while I tell you. You’re supposed to use it with people you trust. And who could I trust more than you?”

Lisbeth blushed, fluffy tail twitching. Because it was true. Clearers risked their lives against the monsters every day. They had to trust the people who maintained their gear. “Okay, I’m interested. So what is this?”

“Well, you start with milk, and then you add some herbs....”

The smith listened. Even when it seemed impossible. They were in Aincrad, after all. Magic made a lot of things possible. Even, maybe- “There’s a *real* Aincrad?” Lisbeth blurted.

Asuna nodded.

“Whoof.” Lisbeth sat down on a handy stool. “If this is real, if we might end up in another world... we’ve got to make a *plan*.”

Asuna grinned. “That’s what I hoped you’d say.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m working on the basis that 5 levels of SAO are approximately equal to 1 level in the Eberron setting. This would set SAO level 100 at D&D level 20 - very high-level, but not impossible. So yes, go up 2 levels in D&D, and dungeons get noticeably tougher. This also makes Kirito at this point about 10th level, multiclass (maybe a little higher given as it’s spread over multiple classes), with at least 3 of that in ranger. Which gives him access to (among other spells) Calm Animal and Summon Nature’s Ally.

Yes, Risia is an elemental plane in the Eberron setting. It is also specifically described as an environment that is an “endless *plain* of winter, howling blizzards,” etc.

I humbly submit that one of the real problems with the prequel Star Wars movies is not any computer-generated actors, but the lack of a scruffy somewhat-good-guy smuggler. Using bad Welsh for Draconic. So there.

Bufs - magic to enhance abilities, add armor, etc.

Winterfest Event

Chapter Summary

Holidays away from home. Sugar candy, snowball fights... evil revenant Clauses....

Chapter Notes

I've got part of chapter 9 written but it's not finished, and I'm still wrestling with some other unfinished stuff. So... that could be a while, but here's 8.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Snow fell, white and silent, muffling the sounds of battle behind him. Kirito spared one thought for Fuurinkazan, up against the Divine Dragons - *let them win, let them be safe-*

Closed off his heart, and ran on.

"You seek Nicholas the Renegade," Vincent's grim voice rang through memory, as Kirito skidded to a halt in a drift. Fast fingers adjusted his inventory, gearing for the fight. This had to be the right place, he could hear phantom sleigh bells.... *"He is a powerful undead."*

Above, two streaks of light through the night. A fur-trimmed red coat fluttered as it fell, giant-sized boots aiming to stomp Kirito even before the event boss landed-

"And he won't be alone."

Kirito jumped back and braced himself as Nicholas the Renegade landed, dodging sideways the next instant as a frost-chain scythed through the air where he'd been standing. The undead goblin-spawn one of Caerulus' tomes had called *tomtin* hissed through decaying lips, following up with a whirling figure-eight meant to drive him toward the rest of the jangle.

Kirito hurled darkfire with his free hand, shattering unnatural ice. Links gleamed like poisoned diamonds in violet shadow-flames.

The next instant, the undead's negative energy yanked frost-links back together. But Kirito was already past, one well-aimed Horizontal taking the tomtin through the throat.

Ordinarily, undead didn't care if they bled out. Which was why he'd aimed precisely.

Spine severed, the tomtin shattered.

Now he was inside Nicholas' range. That giant ax would kill him if it connected, but the rest of the jangle of tomtin were equally at risk if they got too close. Which meant he might survive the next few seconds. Not much longer, as one sword alone....

Teeth bared at the night, Kirito drew his second sword.

Dual Blades.

He didn't know when he'd gained the Skill. He didn't know why. And he definitely didn't know why the system treated it differently from any regular swordsman trying to wield two swords. It had just been there, weeks ago; and his careful work leveling it up had given him the first threadbare hope that he could actually win this event battle. He hadn't mastered the Skill, not yet, but two-sword style had been part of Grandfather's teachings and he *had* paid attention-

Ice on steel. Steel on steel, ringing sharp in snowy air. Kirito whirled in a storm of darkfire-lit blades, holding off the tomtin while slicing away Nicholas' HP. The air was cold, colder than any natural winter; the deadly chill of undeath that would suck the life from most players before they even knew they were dying.

Most don't have darkfire.

In the long run, the chill of Shadow-spawned magic was no match for negative energy. But it was enough to insulate him. Hopefully, just long enough-

Something black swooped through the night, claws slashing within inches of his cheek. "Caw! Caw!"

"The tomtin aren't Nicholas' most deadly allies."

Another swoop, as Kirito ducked and parried and struck; raven wings passed so close, his ear felt the breeze.

"They are named for what they take," Vincent had said. "Thought, and Memory. If they score your face with beak or talon...."

A pair of ravens, a dozen tomtin - no, two less now, he heard the double shattering - and Nicholas' whistling ax. He had to fight without thinking, if he stopped to think or spellcast he'd be dead-

"But they are still ravens, and they love to taunt their foes before they strike. Go to Caerulus. The old dragon isn't cheap - but he keeps a secret in trust. A secret of House Vadalis."

Kirito had. His head and heart still ached from it. But it'd be worth it, if the rumors were true. If he could win one life back from Kayaba-

Chains whirled. He couldn't dodge them all.

Cold. So cold....

Kirito made himself move, catching the deadly ax on braced blades. Shoved it aside and down, stumbling as he shivered. Chilled to the bone, he could all but see the wide opening in his left guard.

Black feathers swooped through it, talons tangling in black hair as the raven cawed its taunting victory-

Choked off, like water gurgling through gravel.

Stiff as ice, obsidian feathers plummeted to the ground.

Nicholas howled, mad eyes rolling in decayed sockets as the ax cut at Kirito with redoubled fury.

Screaming, Kirito whirled to meet him.

There'd been screaming. A lot of screaming.

Which would have worried him a lot more, Klein knew, if he hadn't been in a few horribly tight spots with Kirito. The guy liked stealth. Heck, if they were outnumbered the way they'd been in the psiwasp nest, he was all in favor of sneaking up on a bunch of mobs and opening with a flurry of throwing pikes; or even cutting throats from behind, one by cautious one. Kirito wasn't here to play fair. He was in this game to *live*.

But when the chips were down and it was do or die? Yeah. Kirito had a berserker streak.

Thank god he's not a lycan. Kirito as a werewolf would be a bad, bad mess.

But the screaming had stopped. Meaning the fight was over. One way or another.

Alive, the quiet warmth of his fang told him, as Schmidt swore and yielded the duel. *Kirito's alive.*

Alive, but not in one piece, if that dull throb in Klein's jaw was any clue. Ow. "C'mon," Klein got out, still feeling as though he ought to be breathing hard, whatever his avatar was doing. "Let's go get him...."

Black on black, a lone figure trudged out of snowy woods.

He looks like hell.

Not so much physically; though his fur-trimmed coat looked like it'd been tossed to a litter of bakeneko kits with a grudge against leather. But that blank stare, the way Kirito was just wandering their general direction, as if he barely noticed there were people at all....

Whatever it was, it was bad.

Face empty, Kirito tossed him a blue crystal pendant.

<<*Stone of Returning Soul. Unique. Revives player if used within 10 seconds of HP bar exhaustion.*>>

Kirito blinked. Almost focused on him. "...Use it on the next person you see die."

For a moment the words didn't even register. Damn it, the rumors had mentioned a *resurrection* artifact. Something that could snatch souls straight out of Dolurh and bring them *back*.

This wasn't resurrection. This was just a hair better than a shaman casting *cure grievous wounds* two seconds before your HP ran out. "Kayaba, you *bastard!*"

But there wasn't time to curse the dragon out the way he deserved. Not with Kirito picking up his feet again and staggering on.

Oh no. I'm not letting him slink off alone. Not this Christmas.

Looked like the rest of Fuurinkazan was already ahead of him, falling in a loose escort around the wavering Moonsword. Not too close, Kirito could lose any of them in terrain this wild if he tried. But close enough to keep the Divine Dragons at a respectful distance.

Klein hung back a moment longer, setting up two messages. First to Argo, who needed some facts before everybody jumped to conclusions about what Fuurinkazan had. After that....

This is bad. Really bad. No way am I going to handle it alone.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. He was going to lose skin for this, Klein just knew it. At the very least, there would be shouting.

But it was time to let a certain Moonsword's off-and-on patrol partner know what he'd *really* been up to, this Christmas Eve.

One of these days, Asuna thought as she rubbed her hands over each other, she'd have to ask Klein why Fuurinkazan let her keep a key to their house in Snow Springs. The whole point of having your own place was to have a safe spot away from other players....

"-Don't care if you say you're fine," Klein's voice jostled through the front door as he flung it open. "Cold. Event boss. You need a hot drink, a warm fire, and people. Or do we have to drag you over to Grandma Tiger so she can growl at you about winter undead?"

"...No."

Asuna froze as Kirito stumbled into the room, most of Fuurinkazan herding him toward the blazing fireplace while Kunimittz double-checked the locks on the door. Winter undead? No wonder Klein's message had asked for cocoa. Along with, *please don't kill me. Or him.*

"What happened?"

Fuurinkazan looked at each other. And if that wasn't a 'who breaks the bad news', then she hadn't been leading Knights long enough.

Issin cleared his throat. "Somebody decided to solo the Christmas event."

...I'll kill him later.

For now, Asuna pressed a mug of cocoa into Kirito's chilled fingers, then helped him juggle it back and forth as she and Klein got what was left of his coat off. Given Kirito's usual fighting style relied on not getting hit, it had to have been an awful fight. "What was it?"

Kirito took a careful sip. Then a deeper one. "Undead Santa with revenant goblins. And two ravens." He paused. "Don't ask me to explain the ravens."

"Nicholas the Renegade is real?" Tae squeaked. Found herself the focus of stares, and blushed. "It's one of Grandma Tiger's old stories. The legend is that he used to be a kindly barbarian cleric in the hoarfell, so favored by the spirits that he was granted two spirit raven familiars. But a marilith demon disguised herself as a poor shifter woman, and, um.... Grandma always skipped that part with, 'and there's a lot of yucky stuff little kids don't want to hear about'..."

"Figures," Harry One smirked. "There's always a girl."

Not always, Asuna knew. But it was a pretty common story. "Guy meets girl, guy gets tempted into unforgiveable sins, girl turns into demoness and laughs as she sucks out his soul?"

"Pretty much," Tae admitted. "Everybody hears those stories. Why does it keep working?"

Funny, how all of the guys in the room seemed to be looking somewhere else.

Well, except for Kirito. Who was currently communing with the spirit of hot chocolate, and probably hadn't thawed out enough yet to notice.

"Probably because most guys never know when they meet the right girl." Dynammm wrapped a wing around her shoulders, hugging her close. "I bet he didn't have a good shaman like Grandma around to put her blessing on the courtship, either. That would have spiked her wheel."

Klein snickered. Waved his hands at Tae's odd look. "What, can't you just see it? 'Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...'" He wriggled his fingers, as if sprinkling holy water. "Fwoom! Demon, right in the middle of the wedding party."

"Sometimes that happens," Tae stated, confused. "Not often, but... that's why the best man is always armed."

"And sometimes the bridesmaids, too." Asuna shook her head, bemused. "Lisbeth ended up on a quest like that about ten levels down. It was a leannansidhe, not a demon, but it was still a nasty fight."

"Fairy versus smith? *Ouch*," Tae said gleefully.

Smith seemed to catch Kirito's attention. Asuna wasn't surprised. If it'd been that desperate a fight, Kirito's sword could probably use some maintenance-

Eeep. "Kirito, stay still," Asuna said firmly, lifting her hand. "There's something in your hair...."

"Don't touch it!" Kirito caught her wrist, black eyes wide with alarm. "I don't know if all the venom was discharged!"

"You put... of *course* you did." Asuna glared at him. "What were you thinking?"

Issin choked on his cocoa. "How the hell'd you even do it?" He coughed, and shook his head. "I've had to patch people up after a few stunts. The system doesn't care where poison hits you. If it's on your body, it's on your skin. If you're immune, the dose just fizzles. If you're not... why are you not a statue?"

"It's not in my hair." Kirito set his empty cup down, and headed for the bathroom.

Listening hard, Asuna caught the sounds of water running.

"Kayaba stiffed us," Klein said quietly. "It's not a resurrection. Just a revival - if you get it to someone in a ten-second time limit."

Oh. Oh, no wonder. "Then we still don't know," Asuna said, horrified. "We could be dying in the real world. We probably are."

"Who - what-" Klein's jaw dropped, and he swore. "Oh man. I didn't even think of that."

"Think of what?" Dale frowned. "Come on, guys, make sense... oh."

Issin nodded, grim as death. "If a revival only works for ten seconds, then... after that, there's probably nothing to revive." His ears twitched, just as Asuna heard the faint squeal of a faucet being turned off. "Heads up."

Kirito looked a little better. His messy hair was swiped mostly back from his face, damp black threaded with a few tufts of near-black that cast back glints of dark green and violet.

Asuna sucked in a breath, finally recognizing them without the dull paste of venom. "You put cockatrice feathers in your hair?"

"...Not exactly."

"Not exactly how?" Klein raised a red brow. "'Cause from here it looks like-" He frowned. Took a breath. "That can't be right."

"What can't?" Asuna pounced. She didn't know how well draconic noses matched up against a weretiger's, but all she could scent from Kirito was her own scales. And cockatrice feathers, of course. The same as always.

Issin had taken his own perplexed breath, brows shooting up in surprise. Rising from a wooden chair, he circled the fire for a better look. “Safe to touch now?”

“It should be.”

Not exactly a resounding yes, Asuna thought, watching the shaman run a clawed finger through feathers and hair. Darn it, she wanted to be doing that.

“They’re alive.” Issin pressed gently where feathers were embedded in skin, then pulled back. “I heard about the Siren Sisters running into something like this. A half-giant that tried to drag passengers off a ship. It swam like a fish, even in full armor, because part of it wasn’t a giant anymore. It was elemental water. A graft.” He grimaced, and rested a hand on the top of Kirito’s head. “Hold still. I need to check that you’re still you... and you are. Good.”

A chill sliced down Asuna’s spine. “Explain.”

Issin eyed Kirito.

The swordsman sat still. Took a breath, blinking. “Sometimes a magic-crafter gets grafts wrong. The subject loses too much of their own body to keep their mind intact. Or the grafter tries to create an ultimate weapon, and draws too much of the other creature’s power in for the graft to use. From the archives, it usually takes four or five heavily magical grafts to risk that.” Gray-shirted shoulders shifted; almost a shrug. “Feather-tufts aren’t like that. They’re a graft invented by House Vadalis for their use and sale, and they have hardly any magic at all. They’re more a living tattoo than anything else.” Black eyes managed to glance at her. “The technique ended up in Aincrad when a minor member of the House went rogue. He thought of an interesting use for it.”

“Connlan!” Cocoa sloshed in Tae’s mug as she shot upright. “Connlan of Swiftwater Pass. I know that story!”

“You said Connlan was a Moonsword.” Harry One gave her a curious look. “The dragonmarked Houses are from Galifar.”

And the Five Nations didn’t have Moonswords, Asuna knew. They killed them instead.

“And they *say* they don’t have sorcerers,” Tae said firmly. “But they’re born with magic, which means every once in a while someone *is* born a sorcerer. The House just kills anyone who manifests that power. Only Connlan’s showed up late, and he ran for Aincrad. Vincent saved him.” She hesitated. “That’s the story my family told me. I only saw him a few times, when he came into Snow Springs for supplies. I was just a kid.” She glanced at Kirito. “But I remember the feathers.”

Feathers. Because the world around Kirito just refused to make sense sometimes. “Why would you get feathers that don’t do anything?” Asuna demanded.

Finally, a glimmer of light in dark eyes. “Because Vincent said the ravens would go for your head. And the *Compendium*’s wrong.”

“Wrong?” Asuna said in disbelief. Caerulus checked every tome he had. There were scrolls cross-referenced to almost every book, with notes like “accurate”, “wrong”, “out of date”, and “what was the writer smoking?” And she’d definitely read the notes on the *Compendium*.

“Not wrong. More - incomplete.” Kirito rewrapped his fingers around hot cocoa. “Cockatrice bites have petrifying venom. True. You can’t get petrified just by touching a feather. That’s... mostly true. But if you watch flocks for a long while, when they’re happy and when they think danger’s coming.... If they’re angry, or scared, a cockatrice can chew on its own feathers, and they’ll carry the venom to the next thing they touch.” He looked up at her. “A graft is part of your body. But it also counts as a magical item. Which means you can equip certain things onto it.”

The col dropped. “Like venom,” Asuna said numbly. “Kirito, that’s....”

“Awesome,” Klein said firmly. “Rules lawyer FTW!”

“It’s not rules-lawyering,” Tae objected. “It’d really work!”

Asuna sat up straight. *But... that would mean she’s....*

“Um.” Tae swallowed. “I-”

“Asuna could help.” Kirito’s voice was threadbare with exhaustion. “She’ll understand. You’re just as trapped as we are.”

And just like that, another piece of Kirito’s fairytale fell into place. “It’s not just the youkai lords,” Asuna realized. “You - some of the players....” She wove her fingers together, thinking. “So that’s why the Siren Sisters are so strange!”

Tae blinked. Gave her a second look. “You’re not angry?”

“Angry? No!” This was a key. This was *important*. She felt it, the same way she read a boss battle to know when to send in the DPS, and when to yank everybody back and blast away with AOE magic. “If you know what really works in Aincrad....” Darn it, there was a name for this, if she were a gamer she’d know it-

“Exploits.” Klein looked like someone had smacked him with a cold tuna. “We can figure out things like Kirito’s feathers.”

“Game the system.” Kunimittz wiggled thick eyebrows. “I like it.”

“The problem will be getting them to talk to us in the first place.” Asuna tapped her claws on carved wood. “If they’re from Aincrad, they’ve been taught all their lives that humans want to kill them. We don’t, but I know that won’t be easy to believe....”

Unless they knew another story of a friendly human. Someone who hadn’t been trapped in a death game. Someone real.

“Tae?” Asuna met silver eyes. “Tell us about Connlan.”

“...Arigato. Sayonara.”

Tears pocked the dust on the attic floor as the crystal darkened and fell back into his hand. Kirito muffled his sobs with a pillow, curled into the hammock slung in the quietest, most lonely spot in Fuurinkazan's guildhouse. He didn't want to be heard by youkai ears. He did *not* want to be seen. This was his grief. His shame.

Sachi, I'm sorry.

He'd tried to atone. Tried to bring her back. That was why he'd only risked his own life in the event battle. Sachi had been sweet and stubborn and braver than she knew; she'd never forgive him if he'd gotten an innocent person killed trying to revive her.

There'd been other, darker reasons. Reasons he hoped Klein would never ask about.

We've all lost someone. All of us. If the Stone had worked like the rumors said it would - how could we decide who to bring back? Whose life was most important?

The choice would have torn a guild apart. Maybe not immediately, but as months went on and people tortured themselves with, why *their* loved one and not mine?

And Kayaba would have watched it all.

So he'd fought the event alone. Because he'd seen guilds break and turn on each other, and if that happened to Fuurinkazan....

Keep them alive, Klein. Be the noble samurai we all wish we could be, and lead them to victory. We need that hope.

Not that Kirito thought he'd ever feel hope again. The world was gray, and he was hollow inside. Only the slight sway of the hammock told him he was still alive.

I can't give up.

Kirito put the crystal back into Inventory, then buried his face in his hands. He didn't want to think about this. He didn't want to *be*.

I can't give up. Kayaba... Beniryuu is still out there, and she asked me....

A dying request. It made him laugh through his tears; a dark, bitter chuckle into the damp pillow. Because he'd read the lore, on Moonswords and rangers. And this *fit*, hand in glove.

“We are the guardians of the wild,” Vincent had said. “From youkai, and for youkai. We are those who survive when the wilderness strikes and slays. And so, we are often the last eyes the dying see.

“We are not priests. But we are all living souls, lights against the darkness. Comfort the living, and honor the dead. And in the wild, where there is no law to turn to... bring vengeance.”

Dragons would never answer to two-legged laws. Why should a creature that could watch millennia pass be bound to humanoid mayflies? Weak, short-lived prey, who might see a dozen kings rise and fall before one dragon had a lair arranged to his liking.

We've been here a year. A dragon would take longer than that picking how to carve a gem. Gods, they'll sleep longer than that; it lets them live longer, and why be awake if the two-legs are being boring? Their lairs are already deathtraps for anyone who'd try to catch them napping-

Realization knifed through him; cold as hate, and burning like acid.

Kayaba is here.

Sword Art Online was his creation. The players, and all the magic infusing them, was his dream come to life. Why in the worlds would he be lazing in a cave in Khorvaire when he could live that dream *here*?

Beniryuu is here!

Kirito's hands twisted the pillow. If he could breathe, he knew air would have burned in his chest.

How do I find him?

...What do I do when I find him?

Sachi hadn't asked for anything as simple as vengeance. She wanted them to escape.

Curses can outlive their casters. Killing him won't set us free. I need to find another way.

I need to talk to Argo.

And that was going to be *so much* fun. She'd sold him the location of the event; information was her trade, and Argo the Rat would never sell less than the best. But she'd made it clear she thought it was a stupid thing to risk your life for. The "*I told you so*"s were going to be painful.

I'd listen to them every day for a year, if that could just get us out of....

Kirito's eyes snapped open. That was it. That was the vengeance Sachi needed. That they all needed.

A criminal doesn't get to profit from his crime. Whether or not he dies doesn't matter. He has to lose.

Which left him back at, how did they break Kayaba's curse from the inside?

I need to talk to wizards. Starting with Argo. Kirito turned the pillow to a dry side, and cocooned himself in warm blankets. *Tomorrow.*

Sleep pounced, ravaged with nightmares.

Feathers. Feathers *everywhere*.

On her knees, Tournesol lowered her lightning blade, blinking at the carnage spread over what had been a fairly innocuous stretch of beach and grassy dunes a few miles outside Dhavin's Post.

Now salt-grass had been seared down by demonic fires, the beach was a slick and cutting mess of sand and shells fused by sheer psionic force, and the sea was stained red and ugly brown with shulassakar blood and demonic ichor. The air stank of sulfur, ozone, and the drifting tropical rainbow of feathers fluttering everywhere; bits of fluff sticking in charred grass, sifting over two hapless Moonswords, and gluing themselves to the bloody wounds of a great blue dragon.

Scarlet fluff tickled her nose. Tournesol sneezed, sparks crackling from her lips.

Rising out of crusted sand, Connlan made a valiant effort to dust himself off. "...Told you it would work."

Tournesol coughed, and spat out bits of sandy shell. There was something... a groan from over the dunes.... "Father!"

She scrambled over the dune crest, skidding down through half-scorched sea oats to run into a patch of scales that wasn't charred, slashed, or psionically shattered. "Father, hang on. We have healing potions, please...."

Connlan was right behind her, a pale hawthorn wand in hand. He spoke a shadowy whisper of a word-

Cool blue magic swept over the worst of the burns, laced with just a touch of darkfire.

Tournesol dashed away tears, scrambling to Caerulus' bloodied head to tip potions between ivory fangs. *Darkfire fights psionics. It'll clean out the shulassakar's sonic blast, while the water-healing goes after the demon-burns. It'll be enough. It will.*

A long pink tongue stirred, and the dragon's throat shuddered as he swallowed. "...Ugh." Topaz eyes blinked, blearily focusing on her. "How are we alive?"

Tournesol sniffled, then put on the fiercely brave face she knew her father would want to see. "The prime retriever swallowed the Eye of Destruction. In a *bag of holding*."

"That is where I had it, yes," Caerulus said gruffly, lifting his bloodied head with a wince as gaping wounds began to heal. "The astral energies seemed to keep the damned thing quiet. They wouldn't have created a blast like that, unless...." The dragon blinked. "Impossible."

"No." Tournesol took a deep breath. "Connlan used shadow magic to seal a *portable hole* into Pureshriek's blade."

For the first time she could remember, her father was at an utter loss for words. He knew better than most how explosive that combination would be. If, and only if, the blade had deliberately severed the bag. “But... how?”

“Never stare into a campfire. It ruins your night vision.” The medusa rounded Caerulus’ shoulder, tipping his wand of healing up to cool before its next use. “And it makes so many shadows.”

Caerulus might be a scholar, but books hadn’t dulled a dragon’s hunting instincts. “The night after Verhamlet.”

“I can’t purify their disease.” Connlan was an excellent mimic, down to the lisping hiss of Pureshriek’s snakelike tongue. *“It would weaken the anchor-spell that binds the retrievers to this plane. The Eye must not fall into demonic hands, no matter the cost.”*

Like setting suns, topaz eyes narrowed at them both. “Ordinarily I’d agree. That was why I was trying to find a safe way to destroy the damned thing. Before that *idiot* shulassakar slithered through the wards on my library and made off with it, taking it into the open where the damned retrievers could sense it again-!” Sparks crackled between ivory fangs. “Damn him. If I were the spiteful sort, I’d see him resurrected just so I could kill him *again*. What don’t I know about Verhamlet?”

Tournesol swallowed, wrapping leathery wings around herself. “Connlan... wanted to go in anyway.”

“Diseases that kill orcs and half-orcs don’t always affect youkai.” Dark eyes were shadowed. “If they had even an adept in the hamlet, some herbs might have bought them enough time to live.”

“At the risk of your own life.” Caerulus snarled. “Which would have risked Pureshriek’s *mission*. Of course.” Claws tore at soot-stained sand. “How did he stop you?”

Tournesol touched the necklace over her heart. “We found out how Pureshriek got through your wards. He had... he had Azul’s bloodstone.” It hurt. Her brother had been a thief and a spy and sometimes a horrible person. But to know a paladin had cut him down in Zarash’ak’s wet streets just because he was Caerulus’ son, to get the one key that would open a dragon’s lair.... *Why? Gods, why?*

A hissing exhalation, without a hint of sparks. “I see,” the dragon growled. “And if the retrievers stopped long enough to spread a plague, there would have been plenty of taint about. He threatened to drop it?”

Tournesol shivered, nodding. Bloodstones were a gift, but also a terrible vulnerability. They were connected to their kin until they shattered. What happened to one, could affect the whole clan.

And her father was many things, but he wasn’t a *good* dragon. A paladin would kill him. Wouldn’t even hesitate.

“I burned the tainted areas,” Connlan said quietly. “But by then....” Fists clenched, feathered snakes hissing in his hair as he looked away. “We’re youkai, not monsters! He didn’t have to threaten anyone. He could have just asked!”

“Ah. But that would mean giving a soul a chance to turn away from the Flame’s will.” Caerulus snarled. “I’ve seen corrupt priests of the Flame before, but humans never seem to go quite as crazy as the damned coatl-bloods.” He ruffled his wings. “So you thought if he threatened to kill me once, he’d go back on his word with the Eye, eh?”

“He said it had to be destroyed *whatever the cost*.” Connlan shrugged. “I thought he’d appreciate keeping his word.”

“Remind me never to stand between you and innocent bystanders.” With an effort, the blue dragon shook out healing wings. “Your assistance was welcome to us both, Moonsword Connlan. Now let’s get the hells out of here before something *else* goes wrong....”

Asuna sat up in her guest bed, trying to place exactly what was wrong.

I can’t feel my heart beating.

Tournesol’s heart had been racing. In the dream.

Asuna blinked, and scrubbed her eyes, even after a year of waking up without sleep-sand. The bloodstone dreams weren’t as startling as they’d been a few months ago, when a still-shaky Lightning Flash had descended on Caerulus with a handful of memories of blood and fire and poison, demanding to know *what the heck was that?*

“The stones keep memories as well as blood,” the gruff wizard had stated. *“We have no Moonswords to train you. All I can do is grant you the right to carry Tournesol’s stone; her last link to the living world. And hope the shards of her spirit teach you what you need to survive.”*

He’d never mentioned that spirit was his daughter.

He didn’t tell me he was really a dragon, either. Asuna got up and washed her face, moving quietly so she wouldn’t disturb any of Fuurinkazan in their rooms down the hall. The guest bedroom was nice, but what she wanted right now was breakfast and a hot drink, so she could wake all the way up.

Opening the door, she took a breath, and realized someone had beaten her to it. *Is that matcha cocoa?*

The kitchen was quiet, outside of the teapot steaming on a cooler corner of the woodstove, and a few muttered swears from a Black Swordsman trying to get wild boar bacon to cook without charring.

“You still haven’t leveled your Cooking.” Smirking, Asuna moved in to rescue crispy bits, slice in more bacon, and deftly stir batter a few more times so Kirito’s attempt at journey-

cakes would come out a little less like chewy bricks.

“It’s easier to cook for one person on the trail.” Kirito materialized a half-dozen green-speckled eggs, and cracked them into another pan.

That was actually true. Cooking for yourself had a lower difficulty than trying to make a guild-sized batch of anything. Asuna had found that out the hard way trying to make mochi.

She eyed the fragments of shell before they lost durability and vanished. They looked oddly familiar. “Were those cockatrice eggs?”

That surprised a chuckle out of him. “Vincent says they’re one of the best things to happen to Aincrad,” Kirito admitted. “Raising chickens is a disaster. Too many things will eat them.” He stirred the cooking eggs, which seemed to be turning a proper yellow even if they acted heavier than scrambled eggs in the Otherworld. “Youkai can let cockatrices roam their farms, as long as they’ve got a fenced run to come back to every night. They can take care of themselves.”

Like a certain Black Swordsman. The kitchen was mostly lit by a glowstone lantern he’d set in place, but there were enough hints of dawn creeping through the window to pick out feathery glints in his hair. And shadows under his eyes. “Bad dreams?” Asuna said softly.

Black eyes dodged her gaze. “Everyone has them.”

His hand hadn’t quite strayed toward the feathers. But Tournesol had known another Moonsword ranger, and Asuna saw echoes of that same tight self-control cloaked in black. *He won’t talk about it. Not unless I ask first.* “Are you sorry you got those grafts?”

“...I don’t know.”

She turned back to the food to give him time to think. It was about time to slide the eggs to the far side of the stove to stay warm while she poured another set of journey-cakes onto the griddle. Some more of the cooked bacon went on top of the eggs; she’d figured out a while back that the taste engine was finely calibrated enough to distinguish foods coming in contact from ingredients mixed together and cooked, which added a whole other set of interesting options. “Grafts don’t have to be permanent,” Asuna said, trying to keep her voice calm. “You could have them removed.”

“...I could.”

She had to reach to sense his magic. It was wrapped up as tightly around him as that closed, quiet look on his face. But she was a clearer, too. “Do you think-” *I’ll* “-Fuurinkazan would be angry if you did?” And oh, she was trying not to be angry. But if Tournesol’s bloodstone had been something she could *try*, and then walk away from....

I’d still keep the change. You’d have to be an idiot to give up extra levels in Aincrad. But there isn’t a choice.

“Klein says we need to survive first. Then we’ll worry about what we are.” Kirito turned the bacon, and started peeling pumelos into grapefruit-sized flowers of pink segments on thick leaves of chartreuse peel. “I don’t think they’d be angry. More... disappointed.” He paused, wiping off a knife. “They want me in the pack.”

Ooof. She didn’t like to go more than a few days without checking up on Lisbeth, and she knew the blacksmith leveled up carefully. Asuna could only imagine what Klein and Fuurinkazan felt like, trying to hold the Black Swordsman in their family.

It’s like trying to tame an alley-cat. Sometimes he’ll let you pet him. Sometimes he just runs.

Which was a little ironic. Kirito might remind the Tournesol-dreams of Connlan, yet the outcast Vadalís had actually had an upbringing more like the Yuuki family. Rich. Educated. Expected to work hard, to behave, to fit in. Not a major heir, he didn’t have a dragonmark. But he would have known what his life was expected to be.

Then sorcery had blazed up in Connlan’s soul, and his own house had tried to kill him.

And that was just the start of it, Asuna winced. If Tae’s right - he ran, he saved a girl from a werewolf and got bitten, he had that town chasing him, he ran into more monsters, he managed to talk Vincent into giving an infected human a chance... and he kept a whole flock of cockatrices alive with him. Getting adopted must have been a relief.

She didn’t know what Kirito’s life had been like before Aincrad. But she had to wonder. Before the first boss fight, he’d taught her how a regular sword blow could be as effective as a Sword Skill. Safer, too; simple strikes didn’t have a cooldown time. Meaning you could use them faster. If you were swarmed by low-level mobs, that speed could save your life.

Kirito knows swords, Asuna thought. Real swords.

...Well, that was probably going too far. Still. Even if he just knew real kendo - most people *didn’t*. “Where did you learn to use a sword?”

Kirito almost dropped a pink segment. “The last time I checked, we were in *Sword Art Online*.”

“I know.” Asuna kept her voice steady, trying not to doubt herself. She could be wrong. So what? The way he’d answered - there had to be more to it than that. “But I’ve seen a lot of people fight since Illfang. I’ve watched people learn to use a sword for more than Sword Skills. I’ve learned. But even back on the first floor, you *knew*.”

Black eyes flicked at her, and away. “Kibaou told everyone what I was.”

She waved an impatient spatula, flipping the last cooked journey-cake out before she poured a third batch. “And you think I believe him? So you had two months’ more practice than the rest of us. That’s not enough! I know, because-”

Oh.

“I know, because Caerulus and Grainne made sure Tournesol was taught the sword from the time she could walk,” Asuna said quietly. “They knew she had sorcery. They knew she’d have to fight for her life. So they did everything they could to make sure she knew how to *win*.”

And it wasn’t enough.

Asuna put down the spatula, fingers almost trembling. “Someone taught you. Before you were ever in Aincrad.” Which almost certainly meant kendo was in Kirito’s family. Which meant- “*You’re a-!*”

“Don’t say it!”

Asuna cut herself off, sucking in a breath at that panic and pain. What was wrong with him? If his family was samurai - it wasn’t something to be ashamed of!

“Klein’s a better samurai than anyone.” Black eyes were hard. Hurting. “He came in on Opening Day, and he kept his guild together. They’re alive because he believed in them and he *led* them. That’s what a samurai should be.” He shook his head, slow and final. “I’m just a beater. Fuurinkazan doesn’t need that kind of trouble with the other clearers.”

“You’re not trouble!” *You idiot!*

Black eyes narrowed. “Check your guild messages and tell me that. Heathcliff doesn’t want his people wasting time on players who’ll never make the cut for the Knights.”

That stung. Mostly because it was true. She’d argued with the rest of the guild that clearers needed to spend time helping the mid-levels get stronger. With more monsters like Pollista popping up on cleared levels, Kayaba could effectively cut them off from new recruits if they didn’t. And they were only halfway through the game. If they couldn’t replace clearers lost to high-level monsters, they would all die.

She hadn’t mentioned the plan Lisbeth and Argo - and others - were working on. Heathcliff was focused on *beating* the game. What Kirito had called a Dungeon Bypass was not what her commander had in mind.

We need to make sure we have enough clearers, Asuna had argued instead. The KoB are good, but we can’t depend on clearing the game by ourselves.

Heathcliff had frowned at that, but didn’t argue. Still, he preferred not to deal with non-clearers. No one on his own level had ever come close to beating him in a duel. Why would any lesser players be any more interesting?

He’s never dueled Kirito.

The Black Swordsman almost never dueled. Heathcliff drew his sword to play to the crowd; Kirito didn’t pull so much as a throwing pike unless....

Unless he means to kill.

Asuna stood deliberately straight, and sniffed. “Well, I took a day off, so it doesn’t matter what my guild messages might say.”

Kirito took a step away from the stove. “You took a day off?”

“It’s Christmas,” Asuna said firmly. “I’m bringing Yui a present. What did you get her?”

“Um....”

Guys. “Well, you can’t show up looking like that.” She advanced on him, a speculative gleam in her eye. “What did you do to those poor feathers, take a comb to them? Stay still.”

Eyes wide, Kirito froze.

They’re soft.

Long and supple, like cockatrice nape feathers, with the same cloud-soft down near the skin. Asuna fluffed the down, and smoothed together rumpled vanes, using that delicate scratch of claws she knew the chicks liked.

Slowly, black eyes slid half-closed. Not leaning into her scritchng, not quite....

“Hey! Bacon!”

...She was going to *hurt* Klein. Later.

Their pursuers’ volley flew fast and furious. Kirito ducked behind the shelter of a snowy oak, feeling the cold spray of near-misses, and glanced down at his small companion. Yui’s eyes were wide and dancing as her snakes huddled in the shelter of her fur-trimmed blue hood, and she grinned at him with complete confidence. “We’re not going to let them get away with that, right?”

“Absolutely not,” Kirito said solemnly, accepting his own armament from her mittened hands. A little light and loose, but that was all the better. “We’re going to have to make a break for Asuna’s defenses. Get ready... now!”

He lunged out of cover, throw fast and accurate, taking one surprised weretiger in the chin.

Splat.

Klein blinked through a white dusting of snow, jaw dropping as a similarly snowy Issin and Kunimittz started cackling. “Oi! I didn’t start this-”

“Snowball fight!”

White chaos erupted.

Several volleys, one Asuna snow-fort, and at least two confused mutual ambushes later, Klein was making a triumphant lap of the fallen guild and bystanders, Yui bouncing on his

shoulders.

“Tigers like snow.” Kirito shook his head, as he and Asuna brushed snow off each other before they could get any more soaked. “Who knew?”

“Snow Springs?” Asuna lifted an amused brow at him. “We should have guessed.”

“Heh.” Kirito spread his arms as Klein skidded to a snowy halt by them, catching a giggling hatchling as she jumped off. “There you go.... We should get going.”

“Aww.” Klein and Yui both pouted, turning pleading looks on them.

Ack. Not the eyes. “We don’t want Aunt Stheno to worry,” Kirito said firmly. “Getting to her cave is a lot safer in the daylight.”

“He’s right,” Asuna nodded. “We should go. But it was really fun.” She smiled at Klein. “Maybe Fuurinkazan could send your aunt a message when they’re going to be in town.”

“Darn right.” Klein ruffled black hair; if a little cautiously, to keep from getting nipped by an irritated snake. “You’re a cool kid.”

The walk back to Stheno’s Cave was uneventful, outside of the odd skeleton or ice paraelemental mob, and soon they were handing over a sleepy hatchling and her presents to her adoptive aunt. “A wooden drakkensteed,” Stheno murmured, cradling Yui in her arms. “We can make one of these. Rock candy....” She gave Kirito a look askance.

He felt his cheeks flame as Asuna hid a giggle behind her hands. “Why do you think that was me?”

Stheno raised red brows. Started to answer... and changed her mind, shaking her head instead. “We’ll speak after I get this one to bed.” Yui mumbling against her shoulder, the medusa stepped around a frost-edged tree, out of sight.

Listening hard, Kirito caught a sound he hadn’t heard in over a year. *Logout.*

At least for Yui, SAO was still just a game.

“Are you okay?” Asuna held out an empty hand, eyes creased in worry. “I could walk back with you, if you need more company.”

Slowly, Kirito shook his head. “I’m just going to teleport back to Snow Springs.” They couldn’t teleport into Stheno’s Cave. But anyone on Stheno’s Friends list could use one particular niche in the wall to teleport out. “You should get a good night’s sleep, if you’re going back to the front lines tomorrow.”

Asuna nodded. “It was good to take some time away from the fighting.”

“It was.” Why was it so hard to talk all of a sudden? Just because... Asuna was here. With him. Smiling.

She stepped closer.

I... want....

Just a hug. Just someone near him, so the world wasn't all fangs and steel.

Wings swept open, wrapping blue feathers around him. She was so warm.

Asuna tucked her head against his, and breathed deep. "Be careful." Her head nudged his cheek, like a persistent cat. "I want to do this again sometime."

"...So do I."

Blue wings swept away, leaving him bereft.

Asuna stepped back, eyes wide. "I'll see you at the next patrol?"

"Or the next boss fight," Kirito nodded. "Take care." *Stay safe*, he wanted to wish her. Or even more dangerous, *stay with me*.

But safe wasn't an option. Not until they were free.

Stepping inside the alcove, Asuna vanished.

Kirito sighed, slumping as if his strings had been cut. He still hurt. He might always hurt. But he could breathe now. He'd keep moving. Sachi would want it that way.

He heard the swish of skirts a moment before she spoke. "We have a Winterfest in Aincrad, as well."

Kirito cast her a shy look. "I'm sorry, Lady Stheno. Tae told us some stories about Connlan." He shook his head, conscious of the down-light weight of feathers. "I didn't mean to bring back bad memories."

"I don't have bad memories of Connlan." The seer's face might have been graven from stone. "I have grieved his death for years. I wish that he had not died. That the Karnnathi had never cast their curse. That I and Yui and Euryale were not the few survivors of a once-proud youkai race. But he died to keep death from spreading to all the waters of Aincrad, and I will not let my grief take me from the land he loved." Clawed fingers plucked at a silken sleeve, as if chasing invisible lint. "I've been exploring some of the admin capabilities. Particularly those involved in generating new quests."

Kirito blinked, thinking that over. "You want someone to test one of your quests?"

The medusa inclined her head. "It seems that, so long as it is for a *quest*, a youkai lord may use any of their magic to affect a player. Even some of the most dangerous powers. Such as, for example, a seer's power to let a questioner's spirit walk the light of vision to seek the truth. Even on other planes."

If he could have felt his heart, Kirito knew it would have skipped a beat. "Lady Stheno...."

“There is nothing in the rules,” Stheno said deliberately, “that say a quest must be completed in *Aincrad*.”

Chapter End Notes

Revenant is specific in D&D, and does not mean “zombie”. It means “revived corpse just as fast and intelligent as a person, or more so.”

FTW - For The Win. (No other abbreviations need apply.)

AOE - Area of Effect.

Ruffled Feathers

Chapter Summary

Meanwhile, back on Earth....

Then again, is Alfheim Earth?

AKA quests have Consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

One down. No, two, Recon knifed one-

Lyfa hissed as the third arrowhawk's beak slashed her ribs. The protective shield Recon had cast over them both grounded its lightning before it could stun her, but it still *hurt*.

You didn't have to feel pain in ALO. You could always turn it down.

She never did. Kazuto was risking his life every day, pressing ahead levels to try and clear SAO for everyone. The least she could do was feel a shadow of what he felt.

Though when a lot of mobs were piling on you, the flinch from pain could get awkward....

"Taro wynt!" she gritted out, thrusting out her free hand in a blast of wind magic that sent the last arrowhawk tumbling away from her. Its four wings beat the air, tail coiling with sparks for the electrical strike-

Her volley of magic missiles and Recon's hit it at the same time, obliterating the last of its hit points in a rainbow burst of pixels.

Suddenly tired, she headed for the surface of the nearest floating island. Her cloak of flying settled around her shoulders like translucent green wings as her boots touched frosted grass. "...Need a break."

Feathered scarf fluttering, Recon thumped to the ground a few yards away, a blue glow flashing from the half-elf mage's ring of air walking as it shut down. "Are you okay? That looked like a pretty bad hit."

Lyfa grimaced, drinking a potion. Just because she wanted it to feel real, didn't mean she was going to wander through Alfheim wounded. That would be stupid. Even if Recon was a little annoying sometimes, he was a good player. He deserved a party member who held up her end

of the fight. “I’m all right. I’m just... sorry.” She hung her head. “I know I promised. But I think - maybe I shouldn’t have logged on tonight.”

Recon straightened, looking oddly serious. “You went to see him with your family.”

And that was one of the annoying things about Recon. Nagata Shinichi might have just joined her school class last year, but he’d watched her move. He’d figured out who Lyfa was almost as fast as she’d figured out Recon, green hair and all. And he’d asked her to party with him ever since. Annoying.

But maybe sometimes it was worth it. There wasn’t anyone else she knew here. She didn’t have to be brave all the time.

Lyfa sniffled, and knuckled away tears. “It’s Christmas. Mom thought... I don’t know. He’s just so *still*. The Taskforce says they’re clearing levels, but it’s been over a year. They’ve still got so far to go. It’s impossible!”

“We’re over halfway there, Sugu. It’s *not* impossible.”

Lyfa froze. That voice. She knew that voice. But it couldn’t be.

Recon went dead white, almost hiding behind her before he steadied shaking knees and brandished a dagger. “Are you a- a-”

“I’m not dead. I’m not a ghost.” The translucent swordsman in black gave Recon a wry look, before turning an uncertain smile toward her. “I guess I am kind of ethereal right now. Lady Stheno said that might happen. SAO’s got a hard grasp on our spirits. It’s taking a high-level spell to get me this far. And I don’t have a lot of time.” Black eyes glanced over their wintry surroundings in an experienced player’s scan for danger, as he stepped past and through a leafless lilac bush. “Where are we? You can see floating islands in Aincrad, but no one’s been able to reach one.”

“Where- how-” A sudden fury boiled up in her, and Lyfa went for her sword. “You can’t be my brother! He wouldn’t even know what I look like here!”

“What people look like can change.” His gaze was bleak, as something seemed to glimmer in black hair. “The scrying spell tracked your spirit, not your body. Sugu, I know it’s you. You took over kendo lessons so I wouldn’t have to go. You had me virus-hunting through your computer when you were eleven because you didn’t want to tell Mom what you’d seen on that website, and you promised you’d never ever search on ‘exotic’ again. You like to get the last slurp out of a juice-box-”

Recon stifled a snicker. Waved empty hands at her murderous look. “Sorry! I’m sorry. It’s just, he knows you.” The mage-thief looked suddenly fierce. “But Kazuto’s in Sword Art Online, and the government’s tried to isolate those computers from any other systems. How can you be in Alfheim Online?”

“Magic,” her brother said simply. “Sugu, take screen captures. I don’t know if I’ll show up, but it’s worth a try.”

Recon was already pulling down a menu. Lyfa numbly followed suit, still not sure this was real. Kazuto was in a hospital bed. In Sword Art Online. He couldn't be here.

"Get out a recording crystal, if you have one," the black-clad swordsman went on. "Lady Stheno thought we'd have an hour, but there's so much to tell you and I know it sounds crazy...."

Lyfa listened, mind reeling. None of this made sense.

Aincrad is real. Kayaba created it for the youkai lords, to - to recruit new youkai for a war against Galifar. People are changing, and if they can't get out before the hundredth floor it could be forever....

But her brother had a plan. Well, kind of a plan.

Her brother thought he had a plan. That was the scariest thing she'd heard since SAO's Opening Day.

"What we need is some way to set up communication from the inside," Kazuto summed up. "This quest worked. If we can pull it off again, then... maybe there's a way for us to talk to ALO, at least." He stopped talking, just looking at her. "I miss you."

There had to be something stuck in her throat. All she could do was nod.

"Mom and Dad-"

"We visited you. In the hospital," Lyfa got out. "They're - the doctors are taking care of people, you're okay...."

"Unless we die."

She didn't know what to say to that. If someone took the NerveGear off, people died. If they didn't... *Please let him be one of the lucky ones. Please!*

Her brother took an intangible breath. "Well. If they keep the hackers out of the system, we'll manage. I just wish-" His head jerked up, a hint of violet fire shimmering around the edges of his form. "Someone's coming."

Lyfa frowned. She had her brother here, even if just for a little while. Why did she have to think about the rest of the world? "I don't hear anything-"

Wing-beats. Too familiar. And much more than one flyer.

"Aosagibi," Recon groaned, as the first of the red-feathered youkai soared into view. Some had streaks of white and yellow, and one had feathers that were almost pure gas-flame blue, but they were mostly phoenix-red. "This is avariel territory. They shouldn't be here!"

"Well, they are," Lyfa grumbled, reaching for her sword. Maybe they'd just fly on by. Maybe.

Then again, when was the last time she'd seen one of the phoenix-winged flamethrowers *not* spoiling for a fight?

"I don't understand." Her brother's voice was taut with worry. "They're other players, right? Are they bandits?"

"Bandits?" Lyfa echoed, confused. "They're aosagibi." Which probably wasn't fair to all of them, there had to be some people who liked playing the winged fire-elves just for fun, but better safe than sorry.

"Oh." Recon winced. "SAO was... *is* PvE." He gulped as the flock of fire-users swept into attack formation. Two they could handle. Five? Not so much. "ALO is PvP."

"I see." Her brother's expression was colder than she'd ever seen it. "Do you think they out-level you?"

"Um... ALO doesn't use levels," Recon confessed, one hand moving into position to cast a mystic shield the moment they needed it. "Lyfa, go. You can out-fly them-"

"I'm not leaving you to them!" Lyfa said hotly.

"Then both of you should log out." A wry smile touched her brother's face. "Ethereal, remember? I'll be fine."

"ALO doesn't log out like SAO, either," Recon said under his breath as the winged circle tightened. "We're in the field. Log out, and we leave our avatars helpless for ten minutes. It's a..." his voice faltered at Kazuto's stare, "game feature."

"It doesn't matter." Lyfa drew her sword. No point trying iaido against opponents already in the air. "I'm not leaving."

"Touching." The lead aosagibi swooped almost low enough to land; red leather armor polished to a glossy sheen, eyes narrowed under feathery red brows as he scanned Kazuto's translucent form. "Well, that's new. Tell us what you know about this encounter, and turn over your treasure, and we'll let you leave in one piece."

One command word, and she'd be flying. "Go to-"

Kazuto stepped in front of her.

What is he thinking-!

"We're not interested in a fight," he said, as she tried not to sputter. "These are friends I haven't seen in a long time. Why don't you come back later, if you want a fair fight?"

The leader smirked as his followers snickered. "And I suppose right now it'd be an unfair fight?"

"More than you can possibly imagine."

The snickers stopped.

Lyfa tensed. This was going to be *bad*.

Her brother glanced over the unhappy aosagibi, and sighed. “A moment, if you would.” Fingers limned in violet flames, he reached up to a raven-shimmering feather-

Tore it loose, with a wince and a trickle of blood.

Lyfa paled, and saw a few of their opponents swallow hard. You didn’t see blood in ALO. Not unless an NPC was bleeding in an event; and those were never, ever encounters a low-skilled player could hope to survive.

One step, and her brother pressed the warm feather into her hand, violet and blue fires still dancing along its fringes. “There. There’s your proof. I was here. This was *real*. Finish my quest. Take it home.” Black eyes fixed on Lyfa’s green. “I’ll protect you and your friend. I promise.”

Her brother never made promises he didn’t keep. Except for one.

“I’ll only be playing for a few hours....”

She glanced at Recon. Who gave her a nervous smile, and a nod; *I’ll be okay*.

If she thought about this, she’d lose her nerve. Lyfa yanked open a menu, and logged out.

Starburst of colors, fading to a translucent gray shade over her eyes. Different scents. Different sounds.

Home.

Suguha lifted off the AmuSphere, shaken. *That was Kazuto. I’ve got to tell Mom. But how?*

Something soft brushed her fingers. Startled, she glanced down at her right hand.

Tip still bloody, a green-black feather curled in her palm.

“Mom!”

Kirito caught Suguha’s empty avatar, easing the blonde swordswoman to the ground. It took effort, and darkfire. But she only fell through him a little bit before Recon stepped in, helping him rest Lyfa’s limp form on frosted grass.

The lore is right. Shadow does touch all the planes. Even another virtual reality.

A virtual reality that might have more ties to Aincrad than anyone knew. Sugu might have missed it, but he’d seen Recon flinch at Stheno’s name.

No beta got above the eighth floor. Her cave was on the twelfth. Even a beta who missed Opening Day wouldn't know about it.

Kirito narrowed his eyes at the green-haired half-elf. "We're going to talk, after this."

Recon gulped, throat bobbing against his feathered scarf.

"I'm curious." There was no humor in the aosagibi leader's voice, now. "What makes you think you'll still be here to talk, after this?"

"...You think I'm an NPC." Kirito almost smiled. Looked over the other four flyers, who were starting to look a little wary. "Alfheim Online. A game, right? There's no way you could actually die."

"Oh boy," Recon breathed.

"Don't talk nonsense," the leader snorted. "Everyone knows the AmuSpheres are safe-"

Kirito moved.

No Sword Skills. No magic. Just a year of lethal experience, and a blaze of darkfire to make an intangible blade *real*.

Throat.

Wrist.

Gut.

Wing.

Groin.

Behind him Kirito heard a *whump* of wind-magic batting away a fireball, and the shattering of three avatars. He advanced on the one-winged blue-and-white feathered aosagibi now trying to scramble up out of the dirt, confident that anyone who played with his sister could handle a one-handed spellcaster. "They call me the Black Swordsman."

"What - what *are* you," the frightened player babbled, "never seen anything move so fast-!"

"The player you threatened is my sister."

"Your-? Come on, man! You know how ALO is played-"

"I haven't seen her in a year. I may *never* see her again." Darkfire pulsed in time with the anger boiling in his blood, and breath hissed between his teeth. "*You tried to kill the wrong player on the wrong day-*"

"Please!"

Sword low and ready, Kirito froze.

“Forgive me.” The aosagibi knelt, blue-streaked red hair bowing low. “I wouldn’t want to see my sister hurt, either. Even if... it’s just a game....”

Kirito took one breath. Another.

I can’t.

“Get out of here,” Kirito said wearily. Glanced over his shoulder, where Recon had apparently tied up his dazed opponent in an enchanted rope. “Both of you. Just go.” He shook his head, aching inside. “I’ve seen enough people die.”

Smart enough not to question their good luck, the pair waited just long enough for Recon to whistle his rope back off. Winged carrying half-winged, they leapt off the island.

“Whew.” Recon slumped in relief, tucking his rope back into inventory. “That ought to give them something to think about. Though maybe Lyfa won’t mind hunting deeper in avariel territory for a while- eep!”

He’d watched Vincent loom at people, Kirito thought, bemused. It was oddly interesting to try it himself. “How do you know Lady Stheno?”

Moss-green eyes widened. “W-well, there were rumors-”

“My sister trusts you.” And that hurt, a mix of fear and anger that made him dizzy. “She’s my sister. Do you think I’d let her get sucked into Aincrad? Into Beniryuu’s reach?” Aha. Another flinch. And no one outside SAO should know that name. “I don’t know what I could do to you - not here, not now - but I’m willing to find out.” Under his half-gloves, he knew his knuckles were white. “And if my first try doesn’t take you down, I’m sure Lady Stheno would be willing to send me for another.”

“You know her?” Recon’s eyes got even wider. “And... you talk to her, and she hasn’t....” He made an abortive gesture toward his eyes.

Oh, now Kirito really wanted to kill something. “You’re from Aincrad.”

“I never said that!” Recon yelped, skipping backwards.

“Fine,” Kirito bit out. “Don’t say it. Why are you partying with my *sister*?”

“Because she takes too many chances!”

Whatever he thought he’d expected, that hadn’t been it. “Sugu?” Kirito said incredulously. “She doesn’t take chances....”

She stood up to Grandfather to protect me. She might.

“She thinks I’m a dope, sometimes.” Recon shuffled his feet. “But that’s not all bad. She looks for easier fights if I’m with her. She slows down and thinks. And when she does fight,” his gaze softened, as if watching a treasured memory, “she just flows. Like gliding over water.”

Kirito blinked, the white-feathered scarf finally making sense. If somewhat crazy sense.
“You’re a swanmay.”

Recon’s jaw dropped. “H-how - but-!”

“I know one in the Siren Sisters. She calls herself Gwynn.” Kirito gave him a second look.
“Tae Mistfeather says there are so few male swanmay left, the Galifar nations think they’re only women. Why are you visiting another world when there are females beating down your door in Aincrad?”

“Maybe I don’t want anybody beating down my door!” Recon flushed beet-red; standing straighter, hand near his dagger. “Maybe I don’t want someone who can’t see past the feathers! They don’t want *me*, just....”

“A swanmay,” Kirito finished for him. “Or at least a bird lycan.” He’d seen that, too. Gwynn had not taken *I’m married, go away and stop stalking me* well. Agil had had to get help to toss her out of his shop. Specifically, him.

Oh gods. Now I have feathers. Deep breaths, as long as you can’t shapeshift you should be safe....

Kirito shuddered, deliberately turning his mind back to the situation at hand. “You like my sister.” He had to do something about that. As soon as he figured out what. “If you think I’d let Beniryuu’s curse anywhere near her-!”

Recon gulped. “What if she wanted to come?”

Terrifying thought. “She could die in Aincrad!”

“She could die on the street hit by a fish truck tomorrow!” Recon shot back, embarrassment fading out of his face. “She could slip under a train! She could - she could do what some other SAO relatives have done, and think she just couldn’t take the shame anymore, and....”
The swanmay’s face crumpled. He rubbed at an eye with the heel of his hand, swiping away a tear. “You’re right. Okay? You’re right. She thinks I’m just a transfer student. I’m lying every time I go to class with her. And... I want her to come to Aincrad. She’s smart. She’s fast. She takes care of people.” He looked up. “But I want her to be okay. Even if she stays in Japan. Even if she hates me.”

He cares about her. He’s there for her. Kirito winced. *And I’m not.* “ALO can take people into Aincrad? How? You said it’s not level-based.”

“It’s not,” Recon said seriously. “I’m not an archmage. I don’t know how it works. But about a year, maybe two years from now, there’s supposed to be a planar conjunction. A weak spot in the walls between the worlds, where magic can open a gateway. Anyone who’s made an avatar in ALO... they’ll be able to walk through it. If they want to.”

“Anyone?” Kirito said in disbelief, as Lyfa’s avatar finally went translucent, and faded. *Don’t panic. She didn’t shatter. Don’t panic.* “How many people are in ALO?”

“Last I heard?” The swanmay said cautiously. “Um. About eight or nine hundred....”

Oh good, not too many more - wait a minute. If it's an online game-

“...thousand?” Recon finished weakly.

It was like dropping a stone into a well and waiting for the splash. Only the splash never came.

I'll sit down and shake. Later. He felt Stheno's magic tensing, like a taut spring at the end of its stretch. “Tell Suguha not to give up. Tell her I'm going to find a way back-”

Light seized him, blazing the world away.

“Mrs. Kirigaya, I promise we'd have called you if there were any change-”

Warm feather in hand, Suguha ducked past the nurse stalling her mother, and dashed into Kazuto's room.

Blood.

Just a thin line, trickling down her brother's pale cheek from under the Nervegear. But she could almost smell it.

“Miss, I'll have to ask you to get back- *assist on room 1515!*”

“Great. More people who can't do anything,” Suguha muttered, trying not to cry as she dabbed at blood with a wipe from a box near the bed.

Her mother was right behind her, white-lipped. “You said you saw him bleeding.”

“He wanted to prove it was real. He wanted me to *believe*.” Down seemed to twitch against Suguha's hand; she opened her hand to look at the green-black feather, as stark against her brother's skin as blood. “Like I could ever *not* believe you, big brother-”

Down and vanes twitched. Curled away from her fingers, bloody quill questing over her skin like the head of a snake. Purple-black sparked along its length, raising answering sparks of blue and violet from the trail of blood.

Falcon-swift, the feather swooped off her hand, and dove under the helmet.

One hand fumbling blindly alongside the bed, Suguha tried to sit down.

Midori caught her before she tumbled, tugging her over to the visitor's chair to collapse. “Have you seen... that... happen in ALO?”

“I'm not sure,” Suguha started. She'd seen some monsters regenerate a little like that, once or twice. But her brother wasn't a hydra or a troll-

Swarming nurses shoved them both out of the room.

Suguha wanted to cry. Or scream. Or grab a bokken and just-

A hand closed on her shoulder. “Getting mad at them won’t help, Kirigaya. You know that.”

“Nagata.” She blinked at him; glasses, shy brown eyes, and all. With all the faces ALO could generate, why did Recon’s look so much like Shinichi’s? “He was with you.”

“He disappeared a minute after your avatar did,” Nagata told her. “I just got to an inn to log out, and - never mind. He said don’t give up. That he’ll find a way back.” He looked up, and gulped. “Mrs. Kirigaya. It’s nice to meet you with good news. Well, kind of good news....”

“You saw my son in Alfheim Online.” Midori gave him a considering look, as the noise in Kazuto’s room died down to confused murmurs. “Tell me everything.”

“Back with the living?”

“Ugh,” Kirito managed, trying to sort out the past few minutes. Sugu, Recon, a blaze of sun that was Stheno’s sorcery coming full circle to fetch his spirit back to SAO-

Hard ground under him. The sound of water trickling through ice. A subtle rustle of silk skirts. Stheno’s garden.

Carefully, Kirito levered himself up to sitting, waiting there while the world spun around him. “I think Klein would call that spell *not fun*.”

“But it worked.” Stheno crouched to look him over, frowning.

Kirito blinked, breathing a sigh of relief as the world stabilized. “And you’re sure Beniryuu didn’t spy on us?”

Snakes curled as she nodded. “We should have a little longer unwatched.”

“Good,” Kirito breathed. “We have a plan, Lady Stheno. I don’t want the youkai lords to know about it, we’re having to work on it in pieces, but - if Beniryuu died, would you be able to send the players safely home? All of them?”

“The council demanded that the eldritch machine have that safety, yes.” Stheno twitched back, startled. “Beniryuu found that amusing, there’s not much that can kill an ancient red... what do you mean, if he dies? There would be no one left to send home, you would have to be in Aincrad to kill him-”

“No,” Kirito cut her off, teeth bared. “I studied Kayaba. I know how he thinks. Even if Beniryuu made that man as a persona, an *act* - this is his greatest creation. His magic, set loose to bend thousands of creatures he hates to his will. He’s not just watching. *He’s here*.”

The medusa swallowed hard. “An ancient red dragon.” She shivered. “Even as a whole raid, you couldn’t face him.”

“Yes we can.” Kirito breathed out, trying not to shudder. Risky. So risky. Everything hinged on finding one dragon in the swarm of players; on what they could predict a proud, brilliant creature would do if his illusions were stripped away. Because they weren’t strong enough, not yet; and all their magic combined would only give them one chance. “We have a plan.”

Stheno studied him a long moment, then sighed. “You’re bleeding.”

Kirito touched his face, fingers coming away a sticky red.

“It will heal.” Stheno seemed to be measuring every word. “If you let it.”

Or he could tear out the rest of the feathers and be done with it. He’d lose some XP from removing the grafts, but....

“I gave her that feather to prove it was real,” Kirito said quietly. “To prove it was me. I guess... they are mine, now.”

But what happens when SAO’s over?

“Chimera.” Midori Kirigaya folded her hands on the medical paperwork in front of her, regarding the hapless young doctor who’d obviously drawn the short straw. “I take it you’re not referring to a fire-breathing monster with a snake for a tail.”

“Ah, no,” Dr. Oshiro admitted, winter sunlight glinting off a retreating hairline. “It’s a technical term for an individual composed of two distinct genetic sources... ahem. Right now, the important factor is that the foreign cells don’t extend beyond the cutaneous layer. Cosmetic surgery should be able to remove them... as soon as circumstances permit.”

As soon as a madman’s deathtrap is off his head, you mean. Midori kept her gaze on him, polite but unsmiling.

“In the meantime, your son’s immune system appears to consider them harmless,” Oshiro said briskly. “I know it’s alarming, and we will be monitoring the situation, but we have no reason to believe he’ll have anything wrong with him besides a few scars-”

Assuming a madman’s game doesn’t kill him. “Thank you for your concern, Doctor,” Midori cut him off, suddenly frustrated enough to want to pick up her father’s bad habits with idiots. Much of which involved a bokken. “I believe I need some time.” She gathered the pages in front of her, as if perfectly aligned sheets of medicalesse were the only goal in the world. “Has anything like this happened to other players?”

“...That would be a matter of doctor-patient confidentiality, Mrs. Kirigaya.”

Not a *no*. And from the way his brow was just a little shinier, he was sweating.

So it's not just my son. Something's happening to the people in Kayaba's NerveGear.

She wasn't going to go so far as to believe it was magic. There had to be a reasonable, logical explanation that didn't involve people in another world waving their hands and sprinkling in eye of newt-

In another world.

Alternate universes *could* exist, theoretically. Dimensions where history went differently, where humans never evolved, where the universe itself was inimical to life. It wasn't that much of a stretch to say one universe might contact another.

In another world. I could believe in another world, if there were proof.

But maybe we have proof. "What kind of feathers are they?"

Oshiro started. "Please, Mrs. Kirigaya. The aberrant cutaneous growths-"

"You say they're from a different genetic source," Midori said reasonably. At least she thought she was being reasonable. She was talking, not screaming at him like a yuki-onna that she'd left Kazuto, she'd *left him* in the hospital's care, and they'd let this happen-! "What species of bird are they from?"

"I hardly see how that's relevant." The doctor reached into his coat pocket for a pen, completely taken aback. "We're going to *remove* them. As soon as it's safe to do so."

Midori smiled, as sweetly as she could. "Then you won't mind if I find out just what you're removing."

Genetics research used a *lot* of computing power. Someone, somewhere, owed her a favor.

"So magic is real."

Half a step ahead of her on the sidewalk, Nagata's shoulders slumped. If they'd been in ALO instead of a city street, Suguha knew she would have seen Recon's pointed ears droop. "Are you going to follow me all the way home?"

"Yes!" Suguha skipped a step to match him stride for stride, dark eyes glaring. "You say magic's real. You say there really *is* a Lady Stheno, she's not just an NPC, my brother's telling the truth about *everything* and he's turning into a youkai? You wiggled out of details last night, but you *know* my mom's going to come looking for you for more answers after she can't get good ones from the doctors. And you think I'm going to let you out of my sight?"

Glasses flinched away from her gaze, as her classmate reddened. "That... c-could get awkward...."

Suguha felt a hot blush rush over her face, and swallowed hard. "Well - I mean it!" *Oh boy, this is such a bad idea... but it's for oniichan, and I said I would, so there!* "So we're going to

go get whatever you need from your parents' house to show my family, and I'm going to be right there, so you might as well let me help you carry it--"

"They're... not my parents."

Eep. "You're adopted?" Suguha blurted out. Like oniichan. But Kazuto never looks so sad.

"Not really." He shrugged, brown hair falling into his glasses to hide his eyes. "Back where I come from, you're an adult when you're thirteen. I've been taking care of myself for years." Another shrug. "We knew before we came here that I couldn't look like I was on my own. So the Nagatas offered to show up as my 'parents'." His fingers sketched the air quotes; he blinked at them, and chuckled, just a little rueful. "Better be careful doing that when I go back. Somebody will think I'm spellcasting, and that could just get *messy*."

Go back. The Nagatas aren't his family. Adult at thirteen, and he thinks Kazuto's turning into a youkai, and it doesn't scare him....

It didn't make sense. But there was a way it *could* make sense. If-

If everything I think I know about Recon is wrong. She almost couldn't get the words out. "You're a youkai?"

He caught a toe in a crack in the sidewalk, arms flailing for balance-

Suguha shoved him back upright, confidence in tatters. "I - I'm sorry, that was silly...."

"You really are like your brother." Her classmate fumbled his glasses back on. "That's scary."

"No, I'm not, really...." Suguha trailed off, as the implications sank in. *No way.* "My brother thinks you're a youkai?"

He winced as her shout echoed off apartment buildings. "Um. Kirigaya...."

Ooo, she was red already, it didn't matter how many other pedestrians were giving them furtive looks. "You-! Come on." Suguha gripped his jacket; she knew he'd keep up one way or another. "We're going to get your stuff. And your AmuSphere!"

"My what? But-!"

"You're staying with me until we get some answers," Suguha huffed, trying to ignore how her face felt hot as a boiled egg. "And I need to *beat the hell* out of something!"

We've got to make an Internet in Aincrad.

Bouncing on his inn bed, Recon sorted through the half-dozen webpages floating in front of him in scholarly bliss, still amazed at the information available at the touch of a screen. On Khorvaire he'd have to have a wizard's library to find even half of what a good search engine could turn up in a few seconds. Most people couldn't get a peek inside someplace like the

Library of Korranberg without a long trip by sea or lightning rail and the gold to spend for it... and a really good concealing illusion, if they were youkai. You could buy your own books, if you saved up, but a collection of the *Korranberg Chronicle* and other broadsheets was the only library most commoners could afford to keep.

That's got to change. We've got to change it.

Fighting was okay. It wasn't fun - well, unless it was like that practice bout he'd just had with Lyfa, where the weapons weren't *really* real - but if you were a youkai in Aincrad you learned to fight, one way or another. Galifar soldiers didn't stop to ask if you knew how to use a weapon. So you learned magic if you could, and you learned to fight with whatever weapon you could use without killing yourself. He didn't have the strength for swordwork, but he could make daggers dance. So that's what his flock had trained him in.

The idea that people could live in a world where they could go their whole lives without even *thinking* about killing someone....

I wish I could stay.

...Well, yes and no. Earth had its own problems. If he walked down the street with his real face, people would run screaming. Magic was a lot less strong, most humans had no clue how to do it, and if Earth medicine looked like magic to him there were hordes of sick humans who'd give anything for one *cure disease*. Youkai or humanoid, people were people; there were wars and crime and murder.

And curses. Recon let his gaze slide over toward the desk chair, where Lyfa was hunting through ALO forums and messages with a concentration fierce as a bared blade. Apparently at least two of the aosagibi had talked, and rumors were spreading about the deadly *Black Swordsman* like wildfire-

Green eyes narrowed. "Look at this."

If that's who I think it was, one message ran, it can't be but if the screencaps aren't lying - then Aidan's group got off lucky.

If anyone sees him again, just - be kind. He's hard to aggro. He doesn't start fights.

If you know his name, contact me.

-Sachi.

"I don't get it." Lyfa pointed at the flame icon by Sachi's screen name, marking her as a declared member of the Aosagibi faction. "She's one of the fire races. But she broadcast this to all five factions, *and* the unaffiliated. Why?"

Avariel, Aosagibi, Ayakashi, Tanuki, and Naga, Recon chanted silently. Back in Aincrad, youkai didn't split themselves up by the four Elements, and Secrets. But it made ALO interesting.

Though the real draw was almost as enticing for him as it was for everyone from Earth. You could *fly*.

You can fly anywhere in Alfheim. No one thinks it's strange. No one even thinks it's different.

At least anywhere that wasn't a human city. Which was awesome enough. Recon had spent more dreary days than he wanted to remember pretending to be an ordinary Brelish citizen while carrying out missions in Queen Euryale's service. Take to the air anywhere in Breland, even in the middle of a haunted forest, and, well - there went any chance of a *quiet* mission.

But that was in Khorvaire. Here in Alfheim, Lyfa was giving him a look she probably meant to be exasperated. But the way she bit her lip and flicked fingers at gold hair gave it all away. "Why would a fire-aligned send this out to everyone?"

Good question. He hoped he'd figured out a good answer. "The government's keeping the names of any SAO survivors secret. If she really does know your brother, how else can she find his friends?"

Lyfa thought that over, and nodded. Scowled at the message again. "Why'd she have to be in fire?"

Recon started closing browser windows; this was more important than one more poke at the forums. "You want to talk to her."

"Getting into Aosagibi territory is risky." She wove her fingers together, looking down. "And what would I say? He's my brother, but I can't prove it because he never tells me his screen names, but talk to me anyway?"

"We'll think of something," Recon started.

Almost as one, their messages chimed.

"You were in SAO?"

Lyfa tried not to stare at the tengu sorcerer Lady Sakuya had brought to meet them in wizardess Matteo's echoing library. Ancient tomes and freshly-bound texts battled for space on yards of tigeroak shelves. Everbright globes hung from fine golden chains, throwing light anywhere the skylights left shadows. On any partly-empty shelf a book hadn't crept into, there were poised glass spiders, leaping flying fish, and a small horde of other preserved mini-monsters.

The tengu nodded, raven-black feathers glinting in his dark brown hair. "I wasn't one of the clearers. Not even one of the stronger mid-levels," Lightfall admitted. "I only knew about the Black Swordsman by reputation. But if that video Matteo took is real-"

"If!" Half-buried in a webwork of mithril wire and sparkling crystals, bat-like wings wrapped around her so they wouldn't get caught in the wires, the violet-haired alurin wizardess shook

an indignant fist in Lightfall's general direction. "I knew setting that tripwire-condition for Aidan would catch something good. He may like to play the bandit too much, but he never looks for an easy fight...." Wiggling out from under her enchanted device, Matteo looked up at the serene green-haired Lady of Avariel, and reddened. "Know what you're up against, right, Lady Sakuya?"

"That's usually wise," the hari-onna agreed, face perfectly straight. "So you thought you'd catch Aidan's party in an interesting encounter. Only it wasn't an encounter at all."

"The Beater." Lightfall fingered black feathers, as if reassuring himself they were still there. "I guess if anyone could find a way to game the system, he would."

"Oh?" Sakuya lifted an elegant brow.

"It's a long story." Lightfall glanced at Lyfa, and winced. "But you should hear it first. After...." He shrugged at Matteo's device.

Lyfa eyed it, and glanced aside just fast enough to catch a hint of worry on the alurin's face.

Then Lightfall looked her way, and Matteo was the manic, gleeful mad wizard again, leaping about to throw ornate bone and gilded levers, half of which seemed to have been attached just for the simple joy of clanking gears and rushing counterweighted chains. "Behold!" she proclaimed, as silvery mist spread up and out from a shimmering sphere, coalescing into light and sound. "The Mystical Panopticon!"

"Only you would tie a crystal ball into a game function," Lightfall groaned.

"Oh, hush. It works, doesn't it?" Matteo waved him off. "Maybe we should get popcorn--"

"It doesn't matter." The *shing* of a drawn sword. *"I'm not leaving."*

Heart in her throat, Lyfa watched her brother face Aidan again. Watched him tear the bloody feather loose, and-

Catch her body, as her avatar went limp and soulless, hands limned in that same purple-blue fire.

"Darkfire." Matteo whistled. "A Shadow-powered sorcerer. No wonder an ethereal player could catch you. We don't see that much outside the Naga faction--"

The Black Swordsman *moved*, and three avatars went up in flames.

Matteo slapped a glowing crystal, twirling an ivory rod to twist images back through time. "I don't know about the sword nuts here, but I need to see that again. In slow motion."

Like moving through water, one half-gloved hand reached over her brother's shoulder to grip a plain hilt. Violet blazed from where his fingers closed to the tip of steel as he drew, cutting through Aidan's throat in an explosion of pixels.

Lyfa swallowed hard. It was pixels, not blood. Somehow, that made it even worse.

In SAO, that's what death looks like.

Her brother never hesitated, slicing down from Aidan's throat to take another aosagibi's hand off.

"Picked out the two main spellcasters in his first swing," Matteo was muttering. "Now was he lucky, or...?"

The swordsman pivoted through the flames where Aidan had been, one horizontal slash that bisected a third flame-winged player.

Recon's hand gripped Lyfa's shoulder. She leaned back into it, forcing herself not to run away.

The violet-flamed blade rose, and her brother casually severed the wing of a Fire player gaping at where Aidan had been.

Recon's fingers tightened, like a silent whimper.

Another step, and the swordsman slashed through thigh armor deep into unreal flesh. That one exploded as fast as Aidan had.

Her brother stepped back into what had to be a guard, even if it would have driven Grandfather crazy correcting his posture. Not that it mattered. There weren't any enemies left standing.

Lady Sakuya took a sharp breath. "You slowed this down?"

Matteo poked her controls. Frowned, and poked them again. "About ten times."

The hari-onna's hand hovered near the hilt of her katana, dark green hair stirring, glinting like emerald fire as each strand's countless tiny thorns caught the light. "Dear gods."

"He's a clearer," Lightfall nodded. "They say he's the best."

Recon worked his fingers loose from Lyfa's cloak. "So he's fast?"

Lyfa shifted her shoulder to work out any kinks. "I'm fast. Masters at the tournaments are fast." She shivered. "He's *impossible*."

"And he doesn't hesitate." The glee had vanished from Matteo's voice, replaced by a thoughtful tone that seemed to add years to the cute alurin's face. "SAO is PvE. Everyone still in the game thinks game death is always permanent. But every strike he used was lethal or disabling." She moved fingers near her nose, as if to tap up unseen glasses. "That's a little scary." She eyed Lightfall. "And you're not surprised. That's kind of scarier."

"He's a Moonsword," Lightfall said plainly. "It's not the first time players have attacked him."

Recon had twitched at *Moonsword*. “What’s a Moonsword?” Lyfa demanded. “Why are other players trying to hurt my brother?”

“He really is your brother?” Violet brows shot up. “Whoof. Okay....” She glanced at Lightfall. “Do you mind if I tell her? If all of you are going to be hanging out in my library, it’d make things easier if we don’t all have to talk around things.”

“...I guess it would.” He glanced at Lady Sakuya. “What your mad mage is trying not to say is, well... she’s my older sister.”

The hari-onna started. “Your *sister*? Matteo; you joined ALO even after what happened?”

“Especially after what happened,” the wizardess nodded. “My research is in VR. How could I not try to help?”

Lyfa blinked, and would have taken a step back if Recon hadn’t been right there. “So you know what it’s like. To go to the hospital, and watch him, and... you knew he might not....” She gulped.

“Yeah.” Matteo rubbed at her own eyes. “I know. The first month was the worst... well, you know that. Two thousand players died in the game. And we still don’t know why. But after that....” She took a breath, and squared wing-caped shoulders. “People’s chances got better. So I decided he was going to wake up. It just might... take a while.” Her smile was shaky. “Physical therapy’s not my field. But I was already looking at how people used VR to deal with trauma. And tutoring? Why not? So I started putting a plan together.”

The lanky tengu tilted his head to smirk at her, even if he was a little pale. “What she means is, she pestered the Taskforce with questions until they figured it was less trouble to hire her.”

Sakuya crossed her arms, frowning. “You’re part of the SAO Taskforce?”

“Official tutor and person to talk to if people feel like talking,” Matteo grinned. “I think there’s one of us in every ALO faction.” She stretched her wings a little, settled them back on her shoulders. “Good thing, too. Looks like I’m going to be trading some info with Natalya of the Dark. I know the basics of how sorcery works in ALO, but darkfire’s rare.” She raised an eyebrow at Lyfa. “What was your brother’s original build, do you know?”

“His original build?” Lyfa echoed, startled. “Um... I’ve only been in ALO two months.” Which was embarrassing, but not as hard to admit as, *he never talked about his games*.

“Heh. A little less than Bro, here.” Matteo jabbed a painted thumb-claw his direction. “It’s one of those weird congruencies between ALO and SAO. SAO’s got wizards and mage-crafters, ALO’s got wizards and mages, but nobody *starts* as a sorcerer. It’s something that happens to you in-game.”

“I was a backup swordsman with a little Herbalism in SAO,” Lightfall nodded, hand brushing the shortsword at his side. “I thought about being a mage-smith this time around, but... I guess I like using swords more than making them. Matteo asked if I’d like to back her up in

info quests in Sharn, so looking like a regular traveling merchant with a sword worked.” He snickered, a little ruefully. “At least for the first few days.”

“We’ll spare you the gory details.” Matteo winked at Lyfa. “Let’s just say, sorcerers coming into their power tend to be hard on the landscape. And losing all the guards after us took *forever*.” One fang poked over her lip as she chewed it in thought. “It’s one of the really weird parts of the games. Though not the only one.... Hmm.” She poked a finger toward the still black image. “A little light armor under the coat. And if that coat’s not light armor leather itself, I’ll eat my wand. I’m guessing he started as a melee DPS, and kept it up after magic dropped on him. In, out, don’t get hit, kill it *fast*.” She craned her head, bending at the waist for a better look inside one flared coattail. “That is a *nice* coat. Look. He’s got throwing spikes inside... *huh*.” She straightened, with a shy grin for Lyfa. “It’s funny, but that right there would make me think SAOan, if I met him in ALO. None of ‘em count on their inventory as much as ALO players do. Survivors... they keep weapons out. At least one potion in a belt pouch. That kind of thing.”

“Kayaba’s a bastard,” Lightfall said tightly. “Some monsters can keep you from getting to inventory. You always want some backup.”

“And he’s got some.” Matteo pointed at glints of emerald-black in dark hair. “Look at this.” She drifted a finger downward at an angle, tapping near three distinct tufts of feathers; near the swordsman’s temple, behind the top of his ear, and below and back from the earlobe, a little away from the pulse of his throat. “I don’t know what kind of creature they’re from, but those are definitely mystical grafts. You can get them in one of the big cities, like Sharn. They give you different kinds of magical benefits; often a nasty last-ditch surprise. I’ve *never* heard of a SAO survivor with them before. Do you still have the feather? I’d like to examine it.”

“It’s not in my inventory,” Lyfa said. Which was true, strictly speaking. “But there was a mage-crafting recipe left behind. *Feathered Graft*.”

“Ooo.” Blue eyes went wide and dreamy.

“Stop drooling,” Lightfall said wryly. “Black Swordsman first. Explosions later.”

“It was just that one time!”

“That’s true.” Lightfall folded his arms, humor crinkling his eyes. “The other times, the recipe caught on *fire*.”

“It’s not like they needed that warehouse. Stupid ruined building trap, should have been burned down ages ago... um.” Matteo gave them an embarrassed smile. “It’s okay, I never use that disguise in Sharn anymore.”

“I suppose that’s just as well.” Sakuya’s tone mingled dread and fascination. “Do I want to know how much the bounty is?”

“Well, let’s see.” Lightfall tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Wanted for arson, willful destruction of dragonmarked property, inciting a riot... some kalashtar elder managed to throw in

suspicion of attempting to become a pyrokineticist....”

“What? How’d they- eh heh.” Matteo blinked innocently. Rested a hand on her hip, studying a frozen figure in black. “Anyway... I always thought I’d be helping players *after* they got out of SAO. How’d he get into the ALO servers?”

“We asked him that, too.” Recon materialized a recording crystal. Hesitated, and leveled a fierce gaze on Lady Sakuya; kind of like stumbling over a hatchling dragon, Lyfa thought. “Lady Sakuya. If I tell you the truth about this, I’m risking a lot of lives. In more worlds than you know about.”

Sakuya frowned. Matteo’s eyes narrowed, dark blue slits. “Worlds?”

“Just... listen.”

“Lady Stheno thought we’d have an hour...”

The hari-onna stared, and blindly reached for a chair. Dragged it over, and sat in a whisper of silk robes. Matteo didn’t even bother, plopping down onto the floor, eyes and mouth wide. And Lightfall-

The tengu was shaking.

“Tell her I’m going to find a way back-”

A chime, almost like a game teleport, and Kazuto’s voice was gone.

He stopped, Lyfa thought, almost dizzy with relief. *He knows ALO is a game... but he stopped. And let them go.*

That was the Kazuto she knew. He was different, yes - she was a little scared at how different - but that was still her idiot soft-hearted big brother.

Don’t let that change. Ever.

Though she was going to have a *talk* with him. And Recon. She did not take too many chances, darn it!

But getting mad was too easy. Much easier than thinking about what the two most idiotic guys in her life had said. And hadn’t said.

Recon likes me? He wants me to come to his world? To be a youkai?

And her brother hadn’t said no. He didn’t want her cursed. He didn’t want her hurt. But he hadn’t said anything that meant she shouldn’t go.

He didn’t tell Recon to stay away, either. He... he trusts Recon.

Her brother almost never trusted guys around her. He didn’t talk about it much, but he thought most of them were perverts, too busy staring at her chest to see *her*. And a lot of the

time, he was right.

But he trusts Recon. Because Recon's not looking at pieces of me. He's watching how I fight.

He had to be, or he'd never have figured out who Lyfa was. And something about that made her feel dizzy, and a little scared, and like she just wanted to look at him. So she could see him, the way he'd seen her.

My brother thinks Recon's okay. That's... I'm glad. I think.

Recon took a deep breath, and put the crystal away. "I know it sounds crazy...."

"I won't be that!"

"Lightfall!" Matteo surged up with a beat of wings, catching her brother by the arm. "Little brother, it's okay, it's not real-"

"You don't know what it's like!" The tengu was staring at his left forearm, clenching and unclenching his fingers. "Rella - she bit me, she was trying not to but she said she was so *hungry*. And then - I ran but I couldn't get away from the rat inside, the nezumi was trying to crawl into my soul, the swarm was calling me, and if Agil hadn't - hadn't done what I asked him to do, I wasn't going to *be* that!"

Sakuya was on her feet, face set and strong. "Warrior of Avariel! Look at me!"

Slowly, Lightfall's gaze found hers. He drew a hitching breath, shaking.

"We will not let that happen to you again," Lady Sakuya vowed. "Whatever it takes. I swear, you will not be the monster you fear."

"Promise," Matteo agreed, wrapping a wing around him like a velvet hand. "I *promise*, little bro. You're out of there. You made it."

Recon swallowed, and nodded. "She's right," he said quietly. "Shaman Tetsutora argued Queen Euryale into putting that in as a safety measure. The Council of Lords wants *youkai*, not monsters. Anyone who can... who can fight the akuma enough to ask for a mercy kill.... The spell cuts the link between you and the avatar. Then it shatters the avatar." He shrugged. "It's enough of a sacrifice to make sure the demon-infection goes down with it. There's no nezumi left in you. There never will be."

"A safety measure," Lightfall said numbly. "My party is *dead*. They didn't know, *no one* knew you could die in SAO and still survive, and now they're all dead."

Oh. Lyfa paled. Because if magic was reaching from SAO to the real world, and the link to a lycanthrope-infected avatar was broken *only* when you got a mercy kill.... *Oh, no!*

Blue flared around Lightfall's fingers, like a patch of sky gone astray. "And you're talking about safety measures...."

“Stop it!” Lyfa stepped between them, even if her knees were shaking. “Recon couldn’t have warned anybody. He wasn’t here!”

Lightfall shook his head, something haunted and horrible in his eyes. Slivers of sky shimmered from his fingers, carrying the clean scent of wind after rain. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do! Recon’s in my school!” She shifted to stay between them, even as she heard Recon cursing under his breath behind her. He could curse all he liked. She wasn’t getting out of the way. And she wasn’t going to draw her sword, either. Matteo was right behind her brother with glowing rose petals for a sleep spell in her hand, and nobody should have to do that to her own brother. “He transferred in months after SAO started. He couldn’t warn anyone!”

Lightfall’s gaze searched hers, wary and watchful.

Lyfa didn’t dare look away. *It’s true. Everything I said. It’s all true.*

Sky-shimmers faded. Lightfall closed his eyes, and shook his head. “How could you do this?” he whispered. “Even if you didn’t do this... thousands of people are *dead*.”

“Thirty-eight hundred. When you have millions.” Recon put a hand on her shoulder to step forward; ears down, face miserable as Lyfa had ever seen it. “Nine years ago, the Five Nations, the five *human* kingdoms, were tangled up in what they call the Last War. They’d been fighting for almost a century, making and breaking alliances with each other, with elves and gnomes and you wouldn’t believe what else. Karrnath - where the Ayakashi are based here - they were being pushed hard, even when they flooded the field with undead troops. They needed a diversion. Something that would distract the other nations, especially Breland. And... they found one.” He swallowed hard. “Nine years ago, Karrnathi wizards attacked Swiftwater Pass. And... almost everyone there... died.”

“Swiftwater Pass,” Lady Sakuya murmured, face giving nothing away. “I’ve heard that name.”

“Darn right we have.” Matteo called up a map of Alfheim. “Here’s us, in Avariel territory, right outside the human city of Sharn-”

“Breland,” Recon said, a little strength filtering back into his voice. “Avariel is Breland.”

Lightfall blinked, faint sparks of curiosity lighting grief-dulled eyes.

Matteo arched an eyebrow, and moved her finger north on the map, around a great lake. “Tanuki, Fairhaven.”

“Aundair.”

The claw moved east. “Aosagibi,” Matteo stated. “Flamekeep.”

“Thrane.”

Northeast, past a deep-throated harbor. “Ayakashi. Korth.”

“Karnath,” Recon almost growled.

Matteo held her ground, moving her finger to a tiny island near a jagged expanse of wasteland, territory scorched and blasted by terrible magic. “Naga. Thronehold.”

“Cyre,” Recon said quietly. “They call it the Mournland now.”

“Khorvaire,” Lightfall breathed. “Alfheim is Khorvaire. Then that means....” He pointed at the mountains to Avariel’s west.

“The Walls of Storm,” Lady Sakuya stated.

“Swiftwater Pass is the only way through,” Matteo nodded. “The gateway to Droaam, the... land of monsters....”

“Aincrad.” Lightfall stared at the map, fear and longing on his face. “Droaam is *Aincrad*.”

“Whoa, whoa, *whoa*.” Matteo got a good grip on his cloak. “First? If it’s got a different name here, it’s probably *not* Aincrad. Not in ALO. Second, even if it is, nobody sane tries to get through those mountains without a hell of a lot of supplies, healing potions, and ghost-wards. There’s supposed to be bones ten feet deep in places, where all the medusas... died....” She went white. “That’s in the lore, in Morgrave University. Up until a year or two ago, humans thought all the medusas were *dead*. That a whole race had been....” One hand covered her mouth, as she shuddered.

Lyfa gripped her friend’s shoulder as he looked away. “Recon?”

“Swiftwater Pass was a trade route,” he whispered. “My parents... we were part of a merchant caravan, they just left me with the horses for a little while to go swimming... I saw the river turn *black*....” He buried his face in his hands.

“I’m sorry,” Lyfa said helplessly, hanging onto him as he shook. “Recon. I’m right here, I promise.”

“But... magic’s not real,” Matteo protested, still pale. “Not really.”

Lyfa looked at her, torn between *yes it is!* and *I wish it wasn’t*. Bit her lip, and opened her menu, scrolling to her pictures. “I told you that feather wasn’t in my inventory. It never got there. I woke up with it in my hand. In my *real* hand. And when we got to the hospital....” She found the image, and switched *visible* on it from private to public.

Her brother’s face hung in mid-air, still under the deadly NerveGear. In dark hair, one emerald-black feather gleamed.

“...Meep.” Wide-eyed, Matteo studied the picture. Glanced at her mystical device. Looked at her brother, who was huddled in on himself as if against a winter blizzard.

Lightfall's head came up, chin set. "Sis. You need to see something." He scrolled through his own display. "I, um, haven't been spending as much time on dating sites as you thought." He hesitated, finger over an icon. "Somehow, I know I'm going to regret this." Closing his eyes, he tapped *okay*.

A video opened, showing a plain, pressboard computer desk, keyboard lifted off to one side and a white napkin spread on the cleared space to hold glazed white and black shards that might have been a coffee cup.

"Okay, test three of the I've got to be imagining things sequence." Lightfall's voice, tired and uneasy. Pale fingers toyed with one of the larger white segments, with a painted-on surprised black cat's face. *"I probably missed something the first time. This piece just looked like it was broken. And I know nothing happened the second time. Third time should be the charm... heh. Not the charm. Which is the point."* A hiss of inhaled breath. *"Here goes. Heb ei fai, heb ei eni...."*

Lyfa started. Not because of the chant; a lot of the beginning cantrips were long. You had to build up time leveling before you could access spells with quicker chants. She knew *mend* when she heard it.

Which was why she knew the soft white glow gathering around broken edges, like starlight on fallen snow. Even if it should be impossible.

Lightfall's breath caught. *"No way... I.... Cwpan, cyweiri!"*

Like magnets, two shards *snicked* together, white glow blazing-

Fading, to reveal pieces of a mug just a little less shattered than before. Now Lyfa could see the writing under the frizzed cat's claw-tipped paws: *I am perfectly calm.*

"Oh, son of a-"

Here and now, Lightfall closed the video. Took a deep breath, and met his sister's shining eyes. "It took me all of last week to fix that cup," he admitted. "I haven't tried anything bigger than a cantrip. I'm scared to." He shrugged his shoulders, obviously uncertain. "But it works. Magic is real." He managed a rueful smile. "Just - let me get some fire extinguishers before you try anything?"

Matteo looked caught between worry and squeeing in ultimate geekish glee. Wordless, Sakuya touched thorn-armed hair.

Lyfa held onto Recon, trying to wrap her mind around it all. It was one thing to play a hari-onna, or a tengu, or an alurin. To think about being one?

My brother must be so scared.

"The thing I don't understand is why." Lightfall's gaze met Recon's, and skittered off with a shudder. "If your youkai lords want people who *want* to come - why trap people in a death game?"

Lyfa cringed. Because it *didn't* make sense. Why did anyone have to die?

“The youkai lords didn't create SAO,” Recon stated. “Beniryuu did. And red dragons... they don't like two-legs much.” He lifted his hand off her shoulder. Met Lightfall's gaze, and sank to one knee. “I am the last surviving son of the blood of the Willow Swans. I'm alive because Queen Euryale came seeking vengeance for her mortal kin's murders, and found a lost child in the wreckage. I'm alive because the river was only black for a few minutes; because two Moonswords - the *last* two Moonswords in all of Aincrad - sacrificed their lives and their magic to halt the curse in its tracks. I'm alive because... because I was *lucky*.” His voice broke. “And I hated humans *so much*.”

“That's not-!”

Matteo touched her brother's arm. “Wait.” She looked Recon up and down, from bent knee to flattened ears. “We're not the people who hurt you. If... if what you're saying is true, we're not even from the same *world*.”

“I know.” It was a breath away from a wail. “I know that *now*.”

Lightfall bristled. “Then *why*-?”

Lyfa moved; not between them, but beside her friend. “I want to know, too. Why? You... if you wanted help, you could have *asked*.”

Matteo was chewing her lip again. “Queen Euryale. The Gorgon Queen of Droaam, like the legends? With her sister, Stheno of the True Sight?” She cleared her throat. “Because that's what really doesn't make sense. If Stheno's a *seer*... doesn't take visions to guess that stealing people out of their own world to die is going to end *badly*.”

Recon winced. “Every other future she saw was worse.” He raised his eyes to Sakuya. “Which is exactly what most dragons wanted.”

Dark green brows arched in surprise. Sakuya inclined her head, one thoughtful nod. “The Draconic Prophecies. They're real as well?”

“I don't know all the details,” Recon admitted. “But every Prophecy has the same pattern. *If* X happens, then Y...” He gulped. “If Aincrad dies, then... then a lot of things are supposed to happen. To every humanoid nation in Khorvaire. It could happen a lot of ways, but - if the Five Nations go back to war, the Mournland might be just the *beginning*.” He got to his feet. “What we did was wrong. The Council of Lords should never have trusted Beniryuu. But my people don't want to die!”

Sakuya stood, regal as an empress. “Then you should have told us nothing.”

“Lady Sakuya!” Lyfa gasped.

“We can spread the word,” Sakuya went on. “I know we have hackers in Avariel. We can manufacture a reason if we have to. The government can have the entire ALO system shut down. However you're planning to kidnap people to another world, *we can stop it*.”

But my brother! Lyfa shuddered, standing fast. *Everyone in SAO is still trapped!*

“Khorvaire is not our world.” Sakuya advanced on the swanmay, face grave. “Their people aren’t our problem. Your people, whether they live or die, are *not* our responsibility.” She halted, bare inches away from the pale spy. “You claim humans are your enemies, and then you expect us to *rescue* you?”

“I don’t expect anything,” Recon said quietly. He stepped back, and turned a shy glance on Lyfa. “But I think you’d be happy there. You’re already better at fighting and magic than a lot of people ever get. And your brother - he’s *amazing*. He was the first Moonsword in SAO. And we need Moonswords, so much.” He eyed Lightfall. “All of Khorvaire needs them. You *know* why. Lycanthropy is a curse, no matter how much we try to soften it. Civilized lycans don’t spread the curse. But the Dark Pack doesn’t care. They don’t want to live in peace, like Shaman Tetsutora’s people. They don’t even want to just leave you alone. They hate humans, more than anything, and...” He faltered. Gulp. “They think the way to end the threat is to make it so there are no more humans. You’re all infected, or dead.”

Lyfa shivered, words like ice cubes down her spine.

“I know what’s going on, but I can’t stop it.” Recon straightened. “You probably could, Lady Sakuya. Go to human authorities, get them to shut the AmuSpheres down - you could do it. Make it so *no one* goes through. And everything we’ve risked, all the lives we’ve lost...” Fingers curled into fists. “It’d all be gone.”

Lightfall bristled. “What do you mean, everything *we* lost-”

“Brother.” Matteo’s eyes were very wide. “There’s something the Taskforce never made public. Something very, very important. We can’t monitor much in SAO, that bastard Kayaba didn’t leave anyone access beyond a few read-only files - but we *can* read the Monument of Lives.”

Lightfall blinked, and shook his head. “Matteo?”

“Opening day started with just under eighteen thousand players here in NerveGear,” the alurin stated. “The Taskforce counted. The Monument has *twenty thousand* names.” She swept her gaze over them all, ending on Recon. “Two thousand of those people were yours, weren’t they?”

Wincing, Recon looked away. Swallowed hard, and nodded.

“Ninety-eight of those aberrant two thousand died in the first month.” Matteo shuddered. “If the game works here the way it works there... you know the lore on dragons. Even the good ones don’t care what happens to humanoids, unless it messes with their damned Prophecies.” She drew down a menu interface, typing in some calculations. “At least four hundred of their own people are *dead*, Lady Sakuya. And it wouldn’t be the youkai lords risking their necks. It’d be their common folk. Their teenagers. Like *us*.”

“You’re saying Kayaba screwed everyone.” Oddly, Lightfall seemed to relax, feathers in his hair smoothing down again. “Yeah. He *would*.” He took a breath, and seemed to deflate, eyes

beseeking Lady Sakuya. “So what do we do?”

The hari-onna took a step back. “Me? I’m just the elected faction leader, I can’t- this is too big!”

“But we did elect you, Lady Sakuya,” Recon said, voice rough. “Even if it was supposed to be just a game. People trust you. And they know you listen to them.”

“When it’s faction against faction,” Sakuya argued. “This would be people’s lives. Their *real* lives. I can’t decide that!”

“So put it out as a rumor,” Matteo suggested. “Mass transport scenario, us to Aincrad. Who’d want to go? What would we want to take? What would we want to leave?” She winked at Recon. “I can tell you I’m asking this guy how we can bring the whole Gutenberg Project, at *least*. And figure out a way people can portal back and forth.”

Lyfa found her voice. “You want to go?”

“I’m thinking about it,” the wizardess obliged. “You?”

Lyfa’s chin lifted. “I’m going with my brother.” *I’m never leaving him behind again-*

Oh. Oh, that was going to be scary. “...I’ve got to talk to my *parents*.”

Chapter End Notes

PvE - player versus environment; going after other players is generally discouraged.

PvP - player versus player; going after other players is usually the point.

The Masks We Wear

Chapter Summary

Trapped in a death game, time running out, and a gloating red dragon watches your every move. It can't get worse, right?

(Things can always get worse.)

October 18th, 2024.

Field boss, Klein cursed silently as his guild plus two Moonswords ran toward the spine-chilling screaming. From the corridor the Aincrad Liberation Force had vanished down. Of-freakin'-course. The so-called human saviors of Aincrad just couldn't listen to the Black Swordsman when he said something might be a bad idea. Who'd have thought Kirito's feathers would make other people featherheads?

It was supposed to be a field boss....

Granted, you didn't usually find field bosses this deep in the labyrinth, but it *had* happened before. One impossibly huge Monstrous Scorpion with a cohort of merely boar-sized Giant Scorpions, nothing special to fight but tremorsense and poison - fifty-fifty odds that was just a field boss, no matter how ominous the door was. Sure, Kirito and Asuna had taken a look inside and *retreated* - but come on, huge monster, just begging for a bigger party to whittle it down. Not to mention those two tended to play it safe and reserve their magic whenever Kayaba unleashed a new infection on the players, and so far the seventy-fourth floor had been crawling with yuan-ti. Those shapeshifting snakelike abominations could force a mutating potion down the throat of any captured player, youkai or not, and even if you had days to get cured NPC healers were *damn* hard to find ever since Kirito's spiritwalk. And if you did find them... even Grandma Tiger wasn't always herself, these days. A golem, as Tae put it. And very tightlipped when she *was* herself.

All Kirito did was talk to his sister. Why the hell did that get us cut off from help?

Actually Klein could think of a couple reasons, none of them good. Kirito, Argo, other spell-hackers he'd met - all of them agreed it was damn hard to break a curse from the *inside*. But get someone outside the spell's effect in on helping?

Yeah. Beniryuu had every reason in two worlds to make sure they didn't get Earth *or* the youkai lords in on what was *really* happening.

Any way you sliced it, they'd run the last twenty-five floors with fewer allies and ever-nastier infectious monsters. Were-spiders. Vargouilles; that'd caused a run on any mage-crafted item

that could store sunlight, it was an *ugly* way to die. And now yuan-ti. Just about every player Moonsword and shaman had been run off their feet saving lives and sanities. It was getting to the point that players were slamming Sword Skills and magical fire on anything that even *looked* like a snake. Just in case.

Kayaba really, really needs to die.

Which made him feel guilty just thinking it, evil red dragon or not. Kayaba, Beniryuu - the dragon was still a *person*, and no sane human being wanted to kill another person unless there was no other choice.

Red dragon versus every other human being in SAO, though - I'd take him down. Because the bastard tried to split us up and make us kill each other, over something as stupid as who's got fur and scales or doesn't, and that is just not happening. Not while my guild's still breathing.

That was the reason in his head. In his heart... he'd seen Kirito's knuckles clench white on the table at Yui's name. He'd seen the way Asuna's wings drooped, when she mentioned visiting Caerulus' library for research on yet another terrifying boss. He'd heard Tae crying at night about her father, and the golem now always in his place, trying not to let anyone know how much her heart was breaking.

His people were hurting; Klein knew it in his bones. And he was hurting right along with them. For half a year he'd had a grandmother's hand to ruffle his hair and call him out on being an idiot, and Klein missed that so much it ached.

Dragons can live without family. People can't. This is killing us. And if Beniryuu's a thousand years old, he knows that.

Ancient red dragon skewering later. Right now the nine of them were running like hell toward that... *ripple*, that'd hit the world a minute ago, just after the ALF party would have walked into the boss room. A wave that'd hit every player with magic like an icebolt to the heart, and sent even his own neck hairs spiking straight up. Something was wrong. Really, really wrong. "Some hacker idiot finally pulled a system glitch?" Klein panted as they ran.

Kirito's face was white. "I hope so!"

Klein felt his avatar's unbeating heart plummet toward his ankles. Because what the hell could be worse than a hacker finally screwing with SAO-

The chittering from the open doors didn't sound anything like a scorpion.

What. The hell. Is that?

Five yards long, chitin gleaming in dull tones of gray-violet and venous blue; body not a spider, not a scorpion, but something more gaunt and alien than either. The air around it shimmered, like some of Kirito's strongest darkfire; as if it was here and *elsewhere* at the same time.

Only darkfire was just Shadow; cold and dangerous as an avalanche, but not *evil*. This... *thing*....

Klein felt Fuurinkazan stack up behind him in sheer horror, before fumbling their way into attack positions. And bared his teeth. Because whatever this was, it shouldn't *be*. Not here. Not anywhere.

It doesn't have an HP bar.

"Bebilith," Asuna breathed, just as pale as her not-boyfriend. "I saw it in one of Caerulus' tomes of extraplanar lore, on the layers of the Abyss... that's a *demon*."

A demon. The part of Klein that still remembered being a salaryman back in Japan wanted to laugh and pat her on the head. Because seriously. Actual demons?

But since waking up in Aincrad he'd seen too much real evil, and this thing standing over a dozen scattered ALF fighters stank of all the malice in the world.

Serrated forelimbs lashed out, light and quick as a praying mantis' strike. The hapless Army wizard flew back as if he'd been struck by a giant.

Hit the threshold in front of them.

Shattered.

The bebilith hissed, mandibles chattering like a cat staring at birds through glass. Frustrated drool dripped down one fang as multiple eyes blazed at them, legs twitching in place.

"Boss room." Issin swallowed hard, flames bursting over his shoulder as his firebird spirit manifested, trilling *danger*. "Must be enough of a threshold to keep a demon pinned, for now.... Oh shit. Klein, this thing isn't just aggro'd. It's after *souls*."

"Only our souls are caught between here and Earth." Kirito's dark blade was already drawn. "It's trying to feed, but when the avatar shatters, we're - gone."

You mean dead, Klein almost said, still trying to wrap his mind around *demon*. "The heck would Kayaba program in something to go after souls?"

You know, something deep inside said. *You already know. You've met human evil, and monsters. This... this is darker than Beniryuu could ever be.*

"It's not a programmed mob." Kirito's white knuckles dashed Klein's last hope of blaming this on Kayaba. "I can feel it twisting the shadows. It's *really here*."

...Somehow the NerveGear had just replaced all Klein's blood with ice. *Demon. Actual, soul-devouring demon. And it wants Fuurinkazan.*

A blur of motion, spider-scuttling and *oh freaking gods so fast-*

Air rippled, throwing a razor-edged limb back from the doorway. For now.

Mandibles chattering, the bebilith whirled, hopping back toward the center of the chamber like a demented Giant Wolf Spider.

Wish it was, Kirito could at least clue in a Giant Spider that we'd rather just leave, thanks- it's going for the ALF!

A blue-and-white streak flashed after it.

Klein didn't need the sudden absence of feather-scent to know one desperate black-coated *idiot* had bolted right after Asuna. Although that twist of Kirito's left hand looked more like summoning the menu than any spell, and nobody did that heading into a fight without a really good reason-

No time to think! "Head in!" Klein snapped, charging in - and off to the side, *not* backing their two Moonswords up. Not yet. "Get those Army idiots up and moving!"

Seven of Fuurinkazan, Klein thought, grabbing Corvatz to try and shake the Army leader back into sanity. About a dozen survivors. They couldn't carry everybody out, but if they could just grab the worst wounded and get the stunned ones running....

The *clack-shing-stab* going on behind them almost raised the hairs on Klein's neck. And then did, as Asuna's *kiai* unleashed a stroke of cold lightning.

The bebilith's squeal scraped claws through his eardrums. For a long second he could only cringe, and hope it wasn't as bad on Moonsword ears as it was on a weretiger, or their two demon-kiting DPSers were *screwed*.

He came out of it with Corvatz trying to dig armored gloves under his own helmet; okay, so bad noise hurt human ears too, damn it. "Get your guys moving!" Klein shouted at him, catching glimpses of red armor as Tae bodily hauled one babbling Army guy out the door. "Get them out of the labyrinth so someone can send a message back to town! We need a full raid - hell, we need *everybody!*"

He only hoped Issin was right and the threshold of the boss room really would slow a demon down. From the crackle and zaps Kirito and Asuna were going full-out planar energies with every strike, and they were barely holding its aggro....

Literally holding it. Kirito was braced under one scything claw as Asuna stabbed and taunted, blocking the demon's strike with a darkfire-limned X of black and crystalline blue-white. Black had to be Elucidator, Klein knew that sword too well - but where the heck had that second longsword come from?

Never mind where. Two swords? How is he even doing that?

It's Kii-bou, his memories of Argo rolled their eyes in his head. *Of course he found an exploit. Again.*

Make him tell me how he's doing that later-!

Asuna flicked that thought aside with the determination of a surviving clearer. Kirito was strong enough to tank some monsters in a pinch, but just holding off the demon's attack was grinding away his HP faster than battle healing could keep up.

Dodging the other claw, she stabbed at blazing eyes-

The world... blinked.

Lag?

Worse. Lag would have simply left her hanging, to come back to a world where the monster's attack would have had every chance to land. This - it was as if the whole world skipped, a needle scratching across an ancient record. Claws were coming down again and Kirito was drawing his second sword again and the bebilith was *so fast*-

Kirito was still faster, two swords crossing to block one claw as Asuna stabbed at a joint in the other, making it recoil. But his HP had dropped even lower.

As if he blocked it twice, Asuna realized, aiming for the eyes again. Hadn't worked the first time, but she had an idea.... "It rewinds time? The lorebooks didn't say that!"

"No," Kirito gritted out. "Check your HUD clock. It's running fine. The system's glitching!"

You can keep track of your- Maim aggravating solo later, kill demon now!

Feinting at the eyes, Asuna leapt upward, wings one lightning-laced beat to carry her over the demon's carapace. It didn't have much of an abdomen, but even an immortal demon had to have vital organs vulnerable to sharp pointy things.

And distance gives me options. If the system's glitching close to the demon, then-!

At lower levels a sorcerer's magic required touch, or a weapon, to carry it to the foe. But they'd all been getting stronger - and Kirito wasn't the only one who bought augment phrases from the Rat.

Free hand spread, Asuna unleashed lightning.

Dodge this, you demon bastard!

Ice and sparks and the determination of her own soul, reaching out to blast into the heart of the beast. The power vibrated through her bones like gripping her own blade, one blizzard-fierce *stab*-

Hit; something that didn't give like the simulated flesh and blood of SAO, but sparked and slid and then *just wasn't there*.

Lightning shivered, striking the stone floor hard enough to trigger *Immortal Object*.

That - that can't happen, you can't dodge an eldritch blast! Resist it, yes, but once it's touched nothing can dodge-!

A claw clipped the edge of her pinion feathers; too fast, the second claw would have her-

Raked past her, as Asuna desperately flailed through air, the bebilith curling on itself in pain. Darkfire dripped from its underside.

Kirito's hits land, the vice-commander realized, hitting the ground hard enough to make her ankles scream. *Some of them, anyway... darkfire is Shadow, it reaches beyond this plane, it must be enough to get past some of the glitching-*

The world blurred again, the bebilith doubled on itself like an out-of-focus stereo image, almost splitting. Putrid gray webbing splurged from both demons.

...Oh, that's just not fair.

From the Draconic curses on the bebilith's ancestry and probable deformations as a larva in the pits of the Abyss surfacing from one web-snare, Kirito thought so too.

Let's hope the bebilith thinks he's just swearing! Asuna leapt aloft, damaged pinions or not; all that mattered were her feet were off the ground, no tremor of her presence left to sensitive demon-spider feet. *"Anweledig!"*

Lightning wreathing her, she vanished.

Demons are smart. It'll go after the unknown threat first-

Then there was no time to think, just deadly dodging as the bebilith made very good guesses where her invisible body had to be. And the hope that she was buying enough time; a sorcerer's *spiderwalk* would let a Moonsword slip even the thickest giant spider's web, but a demon's?

Smoke curled away from violet flames, and Kirito finally squirmed free.

Toes just tapping the floor as she stabbed another chitinous joint, Asuna breathed a sigh of relief. And choked.

Oh gods what is that stink!

The world seemed to flip-flop, as her stomach threatened to evacuate her throat. Invisibility shattered around her, a sorcerer's energies going as haywire as the rest of her nerves. Everything was spinning.

Poisonous? No status marker - but it's not in the system, would we even know?

Retreat!

Asuna leapt back and into the air again, wings straining; hoping to blow some of the smoke away. Every movement was a battle against nausea. She'd been hit with some truly awful

status effects before, but trying not to hurl was a new one.

Not fair, came her disjointed thought as she had to dodge and block a claw to one side. Lambent Light *creaked*; she prayed the rapier would hold out long enough for her to bring the poor sword back to Lisbeth for maintenance. *Stink is all over us; where the demon is keeps glitching.*

If only there was a way they could predict the glitches. Pin the bebilith down to really hurt it-!

Scything claws - stopped.

What?

Claws still upraised, the demon stood almost still, tips of its toes just twitching against stone.

Did... did the glitch catch it, too?

Glowing eyes blazed at her. Spiracles on the shriveled abdomen whistled, as if the demon had just now noticed the stench of its own webs.

And the demon proved it was smarter than any spider, whirling toward the one person who *could* hurt it.

The side of the doorframe really, really hurt.

Head ringing, Klein dragged Corvatz over the boss room threshold, into the clearer air of the sandy corridor outside. Whatever was in those webs ought to have been banned as a chemical weapon, and whatever developer proposed it *shot*.

Wait. Demon, Klein thought fuzzily. *Not in the game. Can't shoot programmer guys. Darn.*

Clean air. The world hadn't stopped spinning, but it'd slowed down a little. That would have to be enough. Teeth gritted to fangs, Klein grabbed the wall and dragged himself to his feet. Popped the cap on a vial, and chugged the minty acid of an antidote potion, just in case.

Got to get back in there.

One foot after the other, Klein staggered to where he could get a clear view inside the deathtrap. Normally he'd back those two Moonswords against anything SAO could throw at them. Asuna could strategize on the fly like no one's business, and Kirito had a knack for reading the flow of a fight and scraping unfair advantages out of the system that was downright spooky. But this thing wasn't *in* the system. The world glitched around it, static blotting out yards of room and monster at a time, and even Kirito's crazy reflexes weren't enough when one second the demon was *there*, and another it was-

Fangs drove into Kirito's right arm, shaking the swordsman like a terrier with a baby rat.

Klein swore, leaving Corvatz to live or die, whatever he had the guts for. And ran. Because so far this demon would attack anyone in range, but when it focused on one victim it *killed*.

Fuurinkazan's red armor followed him. Crazy fools, every last one. And he loved them for it.

"Mob it!" Klein snarled, katana slicing for a spidery leg-joint. "Hit it from behind. Dale, Harry - block the claws. Issin, go for him!"

Dale's psiblade managed to clash with the empty claw, keeping the bebilith from twisting too far around as the rest of them tried to put pointy things where they would do the most good. Connecting was still hit or miss, but at least the pinpricks getting through seemed to *distract* it.

Wings of flame blew away some of the awful smoke; Issin's firebird struck, searing the claw-joint Asuna had stabbed. Chitin screeched open.

C'mon, kid, move-!

Kirito was trying, grimly twisting flesh and bone off dripping fangs, but his legs just weren't holding him. His face was pale, too pale, even with darkfire casting its eerie light-

A rush of cold wind. Leaping, Asuna grabbed black shoulders and *pulled*.

The thud of bodies to the floor would've made Klein wince, if he could have spared the time from dodging and slashing at not-quite-there. The Moonswords weren't in his party, he didn't have their status right in his HUD - but the ache in his chest from the Fang burned like acid. He didn't need to glance that way to know Kirito's HP bar was dropping like a lead weight. "Potion him!"

"I did," Asuna called back over the static, dragging her partner farther from the fray. "It's not working!"

Klein heard his guild's curses, and added a few of his own. *Potion's not working, Issin'll have to do a better cure, doing that in here is suicide- Wait. The air was clear in the corridor, maybe-!* "Threshold! Issin, go with them, get him outside!"

"Right!"

Easier said than done. Six of them versus one fourteen-foot monster would usually be just fine for a running retreat, but with the world folding in on itself and attacks lagging and then hitting all at once so the aggro was just screwed - and then they didn't do half the damage they should *anyway*-

A *shush* of sand behind him and Klein knew the wounded were out. Black doorframe in the right side of his view - good, if they'd backed up that far, Fuurinkazan was out....

All except him.

"Leader!"

Dynammm and Tae. Somehow, he wasn't surprised. "We can't let it cross the threshold!"

"But a boss monster can't-" Dale cut himself off, and set to stabbing over Klein's shoulder. Ducked in trained rhythm, as one of Tae's arrows whistled past to slam into blurred chitin. "Damn it, damn it, damn it..."

"We've got to stop it here," Klein snarled, feeling the Fang throb on his chest. "We've got to stop it *now*. This thing's not part of the system! If it gets out into the rest of SAO-"

People are going to die. Our whole world could die.

Not going to happen!

:Are you certain of this?:

Silvery. Warm. *Inside his head*, crackling at the tiger's roar as if it had all the patience in the world.

:Are you certain? Once you choose to burn the corruption of the world, its agents will never again give you peace....:

Klein snarled, shifting to tiger war-form to add more strength to his blows. Lycanthropy had a demon at its heart, even if he'd killed his; Grandma Tiger's lore said claws and fangs could slay the unnatural, when all else failed. Made dodging harder, but they were in the doorway, he *knew* where the bebilith was coming. *Hello? Demon? Soul-devouring monster? No way am I letting this thing get through!*

No words; just a feeling of *welcome*, and-

Light.

Silver flames, catching on his katana; blazing from there to Dale's mindblade to Tae's arrows to every glint of steel.

Flames reflected in blazing eyes, and the bebilith screamed.

"Hit it!"

Fuurinkazan didn't ask; just took the unexpected buff and roared, surging back through the doorway after Klein to strike the demon with fiery blades. Strike, and *hit*.

Fast, too fast, and you blur with every glitch, Klein growled, powering through a rising slash that cut one venomous fang from its head. *But we've got you, you bastard!*

More webbing. More venom. More slashing claws. But that was just like any other boss monster, and Fuurinkazan were *clearers*.

It took minutes, most of their HP bars, every magic and psychic trick they could yank out, and almost all the arrows Tae carried. But finally they had it swaying, near-blind, three legs cut from under it and its bleeding body on fire.

Breath heaving, Klein glanced over too many bars in the red, and growled. *One more push-*
Gleaming violet, a throwing spike blazed past Klein's head, burying itself in the bebilith's last eye.

With a rattle of chitin, the demon collapsed.

Fur fading, Klein waited three heartbeats for the demon to move again. Finally took a breath, when the unnatural form started dissolving into gray ichor. *Not disappearing. Definitely not one of our monsters.* "You just *had* to get the Last Attack Bonus."

From the doorway, Kirito laughed; breaking into coughs that didn't sound good at all.

"I think we've got him stabilized," Issin said grimly, glancing at Fuurinkazan as they limped toward the door, "but we need to get him *out* of here. Rangers need the wild. I don't think that bite's going to heal up until he can soak all the demon energy out of it... Leader?"

"Let me take a look." Sore everywhere, Klein went to one knee in the doorway. Asuna was holding Kirito up, little sparks of lightning dancing over her hands and Kirito's skin.

Sharing her battle healing, Klein realized. *Makes sense. Demons are outsiders; maybe planar energy can... oh, eww.*

The fang-marks were even nastier than he'd thought, weeping sluggish dark liquid where an ordinary SAO wound would have red wireframes.

That's no regular bite. It went after his soul. How do we heal that?

Well. That silvery presence had given them the buff they needed. Maybe it'd give them just a little more.

Gripping gently on either side of the wound, Klein tried to clear his head. *C'mon, he needs to get better, Kirito's one of the best guys I know and no one deserves a piece eaten out of their soul-*

It was like falling inside, somehow. He could feel himself, bright blades and fur and claws he never, ever unsheathed without good reason....

And just beyond his skin, the soft *shing* of a sword drawn in darkness.

But dark's not evil. Just - deep. Like the sea. Like the sky, full of stars.

...That's Kirito. Oh wow. And I thought he was the IT guy in the corner.

Which wasn't exactly wrong. Back on Earth, he'd bet, Kirito would have been exactly that. Hacking the bad guys with programs, people would understand. With steel? Not so much.

Man, no wonder you're so scared of people. You must've stood out like a sunflower in a poppy field. Or maybe a nightshade. Scariest damn human I've ever met.

But Klein knew Issin, he'd watched all his guild work, and so he'd picked up more about herbs than a salaryman in Japan would have ever dreamed. Nightshade was deadly dangerous. But when you absolutely positively *had* to knock someone out to fix what else was wrong with them... Issin had doses in his kit for a reason.

Nothing wrong with you, kid. You're just built different from a lot of us. But we'll always have a place for you. Believe in us. Believe you're worth it...

A sizzle of silver, and the last unhealthy carmine dripped from the bite. Slowly, pale flesh began to knit back together.

Asuna swallowed audibly, one tear trickling down her cheek as she watched life burn again in her partner's eyes. "...How did you do that?"

"Dunno. Not looking a gift drakkensteed in the mouth, okay?" Klein breathed out a sigh of relief, lifting his hands away. "All right, that's-"

In the room beyond, stone groaned. In a very familiar way. Way too familiar to some of their group, as he saw both Asuna and Kirito's heads come up in shock.

Gathering Fuurinkazan with a look, Klein peeked inside.

On the far side of the blue-lit chamber, massive stone doors finished creaking open.

Klein could *feel* his guild blink. *That's the door to the next level. The floor boss door. We beat the floor boss? Us?*

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw black and blue-and-white limp in close enough to peer under taller arms. "Huh," Kirito muttered.

"Huh?" Dynammm sputtered. "That - that couldn't have been the boss, it must have *eaten* the boss, or - or something, and - we - you let *that* be between us and the seventy-fifth floor? *Damn it, Kayaba!*"

"At least the door opened?" Tae patted her boyfriend's shoulder, letting him bury his head in the crook of her neck as he groaned about boss fights in general and *of course it was a boss, freakin' Black Swordsman snagged the LA on it, what else could it be?*

Kirito blinked. *Almost* looking innocent at that one.

Asuna gave him a raised eyebrow, and Kirito cleared his throat. "Should we go up? You know we don't have to, the teleport portal will open in an hour by itself now that the boss room's cleared."

Klein considered their HP bars, what healing and potions they had left, the amount of monsters that'd respawn in the labyrinth versus the half-hour breather SAO always gave on a new floor after you got the stairway cleared, the weird warmth on his chest next to the still-sore Fang-

Wait, what?

Gingerly, Klein poked at that warmth, finger meeting smooth metal that he *knew* he hadn't equipped before the fight. Felt almost like a spearhead, but who'd string that by the point? "Um, guys...?"

Most of his guild just stared. Tae paled. "That's-!"

"The symbol of the Silver Flame." Kirito smiled wryly. "I may have gotten the Last Attack, but it looks like someone else got the bonus." The Moonsword straightened, dark eyes determined. "Klein, you'd better-"

"Get it out of sight," Klein cut his friend off, mind racing. Talk about the fastest way to gain aggro from random youkai short of having an orange icon over your head. "Yeah, holy- never mind." He tucked the spearhead under his armor. *Carefully*. It was silver-warm and dangerous, and why the hell wasn't it burning a *weretiger*?

Answers. We need answers, before we set off a powder-keg worse than Kirito and that damn Beater stunt.

"Unless anybody says no, I say we go up to the next floor," Klein said at last. "Fastest way to get back to wilderness, you still need that. And I don't want to explain this to *anybody* before we talk to Argo. We go up, we unlock the gate... then we're heading back to Snow Springs, because *enough already*."

Huddled under Asuna's wing at Fuurinkazan's well-worn kitchen table, Kirito swallowed hot cocoa. Klein's touch had burned out the demon's venom, but it did nothing for the bitter aftertaste in the back of his throat. Maybe Asuna's chocolate would. "We're running out of time."

"News flash," Issin *hmp*ed, checking over herbs and preparations. Trying not to look like he was staring at his guildleader, like everyone else in Fuurinkazan, Tae included. As who wouldn't, when a weretiger was wearing a *silver holy symbol* and taking no damage whatsoever. "We've been running out of time ever since Opening Day."

"Not what he's talking about." Klein fingered the Flame hanging next to the Fang, face for once utterly serious. "Demons... they don't have permanent bodies on this plane, right? Kill them, they just respawn. It'll be back."

"Not that one." Asuna looked up, still running her fingers down Kirito's arm as if to make sure he was whole and breathing. "It takes them time to gather the energy for a body on this plane, if Caerulus' library is right. That bebilith shouldn't be able to come back for decades." She shivered. "But they're telepathic, and they love to hunt."

"So it'll just tell all its buddies," Dynammm muttered, nudging up next to his girlfriend. "Great."

“Demons don’t have buddies.” Tae shuddered. “But they love to hurt people. If others promised to bring it back some of the souls they ate... it’d tell.”

“So on top of Kayaba’s monsters, we get demons we can’t kill without heap big magic and... a little something else. *Great.*” Klein fingered a curve of silver again. “Um. Tae. Don’t suppose you know what’s going on with this? It’s silver, I can feel the heat. But it’s not... I mean, the text on it just says *Symbol of the Flame*, there aren’t any details. And it feels like it’s after evil, not youkai?” He flung up frustrated hands. “I don’t even know how I know that!”

Tae blinked at him, eyes wide as saucers. “Well, you would. I mean, you *should*, if the stories are right, we have more druids and rangers than paladins but every once in a while someone’s chosen as a Forest Defender, or even a City Defender, so... eep?”

Kirito couldn’t blame her. He’d want to run himself under all those eyes. But this was her guild. No way would Fuurinkazan overreact, no matter how weird things got. “Paladin? Like Heathcliff?”

“Oh no! He’s not-” Tae ducked her head, wings rustling. “I mean, your Commander’s brave, Asuna. And noble, and everything a knight should be. I can see why everyone calls him that. But he doesn’t have divine power.”

Which fixed all gazes on Klein again. The weretiger blinked, pointing to himself in a, *who, me?*

“Yes, you, Leader,” Issin said plainly. “Our weapons weren’t biting half as hard before that aura of yours kicked in. That bite Kirito took? You *healed* him. Neat as I could. Maybe better, I would’ve needed some herbs and chants to get that demon-filth out. You just... did it.”

“Well, I guess, but - aren’t paladins supposed to be, you know, major human good guys?” Klein objected. “That’s part of the lore Argo had on the Silver Flame. Sure, they handle undead, and beholders, and other evil nasties, but their paladins are the ones who keep going after the Dark Pack any time those idiots head into the Five Nations. ‘Cause they’re the only ones who can resist being infected, most of the time. And they’re supposed to go after *any* lycanthropes, not just the bad guys.” He shrugged, a little sheepish. “And you know, I kind of can’t blame ‘em? From what Grandma Tiger tells us there’s a lot of ‘thropes outside Aincrad who never beat the akuma down. No Moonwords in the Five Nations, no shamans; not even a lot of clerics. Would you want to risk whole villages of innocent people on the chance one werewolf *might* behave like a civilized guy? I wouldn’t. And I’m one of the guys who goes furry.” Klein knocked a fist lightly against Issin’s shoulder. “‘Course, I’d want to track the wolf down, hogtie him, and just drag him back for Tetsutora to thump on. But I don’t need to worry about getting bit...”

Hands wrapped around warm ceramic, Kirito grinned at him.

“What?” Klein squinted at his grin, scanned his guild’s matching smirks. “What?”

“Hate to break it to you, Leader,” Harry One leaned his elbows on the table, wiggling his eyebrows. “But it sounds like you fit the build.”

Stifling a giggle, Asuna nodded. “The Commander is noble. He leads the Knights of Blood well; without him, we wouldn’t be half as far clearing Aincrad. But that’s our guild. You, Klein... you do the *right thing*.”

“A paladin upholds the law, and the right,” Tae said solemnly. “But first of all, he protects the people. The strong, and the weak; the noblest citizens....” Her gaze fell on Kirito. “And the outcasts.”

Kirito felt Asuna stiffen, and lifted a hand from his mug to squeeze her fingers in comfort. *It’s all right. I know what I am.*

“But... but...” Klein stuttered as he shoved back from the table, ears bright red, “C’mon, that’s just what a decent guy does!”

Kunimittz and Dale traded amused glances. “*Paladin.*”

Which was interesting, Kirito thought, mind racing. Gods, he wished he could talk this over with Vincent, the elan had always hinted that the magic behind a ranger’s *avored enemies* was far more than study and fighting spirit - and that power wasn’t as strong in SAO as it should be. Meaning divine. But since Christmas... well. He’d been lucky to even glimpse the ranger’s tattered red cloak at a distance, leading him to new quests. Stheno was still in her cave, still herself, but keeping her conversations near as stilted and cryptic as an NPC. And as for seeing Yui....

He didn’t know how Stheno managed to keep bringing the little girl into SAO. Maybe because Yui was one of the few to whom it was still just a game. But those few times he and Asuna had been able to hug her, the little medusa could read the fear gnawing at them. Sense the time counting down for them all. It made her cry. And then Asuna cried. And then he tried not to cry, and just wanted to *kill* something.

I don’t want to lose them. But my family’s on Earth. How can I choose?

Kirito shook away the grief, focusing on how they might leverage this latest game hiccup into turning a red dragon into frosted leather. If the bits of lore they’d picked up were true, the Silver Flame’s purpose was to burn corruption and evil from the world. The Church in the Five Nations focused on killing lycanthropes, yes, but lore said the Flame hated demons and Daelkyr-spawn just as much....

“Or one curse-casting dragon,” Kirito murmured.

Klein’s attention snapped to him. “What?”

Kirito shifted under feathers. “Um, well....”

“I know you’re ‘just guessing’,” Klein’s fingers crooked in mid-air. “I’ll take your guesses over anybody but Argo’s facts. What?”

Faith and a generous heart. That was Klein all over. “Well... what you said,” Kirito started. “People who follow the Flame can be extreme, but they’re not *wrong*. And the Flame itself -

it's meant to destroy evil, and save lives. Save souls, by curing people who are bitten, when they can." He paused. "What do you think the Silver Flame feels about SAO?"

That earned him a fair amount of muttered profanity from the guild. "They'd probably wipe us all out," Issin bit out. "Either world, we're-

"Forget the Church," Kirito cut him off. "That's just people. The Silver Flame *chose Klein*."

Silence. The redhead drew in a long breath. "You're saying... *we're* not corrupted. Not the way the Flame sees it. We got hit by Beniryuu's curse, we're trying to survive it. But we're not evil."

"More than that." Asuna sat up straight, face all calm calculation. "If the Flame chose one of us as a paladin, then it thinks we're all worth defending." Her eyes narrowed. "That demon may have done us a favor."

"*Oft evil will shall evil mar*," Kirito murmured. And if anyone asked, he'd fob them off with an excuse of obscure Aincrad lore. Beniryuu had stolen from all of Earth's fantasy to bring new twists into SAO anyway. "If the Silver Flame's paying attention to SAO now, if any hint of divine power is getting into the system... well, a lot of things could happen. It might be easier to fight undead now-"

"Or heal!" Tae's wings rustled, pearly feathers half-spread in excitement. "You're a ranger. The Wild is divine for you, just like it is for druids. You could heal yourself a little before because you're a Moonsword; battle healing comes from planar energy, like wizard's magic. Kayaba's spell couldn't block that and leave us any magic at all. But now? All the rangers should be able to cure anyone!"

Erk. He hadn't even thought of that. "We should check spell lists later," Kirito agreed. "But if divine power is reaching SAO, and one demon already got in-" He had to stop, and shiver. "We're running out of time. Not for us. For Japan. Maybe the whole planet."

"Whoa, whoa." Klein waved his hands, *slow down*. "What happens in SAO doesn't hit Earth... it doesn't, right? I mean, Argo says we can't even pull off another astral quest."

And that made Kirito's blood boil all over again. He'd wanted to see his family again; he'd hoped to at least give a few others the chance to pass messages to theirs-

But a half-hour after he'd scrambled to his feet in Stheno's garden, a message had shown up in his inbox.

System update: All future quests are to be confined to Aincrad's Prime Material Plane.

Damn Kayaba. Wherever he was, the programmer must have left some kind of automated flag for unusual events in ALO.

But if the two games are connected, they have to have darkfire too. What did I do that stood out?

Issin's fangs had just caught the shaman's own lip. "Most of the time? No. SAO shouldn't affect Earth."

"Why do I hear a *but*?" Dale sighed.

"Shaman," Issin shrugged. "I deal with spirits. And from what Kirito told me about that little jaunt on Christmas, our spirits aren't all the way on Earth *or* on Aincrad. They're still tied to our real bodies, back on Earth, but they're kind of... stuck in between."

Stuck between. Kirito glanced down, remembering floating islands, and Recon's determined defense of his sister. *What's going to happen to him, and everyone like him, when they have to come back to Aincrad after years in Japan? He won't fit in there, any more than we'll fit in back home. If we get back home.*

Can he get back home, if we break the curse? Without Beniryuu's power-

No, wait, of course he can. A planar conjunction, and an eldritch device made by the youkai lords. Maybe two years, he said then; it's just two weeks until November now, so - a year, at most. All he'll have to do is walk back through the portal in ALO....

Wait. There was something *off* about that.

But Klein was wincing like someone had taken a mace to his skull. "And when we're talking things that stalk and eat souls... you're saying, if another demon gets into SAO, it could use one of us like a guide-rope, right across the dimensions?"

Sober, Kirito nodded.

"To Earth," Klein stated. "Where they don't have wizards, they don't have magic weapons, and unless some onmyoji or Shinto priest has got one heck of a Moon Rabbit to pull out of their hats, they don't have the kind of divine whammy it takes to kick demon butt."

Kirito winced, and nodded again.

"Okay, yeah," the guildleader grimaced, fist thumping the table. "Out of time. We've got to do something."

Asuna leaned forward, intent. "I agree. But what can we do? It's not like we can cut through the sky and get right to the hundredth floor boss, people have tried."

"Actually...." Kirito rubbed a finger across the familiar woodgrain, grounding himself in the table's fine details of cherrywood stain, a knothole filled in with some odd creature's horn-glue. Straightened, nerving himself. "I think we can."

"But you can't fly above the cleared floors," Tae objected. "And there's no teleport that will take you higher-"

"We don't have to get to the hundredth floor," Kirito cut her off, seeing flattened ears perk in surprise. "We have to get to the hundredth floor *boss*." He swallowed. "And I think we can. All we have to do is find him."

“Find him?” From the way Asuna’s ears twitched against blue hair, she wanted to pounce and *shake* details out of him. “Did Argo find solid information on the final boss? When we just reached the seventy-fifth floor? Where? How?”

“Not information.” *Guessing. I hate guessing.* Even if he and Argo had gone over every scrap of info they had, everything they remembered from Opening Day, and the information broker thought his guess was likely dead-on. He still felt like he was missing something.

All the lore we’ve gathered on Aincrad and dragons, everything we’ve found out about Beniryuu himself - there’s just so much to know. We have to have missed something.

I just hope we find the last clue before it kills us.

Kirito shifted around, enough to look Asuna in the eye. “Remember, this is Beniryuu’s master plan. The end of years of work by a great red dragon; the most powerful, proud monster in all of Aincrad. Why wouldn’t he be the final boss?”

Asuna nodded impatiently. “You mentioned that after the Christmas event. That’s what you and Argo and whatever other magic-users she can rope in have been working on, and it makes sense. I don’t know why you don’t want me to tell my guild-!”

Kirito gave her a flat stare. “Because *I don’t know who they are.*”

Her jaw dropped. “That... that doesn’t even make sense! I know you like being solo, but if you don’t know them, come meet them.”

“No,” Kirito said steadily. “No, now is too late.”

“Too late-!”

“Oh man.” Klein was pale. “Oh hell... it does make sense. It’s crazy but it *makes sense*, why didn’t I think of that? You saw us. On Opening Day. You saw all of Fuurinkazan. Well, except for you, lovely lady,” he winked at Tae, “but I think we can pretty much rule out pearly draconic as a red in disguise.”

Tae blushed, as Dynamm grinned and hugged her.

Asuna looked over them all, then back at Kirito; a silent plea for him to be joking, *please*.

Slowly, Kirito shook his head.

Asuna swallowed. “...You think Beniryuu is one of the players.”

“Not just any player,” Kirito stated. “Think about it. You’re an ancient dragon. You’re sure the two-legs can’t possibly survive on their own; no humanoid is *ever* as strong and smart as a dragon. But you need some of them to make it all the way to the end so the curse is complete. Where would you be?”

From the way even her scales grayed, Asuna had just connected the dots.

In with the clearers.

Her shoulders went back, jaw set as if she were facing a monster dangerous levels above her own. “So that’s what you meant.” Blue eyes narrowed in calculation. “But from what I know of curses, it won’t be enough for us to just defeat him as a player. We have to make him reveal himself as Beniryuu. He’s smart. He’s *not* going to do that voluntarily.”

“No, he won’t,” Kirito admitted, half to himself. “Not while any of the clearers has a chance to escape.”

Mass stares. “You’ve got that look,” Klein said warily. “I hate that look.”

“You’re going to hate the plan, too,” Kirito nodded. *I already do.*

Asuna looked between them, and braced her fists on her hips. “And the plan is...?”

Standing in Kirito’s room in the Fuurinkazan cabin, Argo took one more look over dyed and shaped black leather, a bloodstone gleaming from deliberately darkened silver. “It’s ready.”

Sitting on the bed beside her fellow Moonsword, Asuna almost wished the guildhouse wasn’t so well made. October on this floor would have been cold enough to excuse hiding under a blanket. She looked at the magical mask in the wizardess’ hands - the *medusa* mask, those sprouting snakes couldn’t possibly be anything else - then to the young man she’d almost lost to a bebilith’s venom.

Where his hands gripped black pants, Kirito’s knuckles were bone-white.

Asuna nodded to herself, and mustered a glare at both of them. “This is a bad plan.”

“I wish I had a better one,” Kirito breathed.

“It’ll work,” Argo said confidently. “Checked it myself. My best magic, bits I got out of Caerulus and the other arcane loremasters, a little touch from Klein for luck... cloaks your racial status just like a permanent *polymorph*. Only it’ll come off.”

Asuna upped her glare, crossing her arms. “You *think* it’ll come off.”

“We have to risk it.” Kirito’s voice was barely audible.

“Don’t know how long it’ll take to get Beniryuu to drop his guard,” Argo said seriously. “Might take a lot of levels, and if we’re gonna trap the bastard before the hundredth floor-”

“I don’t think we have that much time.” Kirito looked up. “You’re sure we have the room looped from any scrying?”

“Sure as tiger cubs love milk,” Argo nodded. “Or I wouldn’t have brought the mask out of Inventory. What do you mean, we don’t have time? You heard the terms back on Opening

Day-”

Dark eyes glanced at her. “And we know *dragons lie*.”

Yes. They did. But. “Curses are tricky to pull off,” Asuna pointed out. “They’re easier to cast with an escape clause; orders of magnitude easier if the cursed victim *knows* the escape clause. He cursed twenty thousand players. It doesn’t make sense for him to tell a lie.”

“What if he didn’t?” Kirito’s gaze was opaque. “What if he just didn’t tell all the truth?”

Asuna opened her mouth... then shut it, and glanced at Argo. She’d studied Caerulus’ library, but she was no wizard. Argo knew technicalities of spellcasting a Moonsword might not figure out in years. “...Could he have done that?”

“Yep.” Argo popped the word, as if she wanted to spit out the taste of it. Her finger ran down one intricate leather snake’s back. “Energy-cost on a curse would be less if we knew all the conditions on it, but not *that* much less. So long as he tells us one sure way to get out, he’s got the biggest of the bonuses he can scrape together. If he’s pulling in enough energy to yank souls across the worlds to start with? Rest would just be gravy.”

“And I think I know where he’s getting the energy.” Kirito’s shoulders were stiff. “The deaths in SAO... and the magic lost from temporary deaths in ALO.”

Asuna shook her head. “But that would mean SAO and ALO would have to be connected-”

Oh.

It fit. It all fit. And if it did - Kirito was right. They were running out of time.

“Never did feel right that an ancient dragon’s whole plan hinged on us getting to the hundredth level,” Argo mused, hood low as she leaned against the wall. “After all, *red dragon*. He’d never believe *humans* could beat him.” A snort of laughter. “Sure, if we could, he wouldn’t want to bring us over to Aincrad. Epic heroes? Whatever plan he’s got for the youkai, I bet them getting dragon-slaying help ain’t it.”

“So *defeat the 100th level boss* is just bait,” Asuna bit out. Oh, if she could just get Kayaba in front of her for *thirty seconds*.

Make that half an hour. We don’t know how long it’d take to put a Linear through all of a red dragon’s HP.

Argo held up a warning finger. “Not just bait. Like I said, for him to cast a curse like this in the first place, we’ve got to know one of the real break points. It’s just not one he thinks we can ever *do*. So... there’s got to be something else. Something that hits us whether we get to the final level or not.”

“Recon’s planar conjunction.” Asuna shuddered. “But - he said people in ALO will have to *choose* to walk through the portal.”

“My avatar worked fine in ALO,” Kirito said quietly. “It was ethereal, but everything else was normal. So we *are* in ALO... and I’d bet we’re already beyond the portal.”

“Feather-boy said a year. Maybe two. And that was last December.” Argo’s face was as grim as Asuna’d ever seen it. “If we don’t get out in the next month, Vice-Commander... we might not get out at all.”

A month. Twenty-five floors. Asuna shivered. “But even if this mask works, and you can pretend... I’ve seen you with all of us, human and youkai. You’ve never hated anyone for making the choice. But you hate the idea of being adopted, and I don’t even know why-!”

Kirito blinked. Looked past her, to the information broker in her shadowy slouch against the wall. “Argo. You never sell Otherworld info. Right?”

“Damn right,” the Rat nodded. “Anything you do here, that’s up for grabs. But personal info security is kinda *personal*.”

Kirito took a deep breath, tension unwinding from his shoulders. “I’m... already adopted.”

Asuna blinked. Because it didn’t make sense. He was sitting right here beside her, human. How could he be adopted?

“Not by a youkai,” Kirito went on, as if the words were hard to drag out. “In the real world.”

What?

Argo’s jaw dropped, all her snakes focusing on the Black Swordsman like he was the strangest thing in the room. “Ki-bou. Seriously?”

Dark green shimmered in black hair; a minuscule nod. “My parents - died in a car accident. When I was a year old. My aunt’s family adopted me. I never knew.”

It was a good thing the bed was firm. Any softer, and Asuna might have fallen right through to the floor. *Really* adopted. She’d never known anyone that wasn’t born to their parents before....

Before SAO. Oh. “But you know now. Was there - did it show up on your menu?”

That brought his head up so fast she almost thought she heard a snap. “What- no. I found it in the registry.”

“The registry?” Asuna repeated, confused.

“The *government* registry?” Argo cocked her head at Kirito like he was holding out on a particularly juicy bit of quest data. “Who let you in there?”

A faint blush colored his cheeks. “...I hacked it.”

“You hacked it,” Argo stated. The same way she’d say, *so you hit the boss monster and it fell over*. “You’re a teenager - you can’t be more than that - and you hacked the registry?”

Now Kirito's gaze had a little of its usual impish spark back. "When I was ten."

"Menace," Argo declared. "No wonder you hack Draconic so well."

"I wish I hadn't." He glanced at Asuna. "I looked up my own birth certificate. I found out my name had been changed. That I wasn't a Kirigaya at all...."

Asuna had to look down. What could she say? She'd argued with her family, and all too often endured her family, but she'd never doubted they were her flesh and blood. That - she couldn't even imagine how much that hurt-

A tiny hiss made her glance up, as Argo crossed her arms and gave Kirito a sidelong look. "Seriously, Ki-bou? That all it takes to mess you up, a name?"

Something sparked in black eyes. "It wasn't just-!"

"Did they feed you?" Argo cut him off. "Scruff you when you were about to run into traffic? Give you *their name*, and tell you you're one of theirs? C'mon, Flash, help me out here. We got picked up by youkai, we know how it works. Maybe they don't *actually* grab us by the scruff, we're a little old for that; though I wouldn't bet on Klein. But they teach us what to do, and what not to, and how to fit in. They care."

Asuna hid a giggle behind her hand, thinking of Lady Tetsutora in full war-tiger form carrying Fuurinkazan's guild leader off like an oversized kitten. Though of course that would never happen....

Only from the rising blush on Kirito's face, maybe it had.

Impulsively, Asuna took his hand. Because Argo was right; but also wrong, in a way maybe you had to have grown up doing all the *right things* to see. "You were scared. Because you knew if people in the Otherworld found out, they wouldn't see *you* anymore. Just someone pretending to be a Kirigaya. And if everyone else saw you as not theirs, but your family said you were - they'd use you to hurt your family. Because they *could*."

From the way Argo's cheeks lost color, the info broker had finally found something that shocked her. "Seriously? Nobody could think that could even work!"

"Oh, it works," Asuna said darkly. "Families who have power, have *heritage* - it works, Argo. All it takes is one spineless worm in the right place, dripping his poison in the right ear. It's so easy to ruin people's lives." She gave the wizardess a flat look. "Think what you could do, if you wanted to bring somebody down. What you've done, to PKers."

Argo swallowed. "That's sick." She scratched under her hood, under and around snakes. "Sorry, Ki-bou. Guess I was kind of out of line."

"No," Kirito said quietly. "No, I - wasn't that brave. I knew what people would say, I just... didn't care. They'd lied to me. They'd lied my whole life. So I - ran away."

Shocked, Asuna squeezed his hand.

“Into games,” Kirito qualified. “Online. Anything that wasn’t the people I knew. They loved me, I know that now... but *they lied to me*. I didn’t know who they were; I didn’t know who I was. So I ran away, and-” He waved his free hand, but didn’t try to pull away.

“Kayaba,” Asuna stated.

That won her the Black Swordsman’s mirthless smile. “And here we are, in the one game you can’t run away from.” He breathed out. “At least I have that much now. They’re my family. It doesn’t matter who I was born. They’re my parents, my sister - I *can’t* leave them for anyone else.”

Black eyes fell on the mask again, wide and white with terror.

“And you don’t think there’s any other way to-” Asuna cut herself off. “Never mind.” Those eyes, the fingers trembling in her own... she could see how much he hated this. The Black Swordsman was down to his last desperate roll of the dice, betting on his knowledge of Aincrad’s lore and uncanny *feel* for the world to pull them through one last time.

I’m out of better ideas, Asuna had to admit. *If Beniryuu’s really one of the clearers - I have no idea who he could be. I’d have sworn everyone we’re fighting with was youkai. If one of them’s a red dragon, they must be one hell of an actor.*

Well, of course he is, a snarky bit of her mind that sounded like Argo *hmphed*. *Beniryuu pretended to be Kayaba long enough to create the NerveGear and SAO. He must be able to mimic a human perfectly.*

So they were down to one terrified Moonsword’s best guess. And terror and magic was a bad mix.

Especially with an item like this one. Pretending to be what you’re not... that’s way too easy to turn into a curse, if everything goes wrong. What can I do?

Asuna looked down at the half-gloved hand in hers; cold with fear, callused from ropes and rocky cliffs and the swords that never left his side. A warrior her family would never approve of, even if they only saw the lonely boy back in Japan. Which hurt.

But I think I’d like his family. The IRL one... and the one he’s made here. Even if the idiot doesn’t know it.

Or maybe he did. “It’s not just your family back home,” Asuna realized. “You don’t want Yui to hurt the way you got hurt.”

Black eyes were tear-bright. “She calls me big brother. And she can’t know, not if we’re going to fool Beniryuu, she can’t, she’s just a kid....” He swallowed. “And if we’re right, and we win - I’ll never get to explain. Even if I could, how could I ever tell her I- I care about her, but I can’t-!”

“And the way that little sweetie reads people, just touching them... do this, and you can’t even hug her again. Oh, Ki-bou.” Argo looked away. Swallowed, and cleared her throat.

“You could leave her a recording crystal.”

A shake of black hair. “It’s an artifact in the system. Kayaba has access. He could read it.”

Asuna blinked, and almost smacked herself in the forehead. She’d forgotten. Aincrad was so real. She’d *forgotten* that they were all data in the system... and the dragon who’d programmed it could search through all of it. “Then we’ll have to rely on Lady Stheno.”

“...It’s not fair.”

“No,” Asuna agreed softly. “But she heard your story about the curse too. She knows we’re trapped, and we have to break out. She’s going to be hurt, but - we can’t stop that. Having people stolen and hating themselves... that’d hurt her more.” She caressed his fingers, and gave him her warmest smile. “But I know you don’t hate her. You don’t hate any of us.” *And I’m never losing you again.*

It only took a minute to bring up the right menu option. “My name is Yuuki Asuna,” she said formally, as the prompt shimmered in front of her partner and Argo stuffed both hands against her mouth to keep from squealing. “Would you marry me?”

“Kirigaya Kazuto,” came the shy answer. “Are - are you sure? If we get back, or if we don’t... all I have is two swords and some magic, and on Earth we won’t even have that.”

Eyeing the prompt, Asuna gave him a level look. “No matter what world you’re in, you’re still you. You know how to fight, how to win - and when *not* to fight. No, I can’t do better than you, you silly! You’re the best partner I’ve ever had.”

Oh, that smile. It could slay a thousand dragons.

“Yes,” Kirito breathed, tapping the blue icon. “Always.”

Congratulations! Chimed overhead; the bell-note a lower accompaniment to Argo’s delighted squeal.

Oh no, Asuna thought, feeling a sudden chill as she and her new husband both tried to slide their gaze toward the information broker without making it *look* like they were staring that way. *Oh no, she didn’t...*

Argo had a screenshot crystal in hand, eyes sparkling even through thick obsidian. “I’m gonna call in all of Fuurinkazan. We’re having *such* a party!”

“...My answer is no.”

Seated behind his desk in the Knights of Blood’s headquarters, Heathcliff’s face looked carved from granite. “You... refuse?”

“I don’t know why you think you can keep Asuna in the Knights if she doesn’t want to stay. But it doesn’t matter. I told the Divine Dragons and the ALF years ago: I don’t join guilds.” Kirito kept his hands to his sides, and hoped any stray twitches would be blamed on the fact everyone “knew” he’d only been adopted days ago. Wings would be hard enough to manage; Argo would sell you exactly how long it took to get used to seeing through a dozen pairs of snake eyes, and it wasn’t something any player mastered in less than a week. “And I don’t duel.”

Standing to one side of the desk, Asuna bit her lip.

One silver brow rose. “On the fifty-sixth floor-”

“That wasn’t a duel,” Kirito said dryly, feeling scales brush against hair as one of the mask’s snakes glanced Asuna’s way. “That was an aggressive conversation.”

Asuna’s cheeks reddened, as she stifled a yip of laughter.

“Anyway I don’t have the time,” Kirito went on. Calm; he had to stay calm, no matter how much part of him wanted to plant two blades somewhere Heathcliff wouldn’t like it at all. A duel over what should be Asuna’s choice? What kind of man did that? “I need to adjust to my vision. Taking hours out of a day to put on one of the Knights’ spectacles is losing time I need to grind.” Because that was how Heathcliff liked to duel, in a grand arena where *everyone* could watch. For morale, he said.

It wouldn’t be good for morale if I killed the man in front of everyone.

That was the hell of dealing with PKers; he knew *all* the tricks to kill a player without getting flagged orange in the system. Too many of them because they’d been used on the Beater. Slash down an opponent’s HP until it was just over half, then unleash one more overwhelming blow - and with Dual Blades, he had just that-

Even in a duel, Kirito knew he could kill.

And I don’t - I don’t trust myself. Not now. Not with what he just said....

“The Sub-Commander is very valuable to us. Her ties to Caerulus, to Lady Stheno, Argo - so many magical resources for fighting and spellcraft. We need her leadership, and that magic, to keep the guild’s edge sharp; to finally clear Aincrad. But if you’re willing to meet my conditions, I’ll release Asuna if you win....”

As if Asuna - and his own revealed Dual Blades Skill - were mere loot to be squabbled over. Valuable drops, clawed into a guild’s treasury like gold from a dragon’s hoard, and never, ever let go.

It made his blood burn, darkfire dripping from his fingers despite almost two years of practiced control. It was *so petty*.

...And it was just what you’d expect of an ambitious guildmaster trying to snare a promising player before the competition could.

I thought all the clearers were better than this. SAO's not a game. Scoring points off the other guilds by grabbing the shiniest toys is stupid.

The Knight's Commander glanced aside, to where Asuna stood straight and ominously silent. "Surely, a few hours is worth it to clarify where we stand."

"I know where we stand, Commander," Asuna said steadily; hand relaxed, not near her blade. "I trust my husband to fight by my side. If I trust him to know when to advance and when to retreat, I trust him to decide what fights are worth it." She smiled at him, bright as steel. "So get going! We need you in fighting form for the floor boss!"

"As my lady commands." Kirito bowed, and saw himself out while Heathcliff was still sputtering.

Asuna is not a prize to be won. Kirito's hand drifted up toward his shoulder, before he consciously lowered it again. And I'm not going to dignify anyone who thinks she is with a fair fight!

November 7th, 2024.

Hilt's too close, the corridor's more than wide enough, why's the damn DDA swordsman crowding me-

The reflexive twitch would have almost bounced Kirito off Asuna's shoulder, if he hadn't noticed the odd blur to that part of his vision. The black angles of Elucidator's hilt were visible in that same blur, which meant the hapless DDA fighter was actually at a safe if not comfortable distance behind and to the side.

Almost three weeks, and the snakevision kept catching him off-guard.

How does Argo live like this?

It was easier when he was fighting. Then the black-feathered serpents mostly focused along the cone of his human sight, only adding shades of new angles to make sure nothing came out of his peripheral vision. Outside the focus of a fight... it was a good thing he'd played computer games with a rearview screen as well as forward vision in the past, or he'd have been completely lost.

Close as he was, the stray Divine Dragon barely glanced at Kirito. Good. At least Argo's rumor-spreading over the past weeks had people believing he'd keep the obsidian sunglasses on, making his gaze no more dangerous than Asuna's death glare.

Rubbing the silver ring on his finger, Kirito grinned. *Nope, she's definitely more dangerous.*

From a purely practical view, every clearer also knew he had cockatrice-venom throwing spikes. And any player fighting a boss would take a chance at petrifying one specific enemy

over the mere stun effect Argo swore adopted medusas had. So they weren't worried.

Thank goodness. Last thing I want to do is prove I can stun someone.

Because he couldn't. Argo had pulled off enough of a miracle as it was. Her mask and Connlan's bloodstone had given him a medusa's perceptions, appearance, and even claws. It couldn't duplicate a magical gaze.

Given who we're trying to flush out using it, too bad.

Then again, his best venom had only wounded Pollista. Beniryuu would probably laugh at a cockatrice spike, then use it to pick his teeth after a little clearer snack.

Which of us is he?

The group of clearers changed from level to level; outside of himself and the strongest of the Divine Dragon Alliance and Knights of Blood, he could never be sure who'd show up to a boss raid twice. Some people couldn't stand ethereal monsters. Others couldn't stand spiders; after the Adamantium Arachnid, no one could blame them. And this boss raid, on the seventy-fifth floor boss, where they knew Kayaba would have a difficulty spike - even players game and willing for the seventy-fourth had hung back. And that was *before* the Knights' scout group had tried to enter the boss room... and died to a soul.

Ought to narrow it down, Kirito thought wryly. With a boss that lethal? If Beniryuu wants this floor cleared, he has to be here.

...Or, of course, the red dragon could have finally picked up on the very quiet plotting Argo, Kirito, and a bunch of other silently furious players had been up to, and decided to let the whole clearing group get wiped out and start over.

Maybe snakevision makes people paranoid? No, Argo was always that sneaky- what is Heathcliff doing?

The translucent blue crystal was unmistakable; as was the swirling portal opening to *elsewhere*.

A corridor crystal? Just to save us marching through the labyrinth to the boss?

Granted, the monsters in a floor labyrinth could chip away at hit points and spells stored; even kill an unwary clearer, though that hadn't happened for more levels than Kirito liked to think about. Also granted, if the boss room was a crystal trap, Heathcliff might as well use a rare treasure now, while they still could.

Still. The casual way the Knights' Commander had brought it out of Inventory, not even a flicker of a wince on his face at spending such a rarity... it felt *wrong*.

Note it, Kirito told himself, walking through the shimmering passage to a sand-floored corridor just outside ominous doors. Focus on it later.

For now - they had a boss to survive.

Not a Duel

Chapter Summary

The plan was to find the 100th floor boss.

...There's no way this is a good plan....

Fourteen. Fourteen of us gone.

Kirito leaned against Asuna's shoulder, blue feathers half-wrapped around him as they wavered on their feet. Both their HP bars were lower than he'd like, despite the *cure grievous* potions they'd drunk, but he couldn't complain. With the shreds of healing magic that had fallen into player hands since Klein had called the Silver Flame, a reluctant high-level ranger had had just enough cure spells to keep the pair of them on their feet. Klein and Issin were laying *their* cures on the last players still suffering the undead corruption left in the Skull Reaper's wake. Moonswords didn't have to worry about that. Much.

Still hurts like hell, though... fourteen. I can't believe it.

"We lost a third of the raid." Asuna wrapped her wing tighter, voice dazed. "Seventy-fifth floor, we knew there'd be a difficulty spike, but... so many of us, this will *break* guilds, and where will we find more clearers willing to take on bosses like this, before...?"

Before we hit Recon's time limit, and everyone is yanked into Aincrad whether they're willing or not, Kirito finished silently.

He'd done research; he knew Argo was doing more. Nothing they'd found had given even a glimmer of hope they might be wrong. ALO had to be Beniryuu's backup plan; his way to deliver on his end of the bargain with Aincrad no matter what happened in SAO. After all, clearers might die. Players might give up, and retreat again to the Town of Beginnings. The Japanese government might despair of saving anyone from Kayaba's deathtraps, and unilaterally pull the plug on every player left. If Aincrad was going to play Beniryuu's part in the Draconic Prophecies, the ancient red had to have another plan.

I was in ALO. I fought there. The system recognized me. Even with Stheno's magic to transfer my spirit across the planes... we saw what happened with the bebilith. The game glitched around it, because Cardinal had no stats for a demon. But ALO handled me perfectly.

Which meant SAO and ALO avatars were *compatible*. Which further implied the games and worlds were compatible, and one could substitute for the other.

A backup plan. And there's probably a backup for the backup we don't even know about yet.

Bad enough what they did know about. If what little the swanmay had told them about Beniryuu's eldritch device was accurate, they had a year to break out of SAO. Maybe less. Before this floor Kirito would have said the clearers could have made it to the 100th level in six more months. Now?

Everyone's going to slow down. We have no choice. People are going to need more levels to tackle the next boss, we'll need to train up more people....

Two floors ago Kirito would have been all for slowing down. More time to advance meant more time to plot their escape; to take the shards of magic and lore they'd gained and break loose before a player ever set foot on the hundredth floor. Time to *win*, not clear the game. Now?

We can't afford to slow down. Not if another demon finds its way in!

They couldn't let a demon loose on earth. Earth had no magic, no divine power. Bombs *might* work; Aincrad lore said that if you did enough nonmagical damage fast enough you could banish a demon from the material plane. But the carnage even one demon could unleash before the army was called in....

And that's if there's just one, Kirito knew. If the hordes of the Abyssal Planes find the way to Earth - they wouldn't stop. They'd just keep coming.

They couldn't wait. They couldn't risk their homes, their families; all of Japan and beyond. They had to keep fighting.

Even if it costs us... everything.

Bracing himself against that shiver of terror, Kirito looked around. First things first. Killing a red dragon had to come later. For now they had to breathe, regroup; figure out who could go on, who needed a break, who was going to have to fall back to mid-level adventures because they just couldn't take it anymore....

Flash of red.

Heathcliff, Kirito told his shrieking nerves, as a few more snakes focused that direction and made blurry red sharper. Not as sharp as his own gaze behind obsidian lenses, but clear enough to make out silver hair and wings, the red cross on the silvery shield. *Guild leader, not another stray add.*

And for a moment he drowned in jealous fury, because Heathcliff could look through all the empty places in the raid and still be the perfect, noble knight. Face mild, gaze intent; noble and calm as a carved princely statue. And why not? *His* lifebar was still squarely in the yellow, not a sliver past half; even one last solid hit from the Reaper wouldn't have killed him-

I never saw him take a potion. Or a cure.

Carefully, very carefully, Kirito moved out from under Asuna's wing.

I could have missed it. The fight was chaos.

Horrible, bloody chaos, and the three of them had been in the thick of it from the moments the room doors slammed shut. No one else had been high enough level, *fast* enough, to block the Reaper's scything claws and stay alive. If Kirito hadn't hacked his own cures in Draconic so he could trigger them verbally, the pair of them would have been forced to rely on only the planar energy coursing through them for battle healing. They would have *had* to switch out, and more of the raid would have died.

Heathcliff didn't switch out, Kirito realized. He's draconic, he heals fast - but he's no sorcerer. Pure fighter, the strongest in the game... but he doesn't have cure spells-

Elucidator was out and gleaming, as he swung for the red knight's throat. Steel *rang*.

Immortal Object.

The world seemed to shade crimson, bloody as the sky on Opening Day.

...Found you.

The *clang* of steel against the system's defenses shivered down Klein's spine, even as he finished the last heartfelt prayer. Because everything that was supposed to be still alive in this room was a clearer, and all of them had better sense than to hack up the landscape. Weapon durability was your *life*.

Another add right after a boss fight shouldn't happen!

From the horrified silence that washed over the room, this was no add. Klein glanced up from Dynammm's sealing wound just in time to see-

Oh. Hell.

The purple hexagon winked out, as Heathcliff smirked at the furious Black Swordsman. "Well. Lucky guess."

"It had nothing to do with luck." Every inch of Kirito was focused on his foe, the medusa's black-feathered snakes all facing their prey; still, so still, barely hissing.

Heathcliff is Kayaba. Klein got to his feet, stunned, the rest of Fuurinkazan gathering behind him in shock. *Heathcliff is Beniryuu.*

He couldn't believe it. He'd listened to Kirito reason it out in stolen moments when the Moonsword had been able to cloak them from the system, and he *still* couldn't believe it.

And he's god-modded the system so he's a damn Immortal Object. We are so screwed....

“I wondered from the start,” Kirito went on. “Thousands of people, trapped to fight and die... even a human programmer couldn’t just walk away from that. He’d be watching. In the system. *Somehow*.” A slow, hissed breath. “And then we started putting the lore of Aincrad together. All of us. *Beniryuu*.”

Heathcliff’s slow, slow smile made the blood boil in Klein’s veins. Made him want to let the tiger loose for once, to rend and bite and *devour*.

No. Stop. Think, Klein told that red fury, holding it back with friendship and the touch of silver fire in his soul. *We planned for this. Even if half our plan was “oh gods we’d better get lucky....”*

“Really.” Red armor shifted with his stance, as the dragon in youkai form watched a swordsman’s stillness. “I’m curious. What do you think you know?”

“The twenty-fifth floor must have scared you.” Kirito’s voice would have been cold, to ears that couldn’t pick out that vibrating fury underneath. “The first floor almost broke the players’ will. The twenty-fifth almost broke them again, and I wasn’t stupid enough to hang around and play scapegoat that time. If you wanted to make sure the curse took, if you wanted players to set foot on the hundredth floor and trap themselves as youkai forever... someone had to make sure the clearers kept moving. Someone had to be the *noble hero*.” A twitch of pale lips; not a smile, but bared teeth. “Besides. It’s so *boring* to watch other people play a game. Why not get in on the fun? It wasn’t like you would die.”

“Kirito,” Asuna whispered. Sword half-raised, as if she still couldn’t believe it herself.

Can’t blame her, Klein knew. *Her own guildmaster. Bastard.*

The bastard who was *laughing*. Klein tensed, Issin’s hand on his shoulder just barely holding him back.

“Well,” Heathcliff mused, turning away, “it *has* been fun. I’d hoped to draw it out longer, until the ninety-sixth floor... but you already know what you have to do. Clear the game, or die.”

“Or don’t clear it, and be stolen into your war anyway,” Kirito said flatly. “That’s what you want, isn’t it. You want the youkai lords to win *in the worst way*. You’ll give them fighters, fresh blood; young youkai who’ll keep the Five Kingdoms from destroying them. And then you’ll sit back and watch as we destroy each other. The youkai lords want willing warriors. You want to make sure they’ll get people who hate what they are. Who didn’t have a *choice*. All so Aincrad exists - just barely *exists* - to keep your Prophecies intact.”

Heathcliff stopped.

Oh great, Klein thought, frozen; even the tiger inside wanted to cower and flee. *We got his attention.*

...Wait. Think. Why are we so scared? Yeah, he’s a dragon, yeah he’s the bastard who got us all into this mess - but we’re clearers. We’re stronger than this-

Draconic aura. Fear. You bastard!

No wonder every clearer was stopped in their tracks, and Kirito's knees were just barely holding steady. Even with all the magic of a ranger's *avored enemy* working on his side, dragons were just that terrifying.

But you're not facing him alone. Klein braced himself, and owned the fear; holding it in his mind like sharp-edged glass. *We're scared. We've got every reason to be scared. But we're not going to run. We're going to stomp this evil like spoiled grapes, and then set it on fire.*

We just need a little help, here....

"So a child could see what the Seer of Aincrad could not," Heathcliff mused. "I suppose there is some use to your world's repositories of lore after all." An armored shrug. "It will be interesting to see if that lore has kept you alive, when we all meet again."

Asuna's eyes flashed. "You're not going anywhere, you-!"

It was like getting a full-face blast of yellow musk zombie pollen, with poison resistance an epic fail. Klein felt his knees fold, and barely kept himself kneeling as every player hit the floor hard.

"I go where I please, little two-legs. You lived in our world; you took on the mantle of our power. Of our very blood. And now every clearer is enmeshed in my spell." Heathcliff stood over the fallen Black Swordsman, face carved and cold once more. "None of you can stand against me."

One final, dismissive glance, and the armored warrior stalked away.

Softly, Kirito laughed. "Beniryuu."

Armored boots halted.

On the floor, Kirito lifted his head, and then one shaking hand. "Did you think we didn't plan for that, too?"

It took everything he had. And maybe a little more he didn't; he could feel Klein's aura of courage flowing over him, buffering him against a dragon's supernatural fear. But Kirito lifted his hand and drew it down, just enough to open the menu.

Unequip.

Blurry snakevision vanished; the writhing sense of serpents squirming from his skull finally gone, as the mask with Connlan's bloodstone fell away.

I'm me again. Thank goodness.

It'd been hard, passing the last three weeks as a medusa; listening to the taunts of human players, the well-meant welcomes of youkai, the creeping nightmares of, *what if the mask gets stuck?*

Because it might have. Player-made enchanted items always, always had a chance to fail. And this one had been enchanted under Argo's hands, using Connlan's bloodstone as its heart; the bloodstone Stheno wanted him to have, and claim, and *be*.

We couldn't risk anything less. Less than one player in a thousand has what it takes to be a medusa. Beniryuu would never believe Stheno would let another youkai get their claws in me.

And Kirito couldn't risk taking the mask off, in case the exploits and spells he'd used to stymie Cardinal's watching systems weren't quite enough. Three *weeks*.

But it had come off. If he lived, he'd have to give Argo a box of the best sweets. Though she might have warned him about the snakevison *headache*. Ow.

There wasn't any other way. We had to smoke him out. As long as Beniryuu thought even one clearer was still human, he'd never have let his guard down....

Ice went down his spine, the warm aura of courage shredded by pure terror. He'd never. Ever. Seen such thunderous fury on a humanoid face. Literally thunderous; SAO's emotion engine had sparks crackling over Heathcliff's head from a mini-thunderstorm.

He's having a bad day, an impish part of Kirito's mind pointed out. *Let's make it a worse one.*

Drawing in a breath, Kirito took off obsidian lenses, and stood.

"*Seriously?*" It was almost a yelp from the floor. "Seventy-five floors, and *you're still human?*"

Kirito stifled a laugh; he hadn't heard a certain axe-wielding merchant hit that note of disbelief since the Ragout Rabbit. "Sorry, Agil. The less people who knew about this, the better."

"How." Heathcliff's voice was hammered iron. "Cardinal should have detected your racial status. Lady Stheno's scrying read you as one of her own. *How did you conceal this?*"

Kirito made his eyes as wide and innocent and *annoying* as he could manage. Even with mixed wizard, Moonsword, and ranger magic to draw on, he and Argo weren't sure quite how they'd pulled it off. Hacking Draconic wasn't as straightforward as it looked. "I guess you'll have to beat me to find out."

"Beat you." There was a growl under the words. "You can't *possibly* believe that would be a challenge."

"Isn't it?" In the real world, Kirito was sure his heart was beating like a hummingbird's. "You meant to face us all on the hundredth floor. Do you think some of us can't face you now?" *Calm. Keep calm. It's more insulting.* "Or is the great ancient red, Beniryuu, too afraid to make a little wager with a human? Say... about twelve thousand lives?"

“Wager?” A slight upward curve of those graven lips. “You may be human, child, but you’re still inside my world. You’ll tell me. The only question is how long, and how much pain.”

Lawful Evil red, willing to use torture and who knows what else, check. If I die, I hope it’s quick.

...I’m not going to die here. For all of us. I am not going to die!

“You’re right,” Kirito mused, feeling the sweat trickle down his face. “We’re in your world. Sword Art Online. So you have no choice. After all, you’re the final boss. Defeat you, and Aincrad is cleared.”

“Arrogant child.” Silver brows flicked up. Shield grounded, Heathcliff raised one dismissive hand, dragged down, stabbed one finger forward-

Nothing happened.

Slowly, Kirito made himself smile.

This is a sealed boss room. And I just triggered a boss fight.

No one gets out of here until one of us is dead.

“Don’t feel too bad,” Kirito shrugged, surreptitiously loosening his shoulders. “I mean, you’re over a thousand years old, but I grew... up... with computers....”

Shimmering crimson scales. Burning gold eyes. Fangs easily a yard long. And a huff of breath hotter than the gusts from Lisbeth’s forge.

He’s... a lot bigger than X’rphan.

And he had to pick now to remember he’d never seriously tried to *kill* the White Wurm of the fifty-fifth floor. Dodge, definitely; parry the freezing breath, and attack it just enough to get himself and Lisbeth clear of the lair, once they had the minerals to forge Dark Repulser. Kill it? That had taken a full raid.

And whites are the weakest true dragons.

I’m in trouble.

“I always thought it would be you who stood before me at the end, little Moonsword.” Beniryuu’s voice rumbled through his bones. “Dual Wielding was the gift I gave Cardinal, bestowed upon the player whose will and nerve made him the fastest of all.” Teeth gleamed, white as bone. “It was only fair, to give one blessing to the boy destined to face the lord of dragons.”

How long do I let him talk? Dragonskin is stronger than plate armor; where can I attack, and actually do damage?

“Faster and stronger with every level; it seemed logical that you had taken up Cato’s blood,” the dragon mused. “Your world, your games, hold surprises even for one who has seen a thousand years.” Another steaming breath; the red throat swelled with gathering flames. “But it will not be enough to save you.”

Spinning Shield as I dodge, it’ll be my only chance - oh gods Asuna is behind me-!

“Kirito!” Hands pushing against the spell’s weight, Asuna raised blazing eyes. “Solo! You always know when you trigger a boss; you always have a backup plan-!”

It broke the edges of dragonfear clouding his mind. Kirito raised his head, months of late-night planning surging back. “Contingency - *Kayaba!*”

The dragon flailed, burning in violet and black.

Darkfire, Kirito thought, braced and ready, as months of casting with Argo and any other magic-crafting player they could swear to silence fired in one massive *contingency* spell. *The power of Shadow, to cut through dimensions and hit anything.*

Beniryuu howled, fire-breath guttering, as silver laced through darkfire flames.

Divine power. The trickiest part of Argo’s spell-weaving, getting the Silver Flame’s power to cooperate against a curse-casting dragon. Though given the dragon was directly responsible for *murderous lycanthropic infections*, the Flame hadn’t been that hard to persuade.

And it likes Klein. It should, he’s more a paladin than any of us-

Trapped in violet and silver, the dragon’s form convulsed; blue sparks arcing from spine to spine, pulling and drawing Beniryuu’s body in on itself.

Risia’s power; Asuna’s power. Cold lightning against the heart of flame.

And more colors, more power; spell layered atop spell with all the heart and soul desperate players could muster, until even an ancient dragon’s magical resistance had to-

Air *cracked*, the implosion after a lightning strike.

Dazed, Heathcliff stood before them once more, armor slightly singed.

Kirito set his stance, lightheaded with relief. *It worked. It actually worked.*

In his mind he could all but hear the Rat sniff, because *of course my spells worked, Kii-bou, what were you worried about?*

“You forced us all to fight and die, cursed us to become youkai for your little war,” Kirito threw in the *polymorphed* dragon’s face. “*Your turn.*”

He could hear Klein praying, low and fervent, and hoped it’d pry that awful *fear* off the rest of the raid before someone’s mind broke. Issin’s firebird could heal bodies, but insanity was

something else. But Klein was just one paladin, even with a shaman to help, and from the trembling bodies on the floor... so far, it wasn't looking good for the good guys.

Sorry, Klein. You're probably going to be mad at me after this.

Klein would have waited for Heathcliff to throw off his spell-shock. Fuurinkazan would have given even a red dragon a moment to collect himself before beginning the duel.

I'm not a hero.

This isn't a duel.

I'm going to kill him.

Swords ready, Kirito raced forward.

Sometimes Asuna forgot how *fast* her partner was.

Fighting beside him, all that mattered was that Kirito was as fast as she was. That he was always, always in position to give her an opening to stab, or take advantage of the holes she'd carved in enemies' defenses. Even when she was just fighting low-level monsters for ingredients, she didn't let her mind wander; a moment of distraction could put claws at her neck, and if the system rolled a critical hit, even a displacer kitten could kill.

But right now all she could do was watch, fingers clenched on stone, and pray along with Klein as Kirito blazed across the battlefield like a night-black star.

Twin hit, Asuna registered. *Deep*.

Or it would have been, on any regular mob. Heathcliff's armor and skill at guarding his vitals led to most of the blow glancing off, even with darkfire gnawing at flesh and soul.

Kirito's faster. But - DPS versus tank. Not good.

Worse, versus a tank who knew exactly how to fight other players. Heathcliff *loved* to duel.

Asuna swallowed. *And this was why, Beniryuu always knew he'd be fighting us!*

Golden light blazed; she wasn't quick enough to close her eyes. But she didn't need to see to know what was coming.

Holy Sword. That shield-!

No sound of impact, just the subtle clink of shifty armor and whispers that might or might not have been one determined Moonsword making tracks. Blind or not, Kirito must have dodged it.

I wish he had the mask on. Argo said it was almost impossible to blind all her snakes.

Asuna blinked streaming eyes; she hadn't been the target, the blinding light should have had minimal effect. Yet even now spots barely let her catch part of the world fading to gray....

Familiar gray, laced with veins of violet. Masking a wide patch in front of Heathcliff in fog too thick to see through.

Asuna breathed out, hope creeping back. *Breath of Night.*

Kirito had taught her that invocation one time they'd partied together. It looked different for every sorcerer, hers crackled with cold blue lightning, but the effects were the same; an AoE centered on the sorcerer that only they could see through. As a guild fencer she didn't use it often, but for a solo who had to escape random mobs it was *priceless*.

From the angry curl of the Commander's lip, he'd seen the invocation before. And from his unwavering gaze, he thought he had a fair idea where Kirito was, mist or no mist.

Asuna saw how armored feet shifted, and knew. *He's going to hit the mist's center.*

Heathcliff charged, the cross-shaped shield vanishing into mist. Steel sang.

Sword Skill. Asuna tensed, listening to the pitch of it. *But no impact-*

And then there was, fast and furious and definitely *not* Heathcliff's greatsword.

Red armor staggered out the other side of the mist, trailing violet wisps and at least three new wounds, a truly outraged look thinning the fighter's lips.

Kirito... wasn't in the center? Asuna almost groaned. *Argo. Had to be something he got from Argo.*

That or Kirito had hacked the invocation himself. Her husband just wasn't happy unless he had at least three tricks up his sleeve.

And you didn't think you'd miss, did you, Commander? Dragons have blindsense. And that made Asuna's vision go red with pure fury, because it was yet another puzzle piece falling into place of how Heathcliff had come untouched through so many boss battles....

"We stand against those who would corrupt and twist the world," Klein breathed, fingers gripping silver. "Which would be a little easier if we could, y'know, *stand*. Not fair Kirito's facing a freaking floor boss on his own. If even one of us could give him a hand...."

Even one, Asuna agreed silently. *Please, if I could just fight with him!*

Her ears brought her a bare, familiar whisper through the fog; of night, and the dark beyond all night.

Moonsword. Asuna almost bared her teeth. *We have ways to handle blinds!*

Mist surged over Heathcliff, and steel rang on steel.

Red armor pulled free, a fighter's *maai* blasting the invocation to misty shreds. Heathcliff swerved to face his revealed foe, sword slashing across and down like an avalanche through black leather-

Through a wavering image of black leather, that took the blow with not a trace of gleaming red injury.

Displacer's Shadow, Asuna realized. *It has to be. Yes! Heathcliff never saw that used, Kirito's the only sorcerer with Shadow, he's got no idea how to face it!*

Elucidator shimmered, striking a yard away from Heathcliff's side-

With an ear-piercing shriek, the cross-shield braced against seeming air. Light blazed.

Eyes jammed shut, Asuna's hands clenched, thumping stone flagstones. Because Heathcliff had never seen the invocation but Beniryuu had *designed* it. Like he'd designed *everything* in SAO.

It was never meant to be a fair fight. How can we win when he made all the rules?

Argo's spell had worked, but it wasn't *enough*. Heathcliff's build didn't have much magic, but it didn't have to; his heavier strikes interrupted most attacks, his focused intent was cutting through invocations that touched him, and any of his blows that landed would punch through Kirito's light leather armor like it'd been made of paper. Without the Moonsword's constant use of Shadow, too many would have landed already.

Asuna swallowed, as Kirito ducked under one sword-strike by a paper's width. *If it wasn't for that crazy coat....*

The hide of an adult black dragon would be weaker than Beniryuu's own scales, but it was still the best light armor she'd seen in the past ten levels. Between that and his chestpiece Kirito could evade damage from most blows that didn't hit him directly.

Speed versus armor, and he's already exhausted.

"Let us burn away these chains of fear," Klein murmured, low and intent. "C'mon, we can do this people, just believe...."

Believe. Asuna swallowed, struggling to hands and knees. *I want to believe. But-*

She couldn't read the icons on her partner's menu, but she didn't have to. All Kirito's ranger spells were on cooldown, and while he had a sorcerer's invocations at his fingertips, no one could cast those forever. He'd burned most of his magic keeping them both healed through the boss fight, and there'd been no *time* to rest and meditate. He still had darkfire-

But Beniryuu is a red dragon, Asuna knew, fighting the press of magic; fingers brushing her rapier's hilt as she read the set of her ex-guildmaster's shoulders, the narrowed eyes that thought they had his opponent's measure, the brace that meant Heathcliff was about to pull a

shield-bash. Which made no *sense*. She knew Kirito, and his weapon stats. Fast as Heathcliff was, that bash wouldn't have a prayer of clipping Kirito's body, and no one with merely draconic strength could hope to damage those blades. *Darkfire cuts through magic resistance, but even polymorphed, a red's still going to have a dragon's stats. Which means fire resistance, and- No!*

Dark Repulser shattered, shards drawing blood from Kirito's face. Only reflexes and a blink saved him from blindness.

The status blinking in his vision was almost worse.

Stun. Ten seconds.

I'm dead.

And his ghost was going to haunt the Rat forever, because one of those spell-splices must have managed polymorph, but not the *baleful* polymorph effects they'd prayed for. Meaning the Heathcliff he was up against was humanoid only in outward form.

Red dragon strength. No sword would stand a chance.

Heathcliff smirked, bringing up his sword with deliberate slowness, angled for the perfect throat strike to kill.

At least I'll see it coming-

Red armor jerked, Heathcliff's smirk turning to painful surprise. Raised steel froze, quivering.

Kirito blinked, fighting the last moments of stun as a blur of blue and white resolved into Asuna's form, wings still spread in the beat that had driven her rapier through the gap under Heathcliff's arm.

Vital organs. Critical hit.

The wounded dragon huffed, lifebar bleeding away. "*Then shall human and youkai fight, and crimson fall like rain.* Who'd have thought the Prophecies... would hold here...."

Glowing white, Beniryuu's avatar shattered.

"Kirito!" Asuna caught him as he sagged, thumping down on her own knees as they leaned against each other and breathed. "I didn't - I didn't think I'd be in time... oh Klein, *thank you.*"

"Hey, anything for the lovely lady!" Still on his knees, Klein threw them a thumb's-up. "Just glad the Flame thought burning off evil dragon paralysis was a valid assist." Still shaky, he got to his feet, helping Issin up so they could get the rest of the guild moving. "Okay, dragon

dead. Or at least out of the game with a headache, anybody think he's *really* dead, the bastard. Now what do we-?"

The world rang, a chime sounding through every mind like the deadly bells on Opening Day.

"Final boss cleared. Automatic logout initiated. Final boss cleared. Automatic logout-"

Finding Your Lodestar

Chapter Summary

Waking up *hurts*.

But there are plans to be made....

It was like surfacing from deep water.

Throat feels... lousy. Kirito blinked, feeling what had to be a crust of sleep-sand thick as a silver coin crack and stick. Scrunched his eyelids shut at the sting, letting new tears wash some of it away; a habit learned hard from too many encounters with swamps, slime, and dragonbreath ashes. *Everything feels lousy.*

And heavy. Lifting a hand felt like trying to drag himself onto the deck after half a day lost at sea and treading water. Which had only happened *once*. Once was more than enough.

Everything feels... empty.

No animals. No youkai. No wild. Just his own breath in his ears; his own heartbeat, drumming away in a rhythm he hadn't felt in two long years.

Earth. We're back on Earth....

Get the damn NerveGear off!

He forced shaking hands to move; to lift, grip painted metal, and *pull*. Because everything was empty and it hurt so much but they were back. They were back, they were on Earth with his family, and he was not giving a damned backstabbing dragon any chance to have vindictive second thoughts with a brain-frying helmet.

Damn you, Beniryuu!

The NerveGear thumped onto the mattress beside him, curve bumping against his side as the cable bunched up white sheets. It hurt.

Sheets, no tiger blanket... someone's house of healing? No. Wait. Earth.

Translucent panels set in the speckled white ceiling, light glowing through. Plain white sheets on a Western-style bed. Japanese voices drifting from the walls, businesslike and formal with an odd edge of hurrying. A lack of green scents, almost covered by tangs of soap and bitter and possibly one faint wisp of coffee.

Hospital. This has to be a hospital. Kayaba - Beniryuu - said he'd give the government time to move us. Guess he had to make sure our bodies stayed alive long enough to snatch them.

Kirito made himself take a deep breath, hackle-raising scents and all. *He lost. We're alive. Asuna's alive.*

Alive, and he was going to find her. And his family. First step, get up....

Owww.

Sore muscles, check. Trembling nerves, check. Head-rush from lying down way too long, oh god check. Spirits, what he wouldn't give for some goodberries right now, even sitting up was exhausting.

Just treat it like a boss fight. Gather your energy. Pick when to move-

A tilt of his head, and strands of greasy hair fell in his eyes.

Oh. That's why my head feels heavy.

His hands seemed to shake a little less as the minutes went on. Good. Focusing, he lifted too-thin fingers, and combed dark strands back-

Resistance, that wasn't lank hair. Softer on the edges, slick flat surfaces to the touch, with firm streaks down the midpoint of each....

Vanes. Kirito's eyes widened. I still have feathers. Here?

Fingers curled around greasy tufts with a rush of pure relief. Soap, water, some preening oil - this was a problem he could handle. Unlike the daunting task of just standing.

But I have to. I've got to find the others - if I have feathers, what about everyone else?

Asuna's wings. Issin's ears. Klein's tendency to go clawed and furry under stress. In Aincrad, it was everyday life. Here? There'd be screaming. And potentially gunfire.

...Breathe. Don't panic. Whatever happened to the others, it can't be that bad. Or there would have been an armed guard in this room. Or worse.

Determined, Kirito pushed his feet to the floor.

Cold!

Not as bad as fighting a frostwurm, but somehow it *felt* worse. Like his body in this world was fragile as spun glass. Grrr.

Count it as a status effect and keep moving. Asuna's out there. Somewhere.

His toes curled against the floor, trying to find something to grip, as a wave of homesickness crashed over him. He wanted to find her. Lean into the warmth of arms and wings. Feel that

prickle of magic against his own, lightning to his shadows.

We don't have magic here. Just to hold her hand will be enough.

The IV was beyond annoying, but... pulling it out would probably be bad. He gripped the stand, and started moving.

Hospital means staff, nurses, other patients. Can I look like another patient? Long enough to- what am I going to do?

Find Asuna. Find his family. Find the others.

How, was a bit fuzzy.

I just want out.

And there was a beckoning light in the corridor, and room to scoot close to the wall as two nurses and an orderly hurried past him-

No cursors. No menu. Oh this is weird.

But the light that drew him was real light, not glaring from the ceiling. A window at the end of the hall, with the cold gray of a Tokyo November outside. Still. *Sunlight.*

He thumped against clear glass, chill seeping into his shoulder through the hospital gown. Leaned there, cold or not, all too aware he was near the limits of his endurance.

How do I open the window, how....

Which was a stupid idea. He knew that. He was weak, he was unequipped, he hadn't scouted any territory like the world outside in *two years*. Climbing out this window would be a worse idea than taking on a young white dragon single-handed. Which he had done - but only when he was *properly equipped*.

And hospitals were meant to be sterile environments. A hall window probably wasn't going to open for anything short of a fire.

Nothing alive in here. Nothing except people. Everything's empty.

It wasn't as bad as he'd thought it would be, all the world plastic and dead. It was *worse*.

Can't breathe, don't want to breathe... have to. Asuna's alive. Fuurinkazan's alive.

Air in. Air out. Concentrate on the leafless trees he could see standing near the other hospital wing, the traces of snow below, a flutter of brown across-

A sparrow landed on the window ledge; head tilting, as dark eyes peeked up at him.

Curiosity.

Kirito froze. Faint. Maybe his imagination, like hearing waves in the rush of his own heartbeat, or an echo of Draconic in one of the stray conversations as staff and nurses rushed by. But he had to try.

A deep breath, and he reached out his heart. *Curiosity. No-threat. Warm?*

Feathers fluffed in surprise. The little bird fluttered up, almost winging towards the flock scattered over lawn and branches looking for any stray bits of bug or seeds winter had left in its wake.

No-threat, Kirito willed; forcing what shreds of wildsense he might have outward to make sure there *was* no threat. He'd hate to distract the little bird if there was a stray cat sneaking up. *Safety. Relieved.*

With a chirp, the sparrow settled back down on the ledge, indulging its curiosity. And taking the chance to poke into the window's corners after a windblown crumb or two; he felt the press of other-hunger abating as the black beak worked.

I can feel it. The wild is out there.

Faint, and hiding between cracks in asphalt and concrete. But alive.

If wild magic is out there, then what about-?

Carefully, he cupped the fingers of one hand so people behind him in the hall wouldn't see. If this worked, he didn't want to draw terrified attention.

Sorcerers got so *tired* of the screams.

Like a spring bubbling up from inside. Darkfire... should be right....

Violet sparked in Kirito's palm, a raven-gleam of purple and black flame leaping against his skin. Cold as shadows.

Fear washed through him. *We didn't get out, not all the way. SAO changed us. Sooner or later everyone will know that. What are we going to do?*

And yet he almost wanted to cry in relief, because this - this was familiar. This was the magic he'd held for almost two years; the power that had kept him alive, that had saved lives, when everything else seemed lost.

He wasn't helpless. No matter what happened, no matter how fragile and weak he felt... even if a demon found its way to Earth, he still had a chance.

Oh, I want to fall down now....

Kirito wedged himself against the wall nearest the window; it was a little warmer than glass. He still felt wrung out, and fragile as spun glass. But so long as there was wilderness, he wasn't alone.

If there's wilderness, then... I'll get better. We all will. It'll just take some time. We won't be stuck in a hospital in the middle of Japan forever. Good thing; Klein was so far beyond steaming at me, I'm surprised the emotion systems in SAO didn't have him on fire. But the Fang's not aching, so he's probably not shredding the landscape-

A shiver struck. *I don't have the Fang.*

No Fang. No ring, a gleaming promise on his finger of love beyond death. No messages. No way to find anyone even if they were in the same hospital - and odds were they *weren't*.

SAO had players all over Japan. Who knows where any of us are?

Given he *hadn't* heard mass chaos - Klein probably wasn't here, or that patient shuffling down the hall away from him would be shuffling *much* faster. Meaning a *weretiger paladin* had just woken up in the middle of another hospital full of sick, terrified people.

Please let some of Fuurinkazan be with him!

And Asuna... even if some of her guild were *there*, she'd be alone. The Knights of Blood had just found out their leader was the same accursed red dragon that'd trapped them all in the first place. They were still in shock.

Hell, I'm still in shock. Kirito rested his forehead against cool glass. *I knew he had to be a clearer. I knew he had to be someone everyone respected, an ancient red wouldn't settle for anything less....*

And he even wore red armor; when all the other Knights were in white. How long was he laughing up his sleeves at all of us?

Well. He'd bet Beniryuu wasn't laughing now.

What if he takes it out on the people in ALO... no. No, think. By now Lady Stheno should have scryed him and told him what's going to happen. No handy curse yanking everyone into Aincrad. No factions, willing youkai against those who were adopted just to survive; fuses ready to light for him to blow the kingdom apart. Everyone who comes, is going to want to come.

Hopefully that'd be enough.

I... want....

He didn't know. He didn't *know*, and that tore his heart in two. Japan was numb and alien, but - his family was here. He never wanted to lose them again.

What do I do?

He didn't know that, either. But the last time he'd jumped into acting without thinking had driven a wedge into his family he... didn't know how to fix. Didn't even know where to start.

Could try, "I'm sorry, I was scared and confused and...." Right, like they'd ever believe getting stuck in a death game would get someone's head straightened out.

Damn it, why can't I ever know what to say? Asuna would know what to say, Klein would-

His jaw dropped, and he had to thump his head against cold glass. *I'm an idiot.*

Well, Klein had said that more than once, too.

You don't go into a boss fight without the right skills for it. You get a partner, a party, to cover the skills you can't. If you have to win that fight, if everything depends on it, if there's no other way around it - solo or not, you get help.

If he could find them, if he had even one person to stand beside him when his heart turned coward and wanted to run... he could talk to his family.

I hope.

No, I'm going to do more than hope. Asuna's my-

Erk. They were back on Earth. Among humans. Who didn't consider sixteen to be anywhere near adult, much less old enough to *get married*.

He had to thump his head on glass again. Gently, Asuna would bap him if he gave himself a concussion. Oh, this was going to be so hard to explain to his family.

No getting out of it. He breathed out, watching breath fog on the window. *And they'll love her. I know they will.*

So how do I find everyone?

Start with finding just one. He had Asuna's IRL name, that and a little internet research-

He tensed, nerves singing with *being targeted*.

"Oh *there* you are! I was so worried."

A tall brunette in a nurse's uniform, long braid hanging over one shoulder of her blue jacket. She adjusted her glasses, as if double-checking she had the right patient, a professional smile on her face. "You really shouldn't be up and around, Kirigaya. I know all the medical dramas make it look like walking with an IV is easy, but we need to take a few precautions first."

Her stance is balanced. Ready for trouble. Her eyes... she's watching everyone. Not just me.

And when a local fighter thought there might be trouble, a smart clearer paid attention.

The nurse held out a hand. "I'm Nurse Aki, I've been looking in on you during your stay. Let's get you back to your room so we can see about maybe getting that needle out."

During his *stay*? That was the most inane, *bland* way anyone could possibly refer to the whole trapped in a NerveGear coma mess, to say nothing of what had *really* been going on with youkai and dragons and....

Beniryuu has people here.

It sent ice through his veins, worse than Nicholas the Renegade's attacks. Because he'd *annoyed* Beniryuu, even before today, and red dragons weren't above revenge by burning everything you loved to the ground first.

From the way the nurse's eyes widened, he was bone-white. "Are you alright?" Aki frowned. "You really shouldn't be up--"

"My family." Kirito swallowed. "Are they okay? Kayaba - we know he had to have accomplices here." *And you could be one of them.*

No. No, that way lay paranoia, and getting locked up before he had a chance to find Asuna and the others. Beniryuu couldn't have people all over Japan. There were over *five hundred* active clearers; even a red dragon's hoard wouldn't be enough to have assassins targeting all of their families. Not to mention they'd been twenty-five floors short of the final level. Beniryuu couldn't have prepared any revenge this quickly. He had to *calm down*.

Aki blinked, then breathed out, smiling. "They're fine. It's just getting on toward the evening. It'll take a little time for the doctors to contact everyone."

That... sounded reasonable. Sane. But that *I am in charge* tone under Aki's words made youkai-trained hackles go up. She wasn't family. She wasn't Asuna. She definitely wasn't Fuurinkazan. And no one else was the boss of *him*.

She's human. She probably didn't mean to be a threat. Probably. "I just wanted to see some real sunlight," Kirito said quietly. "I didn't mean to worry anyone."

I'm not a threat. I'm also not moving. Yet. So what will you do now?

It was *odd*, how Aki's gaze weighed him. Not quite like a clearer's, but some of the same ingrained caution.

A brown brow went up, and she tilted her head. "Your family should be getting the message that you're awake soon. If you think you can stand a little longer... would you like some help getting cleaned up?"

He's awake! He's alive!

Suguha didn't hesitate, dropping onto the side of the hospital bed to wrap her arms around her brother and squeeze him tight.

So thin. Too thin.

But he was here. They could fix everything else. “You made it. Onii-chan, you *got out*.”

Everybody was out now, if the hasty message Suguha’d gotten on her phone was right; she hadn’t checked the news for details, it was enough to know everyone left was out, they were alive, and her brother would be coming home. She’d grabbed Recon and only slowed down long enough for their mother to email the Taskforce that another meeting could *wait*.

We don’t have to plan what we’re going to do when they get out anymore. They’re out. It’s time to bring them home!

Midori dragged the chair and Recon over to Kazuto’s bedside as Suguha finally let go. “Sit.”

“Um.” Recon stiffened, trying to back up. “I couldn’t, you should be together as a family-”

“I’m not giving Mr. Kikuoka time to reconsider your custody while he expects us to be distracted,” Midori said plainly. “Besides. You might be family eventually.”

That narrowed her brother’s eyes. “Custody?”

“It’s a long story and you can worry about it *later*,” their mother said fiercely. “After we’re all sure you’re still alive. Still *here*.”

“Mom.” Kazuto reached up as Midori leaned in, even if his hands shook. “I’m okay.”

She held him as tightly as Suguha had. “Are you?”

“...No.” Kazuto’s breath hitched, eyes bright. “But I will be. When I woke up, and you weren’t here... I knew you needed time to get here, I knew you were probably *fine*, but...”

“We’re fine,” Midori said firmly. “Your father’s out of the country, but he should be able to fly in by the end of the week.” She let go just enough to look him in the eye. “Is there some reason we wouldn’t be?”

Suguha bit her lip. Because she didn’t want to worry her brother, but she’d heard enough from her parents and Matteo to know some of the Taskforce was on their side, but some of them like Kikuoka were more with the government, and they were *scared* of magic. Or wanted it. Or both.

“After Beniryuu cut off planar travel, there were... consequences in SAO. I woke up, and you weren’t here, and I remembered he has people *here*, in Japan, I thought they might have-” Kazuto’s voice shook. “Red dragons have a taste for revenge.”

The way Recon winced beside her, that was an understatement. “Onii-chan.” Suguha *made* her face look serious, this could really be trouble. “What did you do?”

Black eyes glanced her way. “...It’s a little complicated?”

“Does it have anything to do with these?” Midori lifted a hand enough to stroke down one green-shimmering feather. “They’re a little odd. But they don’t matter. You’re my son.

Though if you want to dye all your hair green to match them we're going to have some words, young man."

Suguha glanced at Recon's white face. The way Kazuto had said *consequences*... she didn't think her brother had even *thought* about feathers.

What if the Taskforce didn't catch everyone? Kazuto thought - he really thought we-

Red dragons had an ego larger than their hoards, Recon had said. They'd rather fry people who offended them firsthand, but some of them *would* hire assassins.

There were reasons Recon lived with them, now. And not all of them were because of the Taskforce.

"Green-? No, the feathers didn't have anything to do with...." Kazuto took a slow breath, held it a moment. "I managed to fool Kayaba's authentication protocols into thinking I had certain flags on my user account. When he launched a flag-specific attack, I dropped back to the original settings and... er...."

"You tricked a red dragon." Recon drew closer to Suguha, as if he were both impressed and horrified. "How are you still *alive*?"

"It was a little too close," Kazuto admitted. "I have good friends."

Her computer-geek brother. Had friends. The world really *had* changed.

"I think you'd like them." Kazuto glanced at Recon, then back at their mother. "They're good people. I want to find them. If we hadn't all worked together, we wouldn't have made it."

"Then I want to find them too," Midori assured him. "Though that won't be easy. The SAO Taskforce has been keeping the identities of survivors very quiet." She frowned. "For several reasons. Some of them... I have to agree with. Anyone who wants to have a normal life after this *atroc*ity of a cursed game should get the best chance possible." She shook her head. "They wouldn't stand a chance if people thought they were all - worse than what Kayaba tried to make you."

Kazuto's fingers brushed shimmering dark green. "What we learned in-game-" He swallowed. "I hoped physical changes wouldn't carry over without shadow magic bridging the planes."

Great, her brother was going to blame himself for something else that wasn't his fault. "They didn't," Suguha jumped in. "Well, mostly didn't. Those government jerks on the Taskforce-"

"Suguha," their mother said dryly.

"They *are* jerks. And a lot worse," Suguha insisted. "The *official* Taskforce won't talk to anybody. But Matteo's got people who talk to her, and they say most people... well, mostly they're just really confused."

"Matteo?" Kazuto raised a curious brow.

“An alurin wizardess in our faction,” Recon started. Cut himself off, cheeks red. “Well, in the game. Outside it she’s helping survivors get therapy. Physical, catching up on classes, what to do now that you don’t have claws anymore... she says there’s plenty of people with thick nails, but she hasn’t seen anyone with real claws yet. You might be the only one with feathers.”

“And if we can take Recon with us on a walk through Akihabara in his true form without more than a lot of cameras going off, you should be *fine*,” Midori said firmly. Looked her son over again, and sighed. “But it’s going to take some time to persuade the Taskforce to allow you to make contact with other survivors. Right now they’re swamped by sheer numbers.”

“I have one name,” Kazuto said, half to himself. “I can find her. And if the two of us send messages... we should be able to find the others. If they want to be found. I know Fuurinkazan does.” He eyed Recon. “You don’t know them, but they’re a respected guild. They were in the clearers, and they’ve never lost a player. Some of them really want to talk to you. Especially once they heard you were partied with my *little sister*.”

Recon gulped.

“But since Klein’s not here to loom at you yet....” Kazuto’s gaze rested on her. “Suguha? What do you know about the Ethics Code?”

Okay, that was a weird question- no, wait, argh. This was her big brother, of course it made sense. Sheesh. Like Recon would ever get fresh if she didn’t ask him to. He was *shy*. She didn’t know if that was cute or frustrating. “It’s what lets you report harassment? Like if someone’s crowding you, or being icky... you *know*.” Though she hoped their mother didn’t ask for specifics. She was good enough with a sword that the ickiest guys weren’t a problem anymore.

Kazuto’s gaze slid past her to Recon. Black eyes narrowed.

Frozen in place, the swanmay went *bright* red.

Kazuto huffed, almost a laugh. “You get to live. For now.”

Midori was looking between the three of them, interested in a way that set off all Suguha’s about-to-be-mothered warnings. “Ethics code...?”

A hint of red touched her brother’s cheeks. Clearing his throat, he beckoned their mother close enough for a whisper.

Suguha strained her ears, wishing she’d managed to get keen hearing magic to work on Earth. All she could hear were embarrassed murmurs.

Midori straightened. Eyed her son, face fighting a smile. “And you know about this because...?”

Kazuto’s faint blush spread. “I have a girlfriend?”

“I *knew* your father should have had the talk with you sooner.” Midori leaned back, shaking her head. “Well, he’s not getting out of it now. As soon as he gets back to Japan... I hope you have her name?”

“Asuna,” Kazuto nodded. “Yuuki Asuna.”

“And again,” Yuuki Kyouko said firmly, hand resting on her daughter’s shoulder.

One more. Trying not to bite her lip, Asuna lifted the leg weights again, feeling a fine sweat break out as she tried not to shake. So far physical therapy, as Klein would probably say, well and truly *sucked*.

I wonder how he’s doing? I hope everyone’s keeping quiet about the weretiger bit, I don’t think people would take “possibly contagious depending on how Beniryuu’s magic worked” well....

“Focus.”

“Yes, Mother.” Asuna breathed in, and out. The hospital was genteel, quiet, and expensive, but the exercise rooms still had the faintest scent of sweat and exhaustion. After surviving two years of boss raids in SAO, she knew that smell cold.

I’m out. We’re all out.

Two more lifts, and she’d be done for the day. The therapists had been firm; no less than the rehabilitation schedule, and no *more*. Trying to rebuild wasted muscles too fast could do more damage than not trying at all.

“Asuna.”

“I just needed a breath.” Jaw set, Asuna struggled against gravity once more. She appreciated what her mother was doing. The Vice-Commander of the Knights of Blood even approved. Someone who wouldn’t let her quit was important if she wanted to get her strength back.

But once in a while Asuna wished she could get a hug, and have someone stroke her hair while she grumped and snarled about how *hard* this was, Beniryuu was a sociopathic scaly something-not-named-in-polite-company, and it wasn’t *fair*. Especially when every move was thrown off by missing the weight of wings.

She could imagine Yuuki Kyouko’s reaction to *I want my wings back*. It wouldn’t be pretty.

She’s already planning to death how to deal with my nails. Don’t... don’t let her know it could have been worse.

Asuna bit back a few more nasty Draconic swears, turning that fury inward to make shaky muscles move again. Because Beniryuu was a *jerk*, full stop. He couldn’t leave them alone and human on Earth, no. Instead he’d let just a trace of magic through. Just enough to make

people who hadn't lived SAO shrink back in fear. And yet she had no wings, no scattering of scales, and thick nails were a damn poor substitute for claws. Couldn't even tear thin cotton without bending back in the most painful way.

And no blue hair. Kirito wouldn't even recognize her.

Stop that. He's your... better say boyfriend, here. He'd know you in the dark.

And the traces SAO had left behind meant she was able to heal herself a little every day. She wasn't sure that was safe, who knew if planar energy would leave any kind of the same trail as souls dangling loose in the void - but if a sorcerer didn't use energy, it'd spark out when they least expected it. The last thing her family needed was for her to accidentally fry half the hospital's electric grid.

Better to use the energy and slowly build her strength back up. No matter what her mother and the therapists might think about her efforts, Asuna meant to surpass every goal they had. She didn't just want to walk, she needed to be able to *fight*.

Even if we broke the curse, Asuna thought soberly, bracing herself for one last lift. Because who knows if we broke it soon enough. And a demon might find Earth anyway. And even if one didn't, some of Laughing Coffin's still out there. Alive.

And knowing that hurt, in a way she didn't think she could ever explain to someone who hadn't been *there*. Beniryuu had trapped them all to fight and die, but Laughing Coffin, the other orange guilds - they'd *chosen* to hunt down fellow players and murder them. They didn't deserve to keep breathing.

But I can't say that. I can't ever. People would think I was crazy. Evil. Wrong.

And they already know we're... not right.

Hopefully someone here would do something about the player-killers. They'd killed before, they might kill again. It shouldn't have to be up to the clearers to keep stopping them.

Though even if Laughing Coffin were under lock and key... the Aincrad Liberation Front wouldn't be.

And that's a whole different problem.

Thinker and Yulier were good people; Yulier was a Moonsword herself. They had no grudges against the clearers, human or youkai. But Kibaou's bunch? They'd hated youkai in-game, and they might not stop hating them now.

How do I even start to explain that? Asuna wondered. *All my family wants to do is forget SAO ever happened. Sweep it under the rug and start over. Just say I was "ill and recovering". That people might hold grudges for things that happened in a game....*

And we haven't beaten Beniryuu. Not yet. Not as long as ALO's still running.

Which would be even harder to explain. Say that they were likely to get kidnapped to another world by magic? Her brother would blink, her father would quietly call for a psychiatrist, and her mother would bluntly state she was far too old for chunibyo syndrome.

I know it sounds like something out of a crazy isekai! Lowering her foot, Asuna tried not to groan. *Which is probably exactly what Beniryuu's counting on.*

If the dragon was still alive. Though she had to go with Klein on betting he *was*. Red dragons had egos the size of their volcano lairs, but odds were Beniryuu had enough respect for the youkai lords, at least, to suspect they might find a way to target him even in SAO. He'd have made sure he couldn't die from a mere *game*.

Like so many of us died. I can't even get the numbers out of the hospital. They say it'd "stress me too much". Damn it.

But with any luck she'd have someone to talk to soon. Whatever else the SAO Taskforce might be keeping under wraps, they'd set up a database for players to use for voluntary contact. She'd already used the site to send messages to the rest of the shocked KoB... and when she'd logged in, she'd found emails from Kirito and Argo.

She wasn't surprised Argo's had come in first. Information was the Rat's stock in trade, and Argo had never been shy about going after it.

Last we heard it was the 75th floor boss, the meat of Argo's email had run. What happened? Let me know you're still alive, 'kay?

Kirito's had been timestamped about three hours later. Which would have made her want to grab a skittish solo and *shake* him, they'd been married for weeks, why did he have any doubts she wanted to hear from him....

Except the tone of his email had been very polite, *very* formal, and asked if it would be acceptable to her family for him to bring *his* family to give their thanks to the upright and dedicated young lady whose noble example had inspired so many to survive SAO.

He looked me up, Asuna'd realized, after staring at those polished phrases cross-eyed and reining in her temper. *He had my name, Argo said he was a hacker - he knows who I am. Who my family are.*

Just thinking about it now made Asuna need to take a deep breath and sit on her temper all over again. On the one hand she was mad, she admitted it, because who she was shouldn't matter. She was still Asuna, still the Flash; the fencer who'd fought and bled and loved Kirito in Aincrad.

On the other hand... they weren't in Aincrad. And it did matter if she wanted her mother to even *consider* approving of a younger boy. Kirito might hate guild politics, but he'd played enough of them with his Beater stunt to have some idea how tricky dealing with the family that owned RECTO might be. He was putting his very best foot forward. For her, and her family.

Let's hope it works. Gripping the exercise equipment with grim fingers, Asuna forced wobbly legs to straighten, and lurched the two shaky steps to the hospital wheelchair.

“Asuna-!”

“I’m alright, Mother.” Exhausted, Asuna smiled anyway. “I can’t wait to get out of this chair for good.... Thank you for agreeing to the Kirigayas’ visit. I don’t think I’ll sleep well until I can see Kazuto is okay.”

“I don’t approve of associating with others from this... terroristic incident.” Kyouko’s jaw was set. “Your father put his company and his reputation on the line to continue supporting the SAO infrastructure and give the innocent the best chance of survival. That should be more than enough to ask of anyone.”

Asuna’s temper flared; she gripped the wheelchair arms hard enough to turn her knuckles white.

Wait. You know Mother. She’s not finished yet.

“But the officer in charge of the SAO Taskforce, Kikuoka Seijirou, is determined to bring Kayaba to justice,” Kyouko stated. “If the survivors must pool what they know to see a murderer is brought down, it is our duty. Kirigaya is the only survivor who managed to communicate from within the firewalls. The Taskforce will want details on how, and it is most likely they will interview every survivor connected with him. It would be best if we controlled their impression of your connection from the start.” She paused. “And at least he has manners.”

Asuna breathed a sigh of relief. She didn’t know why the Taskforce had clamped down on survivor’s names, but she was grateful to stay as anonymous as Yuuki Shouzou’s daughter could. The media might put together her “coma” and RECT Progress taking over the SAO servers, but so far they didn’t *know*. No one had footage of her in ALO.

Not of me. But I can see why Mother’s worried. If the scandal-rakers ever get a hold of the ALO recording.... All it’d take would be one media personality tsking on the morning news about, here’s a boy who came out of a death game and he “killed” those players, what if he does that for real?

Kirito *wouldn’t*. Not ever. Not unless people he loved were in deadly danger.

Like the truth ever mattered to someone who wants a juicy story. Asuna hid a wince. *Poor Mother. I hope we can do something to make her job easier.*

Because being a CEO’s wife *was* a job, as much as her mother’s career as a university professor, and it was an important one. It just wasn’t one Asuna ever wanted.

So far they’d done what they could to avoid the press. Kirito’s jaunt into ALO was out there in the gaming community, but who he was had been kept to the Taskforce and the upper levels of RECT Progress. They’d been paranoid about letting the info any further, especially since something had apparently happened to the director, Sugou Nobiyuki. What, Asuna

hadn't been able to find out, but the Taskforce had provided extra security for the company ever since. Given the hints her mother had dropped said the Taskforce might be backed by the JSDF... that was ominous.

Kyouko checked her watch. "They should be arriving shortly."

"I'm looking forward to it," Asuna said simply. Trying not to bounce with anticipation; she had to get better, being in a wheelchair just didn't let her pace the way she needed to burn off a clearer's nervous energy. Not that this was a boss fight....

It'd be simpler if it was a boss fight. So much easier to kill things than negotiate.

Across the room, the door opened, a blue-clad nurse peering inside. "Mrs. Yuuki? Mrs. Kirigaya and her family have arrived."

"They are expected," Kyouko stated. "Thank you."

A bow, and the nurse retreated, clearing the way for another chair.

Asuna's breath caught. The part of her trained to read a room and honed by commanding the Knights of Blood made sure she took in the serious woman behind the chair, the dark-eyed younger girl close behind, both of whose dark hair and features would have told her these were Kirito's family.

But her heart focused on the thin hands doing their best to push the wheels, the dark eyes that looked only for her.

"Mrs. Yuuki," Mrs. Kirigaya began, "Thank you for seeing us-"

Propriety could go die in a fire. Asuna pushed herself over in one fierce shove, half-falling into Kirito's lap as their chairs crashed together. "You're alive. You're *alive*."

Because she hadn't been sure. Reason said so, the messages said so - but she hadn't been sure. Not the way familiar arms and a hand lifted to stroke her hair were sure.

"Asuna," breathed against her ear. "You're okay."

"I am now." She sighed in relief, scritchng under shimmering green. The hospital's scents drowned almost everything, but this close she could catch the faint, familiar trace of cockatrice feathers....

Oh. Mother is... not going to be happy about this.

Her mother was a bit pale when she looked up. But Kyouko rallied, poised and polite, only gripping the handles of Asuna's wheelchair so her daughter could get back into it herself. "Kirigaya Kazuto?"

"Yes, ma'am," Kirito nodded politely. "Thank you for letting us meet again."

Asuna caught her mother's slight swallow, but Kyouko's neutral expression didn't change. "My daughter says she owes you her life."

"She saved me just as often." Kirito's face was still serious, with all the respect Asuna had seen him offer a negotiating youkai lord. "We worked together. I was better at scouting situations and bringing information back. She organized the clearers to take that information and make a plan that let us survive. A lot more people would have died if she hadn't stepped up and taken charge. You must be very proud of her."

Asuna blushed. It was one thing to know leading the Knights of Blood had kept the front lines moving, kept everyone hoping they might clear Aincrad and survive. It was another to hear Kirito say it.

For a moment, Kyouko was almost ice-still. Then she breathed again, looking from her daughter to Mrs. Kirigaya. "It would seem the Taskforce has been... less forthcoming with details than I would have expected."

"They do like to keep secrets from all of us," Mrs. Kirigaya nodded. "They weren't at all happy when I went to some outside contacts to determine what was going on with my own son." She took a step forward. "I'm Kirigaya Midori. This is my son Kazuto, and my daughter Suguha; my husband Minetaka is currently watching over our house guest in case someone on the Taskforce decides to press for another interrogation. That boy is still a minor... though I think you might want to speak to him as well."

"Interro-" Kyouko cut herself off. "You have someone in your care who was working for Kayaba." *And I didn't know*, that steel-straight posture said.

"Recon didn't-" Suguha reddened, looking away. "He didn't know everything. He's trying to help us fix things."

"He'd better," Kirito murmured.

"I think it will be interesting, to learn what else the Taskforce decided we should not know about our own children," Kyouko mused. "What do you do, that you have resources they did not?"

"I work in programming and electronics," Midori said plainly. "Much of my work is more documentation and editing articles, so I exchange information with programmers and researchers across the world." She smiled. "Kazuto's already shown a striking amount of aptitude in applied programming and technology. He's expressed an interest in seeing if there were a way to preemptively disable any attempt to use NerveGear in a malicious fashion, beyond just disabling the batteries entirely. And he was very glad to hear that Suguha has been using your AmuSphere."

Kyouko frowned. "Why would you allow your daughter to use one at all, given her brother's example?"

Asuna bit her lip. Her mother might acknowledge that she had common interests with the Kirigayas when it came to what the Taskforce hadn't told them, but Kyouko was determined

to make this as difficult for everyone else as possible. It wasn't *fair*.

Midori didn't so much as twitch as the bait. Just raised one eyebrow slightly, like her son in one of his *whimsical* moods. "Once I knew she wanted to try FullDive, I investigated RECTO and its products - and personnel - very thoroughly. You have a reputation for safety and reliability. Although I don't think Sugou Nobuyuki was one of your husband's wiser hires, given what's been uncovered in his personal files." She inclined her head at Asuna. "I hope you stayed as far away from him as possible. That man was... not right."

"I did," Asuna admitted. "He was- ugh." *Oh. So that's where Kirito gets it. Oh my.*

Kyouko straightened, undoubtedly about to clip out words on not speaking ill of a dead and reliable employee, argh, no matter *how* many times Asuna had told her the man creeped her out-

"I wanted to know what VR was like, because my brother was going to live," Suguha jumped in first. "And I was going to make sure I knew what he went through so I could help!"

"Sugu," Midori said quietly.

"...Sorry."

Not that Suguha looked sorry, Asuna reflected. But to society, the proper forms were everything.

And at least seeing them observed seemed to mollify her mother. "An honest girl. If one who ought to know how to speak more softly. But you took the wrong approach; you spread the damage further. We have all lost two years to this madman Kayaba. We should not let him steal more. It was a *computer simulation*. Only this world matters. Once he is caught, we should all... try to forget."

Asuna took a deep breath, trying not to let it hiss through her teeth. How did she even start to explain that Aincrad had never been just a simulation-

Kirito tensed, glancing toward the door.

In any world, Asuna would trust her partner's instincts. "What is it?"

Kirito gripped one wheel, ready to turn his chair toward potential danger. "I don't think people will let it be that easy."

"I'm afraid he's right."

Tall. Well-dressed; though even after two years in SAO Asuna could read that dark gray was an upper-level-government-salary expensive suit, not the truly tailored ones of the corporate world. Glasses, with thin hexagonal frames; just enough to make his eyes hard to read under the shade of dark hair.

"Mr. Kikuoka," her mother said levelly. "It seems there is a great deal of information you have not been providing to RECTO." *Or to me*, that glint in her eyes said clearly.

“Quite a bit,” Kikuoka said shamelessly. “Partly because of privacy, of course... but also a matter of national security.” He waved a sweeping hand. “I have a conference room prepared. Perhaps we should talk?”

Advice From an Old Wizard

Chapter Summary

As Obi-Wan Kenobi said, sometimes there are alternatives to fighting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Two months later.

“So we’ve got to go.”

Kirito leaned on the Dicey Café’s bar, warm cider in front of him and Asuna’s warmer presence beside him. And tried not to breathe too obvious a sigh of relief when Agil just nodded. They’d all talked about this one on one; survivors, family members, ALO players and their interested significant others. But this was the first time those who’d won or been shanghaied into the position of major leaders had gotten together in one place to meet and brainstorm what they wanted from the rest of their lives.

Because that’s what we have to plan for, Kirito admitted; nudging up closer, feeling Asuna’s chuckle vibrate through bones. Tensed at a movement from the table behind them - and relaxed again, catching Argo’s enthusiastic gesticulations about portal magic. Recon and Matteo were doing their best to poke holes in her wilder theories, while another dark-haired young survivor traded rueful looks with Suguha. Lightfall might be a good sorcerer, but he didn’t have the same geeky glee about taking magic *apart* that his sister did. *If you can open a portal one way, we can probably find out how to open one back... but it’ll take time. And we’ll probably never be able to send a lot of people through. Not if we want to keep the infernal planes from catching on.*

“Kathy’s good with going,” Agil said plainly. “We loved the café, but once it started getting out that SAO wasn’t a *total* kill... well, there are some creepy bastards out there.”

Asuna shivered. “I’ve read some of the emails sent to RECT Progress by relatives. They’re... I don’t know which are worse. The ones that are just grieving, the angry ones, or the Mishima-style crazies who think this is some massive plan to destroy Japanese culture by - how did one of them put it - *robbing the acceptance of the inevitable of its inherent nobility.*”

Kirito winced. The Taskforce had eventually coughed up some details on deaths and magic, after Asuna’s parents and his own had... *worked* on them a bit. Yuuki Kyouko had never once screamed. She’d never even raised her voice.

She was *terrifying*, and he could see exactly where Asuna got it.

“RECTO emails are bad, yeah. But you don’t know the half of it.”

The room’s gaze went to Argo as the wizardess shoved back her chair. Kirito had to blink, missing the whiskers on her face even more than the snakes that had lived in the brunette’s hair for months.

Argo took in everyone’s concerned looks, and breathed out. Waved, with a game version of her usual Rat smile. “Everybody here’s been planning what we should do now, which is good. But I’ve been poking through chat rooms and the online rumor mills to keep track of the reactions to us waking up, which are... not good.”

If she hadn’t had the whole café’s attention before, Kirito knew, she had it now. “What have you found?” He leaned back a little. “And how much gold does it cost?”

That got a ripple of snickers from the room. Argo gave him a quick grin, then sobered. “This hits all of us, so it’s on the house.” She scanned the café. “It’s not just random kooks writing hate mail, and it’s not just clearers and RECTO getting stalked. If everybody who’d died just died... that’d be horrible, but the families could blame Kayaba. But not all of us died.”

Beside Suguha, Lightfall twitched. Matteo put a comforting hand on her brother’s shoulder. “Easy, little bro. Breathe.”

Not all of us. Kirito hid a wince, running the numbers in his head. Dying in SAO had been about a fifty-fifty shot. So long as a player had fought to the bitter end... they still didn’t know what criteria Beniryuu had used, but half those players had been very surprised to wake up alive.

Everyone who’d suicided, was dead.

“The Taskforce tried to sit on that,” Argo forged on, “but with everybody awake now... don’t ask who, don’t ask how, we had hospitals all over Japan mixed up in this, someone was bound to talk. And they did. Word got out that some of us survived when we should have died. And that’s made some folks angry.” Her gaze fell on Kirito. “You know how that goes. People get mad, they start looking for someone to blame. And face it, people. On Earth, we’re the weird ones. We’re easy to blame.”

Kirito tried not to flinch. “So it’s not just whether we want to go or not. It may not be safe for our families if we stay.”

Asuna gripped the bar, then breathed out. “My family will be fine. They have security. Everyone else - Argo’s right, it’s a risk. I don’t think it’s a huge risk, the police will be able to detain people who make obvious threats, but if even one person makes a crazy plan and doesn’t talk before they act... well. Laughing Coffin.”

“That could explain a few things that came up recently,” Matteo mused.

Oh no. Kirito felt his stomach sink. “What things?”

“Ooooh boy.” Matteo pushed her hands through her hair, dark strands catching on one finger before she disentangled it. “You have to kind of read between the lines of what the Taskforce is admitting to, but... bottom line, Kikuoka and his guys may want to keep a good grip on magical research, but they still think we’re citizens, with a right to say no and walk around like anyone else. Only it looks like higher-ups in the government want to disappear - ahem, *firmly encourage* anyone with sorcery to do their civic duty and join their black ops studies.”

A moment’s silence held the café. Then - Klein wasn’t the only one who growled.

“You know, what scares me is this is probably what they think is being *nice*,” Matteo grumped. “Work for the government, rather than be thrown into some inescapable pit for being too creepy to live.” She held up her hands at Lightfall’s wounded look. “Hey, I think magic is beyond cool, bro, and I’m going. Most people... special effects in the movies, cool. Realizing someone can actually turn you into a newt? Kind of terrifying.”

“Just goes to show they don’t get how magic works. Any spell can be broken. Hell, we proved that inside SAO.” Agil stopped polishing a glass, grim. “Argo? Make sure everybody got the news that a mercy kill wasn’t permanent. I had some bad nights until Lightfall dropped that email.”

“So did I,” Kirito muttered. *Though most of mine were in Aincrad, not here.*

He wondered how many nightmares Matteo had had, after finding out her brother had survived a fate worse than death. And how brave the wizardess had to be, after seeing the message Kirito had gotten out, to keep working in ALO *knowing* it was the gateway to Beniryuu’s curse.

You’d do it, if it’d been Suguha who was trapped and had to decide what world to claim. Kirito breathed out. And Matteo’s trying to help all the survivors. If she has the courage to come, we’d be fools not to take her.

“Every Moonsword had bad nights,” Asuna said quietly. “And all of us who... couldn’t help any other way.”

There was something oddly comforting about Agil’s nod. Maybe it was just remembering what a were-terror bird could do to an enemy, with or without an ax. “That’s one of the reasons you’re going, huh? Besides the whole idiot politicians mess. Keep other people from going through that.”

A quiet footfall was Kirito’s only warning, before a grinning redhead’s arm dropped over his free shoulder. “Course it is. Heck, that’s one of the reasons *I’m* going.” Silver gleamed at Klein’s throat. “The Church of the Flame’s probably going to throw a fit, but I’m going to get some of their paladins onto ‘just smite the *evil* youkai’ path if I have to drag them kicking and screaming. I owe the big ball of fire that much. Plus somebody’s got to bring along the healing spells for you two. You get into waaaaay too much trouble for battle healing to handle.”

He was not going to blush, Kirito told himself. Even if he didn’t get into *that* much trouble.

....Usually.

“You’re right,” Kirito said instead. “In Aincrad... no one’s lucky enough to wake up from a mercy kill. They need help. I want to.” He took a breath. “But that’s not the only reason I’m going.”

Asuna nodded at his glance. “Beniryuu read the Prophecies, and one of them made him target Earth. We know he’s old, respected, and powerful. So if one ancient dragon interpreted the Prophecies that way - why not others?”

Klein whistled. “That? Is a scary thought.”

“Amen to that.” White-knuckled, Agil put the glass down before he broke it. “Still. Can’t be that many ancient dragons willing to pull off coming to a whole other world and playing human.”

“They don’t have to,” Kirito said grimly. “Beniryuu knows Earth exists. If he found it, other creatures can. One demon almost got to Earth through us. What if someone gave another demon a planar map? Or the daelkyr? Or the quori? Earth barely has anything to defend against *magic*. What happens if one of those psionic dream-monsters plants a *mind seed* in some world leader and starts World War III?”

“And I didn’t have enough nightmares,” Agil muttered.

“Urk,” Klein agreed.

Asuna nudged Kirito, and gathered both warriors in with her glance. “It could happen. It probably won’t... but we have to make plans for the worst-case scenario. That’s part of why we’re going - to try and make sure nothing like it ever happens.” Her voice softened. “But there are so many good reasons to go. Happy ones.”

“Grandma Tiger.” Klein disentangled himself, accepting the drink Agil poured without asking. “And that cute little thing you two are going to adopt as soon as you get there, I just bet.” He wagged red brows. “How are your parents taking being grandparents this young?”

Kirito couldn’t help it. He groaned, dropping his head to the bar.

Asuna giggled. “For him, it gets worse.”

“Worse?” Klein’s words were slightly muffled by Kirito’s determined meeting of forehead and polished wood. “Wait, don’t tell me you told them about Yui and they don’t like her!”

“Oh no.” Another giggle from his girlfriend. “They like the idea a lot. They never had time for it here in Japan, but Mrs. Kirigaya wants a whole *house* full of children.”

“Um, okay...?” Klein ventured.

Kirito sighed, and lifted his head. Better to get it over with. “Mom and Dad both like the idea. So they plan to take in orphans like Recon... and they made younger avatars. We’ll see if they

translate on the other side. If they don't alter much else - Argo thinks there's enough magical similarity that it could work."

Klein blinked at him. "How much younger?"

"Your age," Kirito admitted.

"You mean-" Klein cut himself off, eyes wide. "They want kids. Oh my god, a whole clan of baby Kirigayas?"

"Aincrad will never know what hit it," Agil agreed, grinning.

"It's not funny," Kirito muttered. "Sugu's *terrified*." *So am I*. It was one thing to want to take care of Yui, she was old enough not to break when they hugged her. Babies were so *tiny*.

"Kirito. Buddy," Klein said solemnly. "If you two are serious, and I know you are, you're going to have to deal with bitty humanoids one of these days. Got to learn sometime, right?"

The sound that escaped Kirito might have been something like *gurk*. Despite Asuna nudging up warm against his side. Or maybe because.

"They're not as scary as they look," Klein persisted. "Honest."

"Neither is a Caller in Darkness," Kirito said dryly.

"Eh, he knows what he's talking about," Issin put in from where Fuurinkazan - minus one - had claimed a table. "He keeps sneaking into the kids' ward to lay on cures. Softy."

"Am not!" Klein protested. "It's just, well, *kids*, and the world didn't cut 'em a break...."

"Just as long as someone watches the doors," Asuna warned. "The last thing you need is to get caught before we can set up portals to trade medicines and healing knowledge between the worlds."

"Yeah, yeah, we know what we're doing- wait, what?" Klein's attention snapped to her, Issin's right behind. That drew the rest of Fuurinkazan, even Dynamis, still moping over Tae.

"Are you serious?" Issin fixed her with a level look. "Even if we can get portals working, most herbs I know about are just good for Aincrad ailments."

"That's what we know they work for," Asuna agreed. "Who knows what else they might cure over here? Or if they can be made to work better, as standardized medicines? New medicines, new dyes, new ways to patch someone up after surgery... Kirito and Argo can hack Draconic as a programming language. It might open up whole new avenues for computing! Why do you think my mother's letting me go? This is an opportunity that comes along once in a lifetime, and she wants RECTO in from the start." She turned that same sober gaze on Kirito. "And it goes both ways. Healing magic is good, but sometimes things don't heal just right. What if - oh, say, we could bring in trained surgeons to make sure all the bits of shattered bone went back together before we heal someone's leg? It'd give better results than either healing or surgery could do on their own...." She trailed off, reddening.

Kirito said nothing. Just kept smiling. Asuna in planning mode was awesomely terrifying.

“A-Anyway,” she rallied, “my family’s not happy... but they think we can make this work. On both sides.”

“Let’s hope so.”

Asuna stirred. “Lady - Sayuri?”

The university student turned her drink around in her hands. “I’ve spent the past year trying to catch up on... well, everything. Politics. Tactics. Strategy. Everything a noble leader should know. Trying to learn it myself, trying to find people who can learn the things I’m no good at, trying to make sure the other faction leaders are doing the same....” She gulped down amber liquid. “I’m scared to death.”

“Good,” Asuna stated.

Beside her, Kirito nodded. That was the Vice-Commander, gauging if a clearer was up for the fight. And Asuna thought Sakuya was.

Sakuya started. “Good?”

“If you weren’t scared, I wouldn’t want to follow you. And I know I do.” Asuna leaned back, smiling. “After all... you made sure we’re going to have *chocolate*.”

It’s today. Standing in the sunlight in the floating castle’s main courtyard, Stheno hugged Yui close. In the center of the open ground, mithril and platinum chains glittered in the sun, binding dragonshards, vials of uncanny blood, a bone from every youkai race, and all the myriad artifacts the lords of Aincrad had gathered to link to the smoke-gray box of Beniryuu’s unearthly creation; what she now knew was called a desktop computer. *If they’re coming, they’re coming soon.*

If. Her visions - her hopes - said yes. Common sense, though....

The embodiment of common sense huffed a breath behind her; Queen Euryale, regal and glittering in her snake-laced crown and fighting armor. “We should be on the battlefield.”

“Which one?” Stheno said dryly. “The air war near Swiftwater Pass? Much as I might wish to deal a lesson to Breland and Thrane at once, airship sailors are hard to target with gaze weapons, and too far above for my magic to easily strike at the elemental bindings that keep them aloft. The shifter raiders out of the Eldeen Reaches? We should capture some of them alive, if we can; their assaults are coordinated too well with the airship attacks to split our forces. They must be communicating with at least the Brelish airships, somehow. If we could block that we might give our forces breathing room. Or did you wish me to haunt the purified lands in Aincrad? Where Karrnath swears their priests would never venture... yet somehow, we see more and more undead arising, despite all our efforts to cleanse earth of all taint.”

Her sister indulged in a rare roll of eyes; Euryale knew as well as she did petrification couldn't touch the undead. "Our spies have at least uncovered that Aundair's promised the shifters trade benefits. And more importantly, less border raids."

For some stupidity, only a player's *facepalm* sufficed. Stheno dragged a breath past her splayed fingers, then deliberately lifted her hand away. "And the shifters fell for it."

"According to our swanmay agents, Aundair is holding to their word. For now." Euryale's silvery cobras hissed and snapped. "Of course, as soon as we're weakened enough for those of Eldeen to start advancing their warriors in force... there's a very suspicious buildup of Aundair troops and mages, about twenty miles in on the Aundair side of the Eldeen border."

"Weaken us, weaken the independents of Eldeen so they can take it over again and finally have enough territory to threaten Breland again...." Stheno sighed. "Any or all, the magelords would favor."

"I am strongly considering," Euryale stated in measured tones, "detaching a party of those with mass destructive magics from the battle lines onto a deep-strike mission into deliver a shattering quake to the isle of Thronehold."

One of the paths I saw, Stheno swallowed hard, as Yui shivered against her, and made herself calm so the little psionic wouldn't breathe in her fear. *One of the worse ones*. "Restarting the Last War won't help."

Euryale glanced down at the hatchling, and softened her next words. "Sister. We're... running out of time for less extreme measures. Damn Beniryuu."

"Sister!" Stheno hissed.

But Yui smiled, if it was a little shy. "Klein said a lot worse than that about Beniryuu. And Kirito *thought* it." She blinked up at the queen. "You think he told the Five Nations we were going to get help?" A tiny swallow. "He doesn't want the Nations to win, he doesn't want to leave us alone - he just wants us to *fight* each other. And keep fighting, and never solve anything! How can anyone want everyone to hurt each other like that?"

Euryale reached down to ruffle black hair and snakes. "He's a dragon-"

Yui bristled. "Caerulus is a dragon and he's not like that!"

"Caerulus is a *very strange* dragon," Euryale said solemnly. "Besides. He likes his lair right where it is, on the border between here and the Shadow Marches, so no one ever tries to burn his books again. And you know the first rule of dragon lairs, right, little one?"

Yui nodded emphatically. "Never mess with a dragon's stuff!" She winked. "Unless you want them *really mad*."

Euryale stifled most of a laugh. But her deadly eyes were dancing. "Your strange friends would think so, little Yui."

"A pity we can't mess with Beniryuu's," Stheno murmured.

Euryale gave her a quick glance. “Valentine still hasn’t tracked down his new lair?”

“Not yet,” Stheno sighed. Vincent had invaded every last one of Beniryuu’s old lairs as soon as they knew the players had logged out. Not alone; even the strongest elan ranger couldn’t face a red dragon alone and hope to tell the tale. He’d taken Zack’s pack with him as well. Which had taken more time. Not much, but - apparently, more than enough for a prepared red dragon to utterly *vanish*.

We’ll find him. Somewhere. Somehow. I am Stheno of the True Sight; I will find him. For what he did... and what he tried to do.

She hugged Yui close, trying not to second-guess every decision she’d made this past decade one more agonizing time. She’d taken Beniryuu’s bargain, knowing it was dark, hoping to find some last flicker of light for her people. She had no right to wail at the gods now, if the red dragon had truly shattered their last hope.

Not for myself, no. But the children. I will save our children.

If all else failed... she knew enough of magic and the planes. She’d see Yui safe, in the arms of those who would care for her.

Though what Japan will make of a medusa....

Snakes shifted against an intricate crown. “They’re not coming.”

Stheno rubbed Yui’s shoulder, breathing deep. “Be patient.”

“Patient?” Euryale’s growl was subdued for the hatchling, but all too clear. “They’d be fools to come, knowing what they know. Even if they have no idea we’re under assault right now, they learned enough of our lore to realize the Five Nations have their own ways of scrying the future. And they won’t let this pass unchallenged. They’ve seen it coming-”

Stheno straightened, a tingle of the Planes passing through her bones. “They won’t see this coming.”

It started with a flicker of sun off the chains; a spark, no larger than a firefly....

The spark bloomed, shimmering into a light the size and shape of a man. Power gathered, more sparks flying; a dozen, no a myriad of lights, blazing into life in Aincrad’s main courtyard, more and more-

Two dozen. No, fifty. No, more than that, far more; gods, there were only a few hundred clearers, how many chose this-?

Stheno squinted against one particularly bright fire. Far too big to be a person, more the size of a small dragon. Yet nothing alive, not unless gelatinous cubes were native to Earth; a massive rectangle with lacings of darkfire everywhere, radiating from four corners-

That light died, solidifying into a massive box of steel wreathed about with enchanted ropes, even as more sparks flew and bloomed into breathing bodies. Stheno only had eyes for the

small group clustering at one rope-tied corner. One medusa, one blue-winged draconic, the green-haired swanmay who was one of Euryale's agents... and four humans, all of whom looked alike enough to be family even if one had feathers and the younger girl was blonde.

Stheno knew those feathers, even before Kirito blinked off the shock of transit, and looked up at her. And smiled.

He came.

The ice in Stheno's soul thawed, and she could breathe again.

"I told you it would work!"

Stheno hid a smile as Argo bounced in glee. So the wizardess had pulled off yet another impossible magic. "They should never have doubted you," she agreed, walking over as swiftly as Yui's legs could match. "But what, exactly, worked?"

"Lady Stheno!" Argo's eyes were bright behind obsidian glasses. "I don't think it would have worked if we didn't have a whole family tied together by shadow magic...." She waved at red-painted, corrugated metal, half-covered in sacred ropes of talismans and inked sigils. "We brought stuff! And books! And *information*." Another, more subdued bounce. "And there's Lady Sakuya, and Lord Mortimer, and General Eugene, the other faction leaders ought to be here real quick... I'm going to take them to Queen Euryale, milady, if you guys are as backed to the wall as Recon thinks the leaders need to start plotting right *now*." She waved at Yui, who blinked and waved back. "You catch up with your family, Yui. Your Aunt and Uncle have been just dying to meet you."

"My...?" Yui blinked, and shook her head, finally letting go of Stheno's skirt to run to Asuna, thumping into outstretched arms with tears of relief. "You came back! You all came back!"

"We weren't going to leave you alone." Asuna hugged her tight. "Not ever."

"We came as soon as we could." Kirito moved in to rest a hand on dark hair and stroke the two nearest snakes, shoulders easing. "And look over there. See? Klein came back, too, and I bet he's going to try and take us down with snowballs again just as soon as winter gets here."

From the way Fuurinkazan had gathered around Tae and Dynammm, cheering as black wings wrapped around white, Stheno imagined snowball fights were the last thing on their minds. But there would be time for that. Later.

We'll have a later. Stheno surreptitiously wiped away a tear. Dust. Of course. *Aincrad will survive.*

And right now she thanked all the gods that formalities were Euryale's job, as the leaders of the players plus Argo had started pulling out maps and discussing exactly what shape Aincrad's borders were in and where to best start shoring up the lines. Her part in the planning would come later, after those who commanded had decided what was possible. For now... she could meet those who had chosen to do the impossible.

Or try to. Her feet couldn't quite cross the gap.

I hurt them so much.

But Kirito turned toward her, dark eyes warm. "Mom, Dad, Sugu; this is Lady Stheno, the Seer of Aincrad. Lady Stheno, this is my family. My father, Kirigaya Minetaka; my mother Midori, and my sister Suguha."

His parents. His sister. Stheno breathed out, and dared to move again. *He knows they are his, and he is theirs. How could I have ever wanted to take away that joy-?*

Wait. Something was not quite right, as she studied the young mother and father before her. Granted, she'd spent most of her life around youkai, but centuries had taught her something about humans. "Forgive me, I didn't think human parents would be so young."

Midori grinned at her; an echo of her son's most mischievous plotting. "Kirito and the others said the magic would alter us to match our avatar. We thought we'd take advantage of it."

Still giving the medusa a considering look, Minetaka nodded. "If I'm going to take up actual kenjutsu again, it'll be a lot easier at twenty than-" He cleared his throat. "A little closer to fifty than I'd like."

Stheno hid a sudden giggle behind her hand. Because it was outrageous and world-breaking and made *so much sense*.

They know exactly how to come up to the edge of the rules without breaking them, in ways no one ever thought of before. Another giggle. *They have to be Kirito's parents.*

And they'd chosen to come with him, rather than bind their son in their own world. It gave her the oddest flutter of hope.

Minetaka glanced at the dark hilt above his son's shoulder. "European longwords. This could get interesting."

Kirito ducked his head. "Klein could show you this world's kenjutsu. And Grandma Tiger is *wicked* with a naginata."

"Now that I'd like to see." Minetaka straightened. "Sugu?"

Kirito's sister had a death-grip on Recon's wrist, despite the young swanmay's best efforts to twist out of it. "Is Recon in trouble?"

Stheno eyed her, then Recon. Deliberately lifted her gaze, taking in all the lights still blooming into lives even as the players now filling the courtyard passed a thousand. "If it should chance that he is, *I will deal with it.*"

Though she rather doubted Euryale would have the time to chastise her young agent, even if the queen had wanted to. Not with the scattered exclamations and downright snickers she could overhear from Argo's group of leaders as they explained how they'd brought as much as they could of what player crowdsourcing considered "absolute necessities for a Mass

Transport event”. Including cacao seedlings, certain bits of technology, information on putting together several centuries’ worth of Earth’s technology from the ground up, and whatever they needed to produce... hmm. Apparently that specific word was difficult to translate, but it seemed to be compounded drugs for healing. A Nurse Aki - the *Taskforce representative*, from Argo’s words - was particularly insistent that they’d brought medicines specifically to treat-

All her snakes coiled, alert and ready to strike. Because one of the very annoying downsides of immortality was that regular, seasonal pain. Forever. “Lady Kirigaya. Is she serious? Your world has medicines to treat... *that* ailment of women?”

A faint color brushed her cheeks, but Midori nodded. “Believe me, you wouldn’t have gotten half the number of female players without it. There’s only so much willow bark and hot water bottles can do.”

Asuna winced, but that determined rustle of feathers implied she was entirely too pleased with herself. “That’s one we want to get off the ground in a hurry. We’ll have to test how it affects demi-humans and youkai - it would be wonderful if it helped night hags! - but for humans, we *know* it works. And it’s going to be one of your new trade items.”

“One of our-” Stheno’s mouth dropped open; it took her a moment to shake it off. “But we don’t *have* anything the Five Nations would rather bargain for than send out adventurers to plunder. No liftwood, no great veins of mithril or adamantium, no source of exceptional dragonshards....”

“You didn’t have anything,” Asuna said firmly. “Now you will.” She stood straight and determined. “You said it yourself; every path you foresaw where Aincrad *fought* the Five Nations ended horribly. So we need to make it so they don’t want to fight us.” She fingered her rapier. “We’re still going to have to kick them all off the borders, first. But after that... no matter what the nobles say, how many soldiers are going to want to mess up trade relations if their wives want painkillers and chocolate?”

“War with merchants instead of swords.” Half-closing her eyes, Stheno reached out to that *sense-of-future-paths*....

Light. Not a bright light, not yet; but more warmth than she’d seen in Aincrad’s future in decades.

This could work.

She blinked in time to see Fuurinkazan heading their way en masse, Klein crouching to ruffle Yui’s hair. “And I’ve got plans to have some words with the order of the Silver Flame anyway. The time it takes ‘em to scrape their jaws off the floor ought to get them to back off for a while.” He stood. “Besides. Between SAO and Earth, looks like the Flame might be right behind its paladins giving us a hand with a certain son-of-a-daelkyr-spawn red dragon.” He scratched red hair. “I mean, if you haven’t found him yet...?”

“Not yet,” Stheno all but growled. “There are places we can’t easily infiltrate. If he’s even on the same continent.”

“I’d bet he is.” Asuna’s eyes narrowed. “I worked with Heathcliff. He’s somewhere he can watch the chaos. Count on it.”

“Thrane,” Kirito said firmly.

Stheno gave him a look askance. “Thrane? With all its clerics, and paladins, and hatred of youkai and any shapeshifters?”

“Exactly.” For a moment, Kirito’s eyes were shadowed. “Heathcliff fooled us all for *years*.”

“And we want to head over there anyway,” Klein stepped in, grinning. “We need to rattle the whole top level of the Church if we want ‘em to stop hunting good youkai and help ‘em hunt evil ‘thropes... and lore says the Keeper of the Flame’s a kid, right? A little girl who’s probably never had cookies, or chocolate, or even a snowball fight. That’s just not *right*.”

For a moment, Stheno almost facepalmed again. A weretiger wanted to feed the Keeper of the Flame cookies.

A paladin. He just might do it. “You’ll have to cross no less than two hostile nations to get there,” Stheno warned. “And keep your true natures concealed all the way.”

Kirito and Asuna traded a look. “It’s going to be complicated,” Kirito agreed. “So... let’s start planning.”

Chapter End Notes

Yukio Mishima is the pen name of Kimitake Hiraoka. Long story very short (Wikipedia has more details), while he’s considered one of the most important Japanese authors of the 20th century he was more than a little obsessed with death. As in composed his own suicide poems, tried a coup to put the emperor back in power, then committed seppuku obsessed. He’s apparently one of the reasons modern Japan now considers suicide in very bad taste. (They still refer to that mess as the “Mishima Incident”, so.)

End Notes

TPK - Total Party Kill.

DOT - Damage Over Time.

The most drastic alterations from Eberron canon: Galifar nations and Valenar are a lot less tolerant of “monster taxpayers” and “sorcery” (really warlock powers, as opposed to wizardry and D&D canon sorcery). Droaam is now Aincrad, and instead of the Daughters of Sora Kell, it was the three medusas (Stheno, Euryale, and Medousa) who led their mortal relatives (other medusas) and other monsters centuries ago to claim a dark and savage territory as a land for youkai. The youkai have some interesting druidic-type spells to reshape areas more to their liking, and Kayaba is a red dragon with an eye toward the Prophecies and an arcane device.

And medusas (and most youkai) are much more Cute Monster Girls (and Guys) than D&D canon. I freely admit the bunnies went a bit berserk with this (and some of the magic), likely because I’d had high hopes for a particular Eberron novel with medusas in it and... well, not so much.

SAO icon colors: PCs are green if they’ve committed no crimes, orange if they have. Red (not SAO canon) has been added for “infected and not sane”; the players have no idea how the program manages that, since they have no idea it’s not exactly a program.... NPCs are often green with an “NPC” tag under their HP bar. Inactive monsters and some NPCs may be yellow. Quest-giving NPCs may have a gold icon. Active monsters are red, and red with a yellow border around the icon means “needs to be killed to complete a quest”. The shade of red indicates how dangerous they are: monsters weaker than a player are light pink to white, those of equal level are red, those of higher level are purple. Finally, dark crimson is “cannot be defeated by you, no way, no how, run for it.”

Note that players see icon colors based on their level and Scan. A 40th level player will see a 40th level monster as red, while a 50th level player would see it as pink, and a 10th level player would see it as dark crimson.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!