

1



Dimension Wave


Author: Aneko Yusagi
Illustrator: Ryo Ueda

1



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Not one to let a
chance slip by,
Kizuna gave
chase.

**“Don’t
under-
estimate
me!”**


Dimension Wave 1

Aneko Yusagi
Illustrator: Ryo Ueda

**“What’s up with
that?! It’s huge!”**

A haggard expression haunted my face
as I met up with **Tsumugi** and **Kanade**.
Slung across my back was a massive fish...
It was the **Lord**.



A full-page illustration of a character named Shouko in a dynamic, mid-air pose. She is wearing a blue kimono with yellow cherry blossom patterns and white ruffles. Her long black hair is tied with a red and orange bow. She holds a large, dark green folding fan with yellow floral patterns. The background is a bright green field with glowing white particles. The text "Wild Dance First Formation: Rapid Strike..." is written in a stylized font on the left side.

“Wild
Dance
First
Formation:
Rapid
Strike...”

Shouko
muttered
the name of
her skill.

A character with light skin and blue eyes is shown from the waist up, wearing a black hooded garment with a red sash. The character's hands are outstretched in a pleading gesture. The background is dark and rocky. The text "Please hold!" is written in a large, yellow, stylized font at the top right.

"Please hold!"

A figure
clad from
head to
toe in black
like a ninja
pleaded.



It was a shrill ear-shattering sound like glass smashing the floor. It came exactly where Shouko had felt the wind—from the First City.

“What?!”

This was a sight that could never occur in reality. Black lines were running through nothingness as if it was a fracture in the very fabric of space itself.

CHARACTERS

Dimension Wave

1



Kizuna†Exceed

A young boy taking part in the game Dimension Wave. His race is Spirit. Thanks to the mischief of his sisters, he is playing a little girl avatar.



Kanade†Exceed

Kizuna's older sister. Her race is Human, and she is a swordswoman. She prefers a steady and reliable playstyle.



Tsumugi†Exceed

Kizuna's little sister. Her race is Demihuman, and she is a scythe user who fights on the front lines. Naive and child-like, she only does what interests her.



Yamikage

A girl role-playing as a ninja. Her race is Spirit. She wears the robes of a male ninja and says the word "daresay" at every opportunity.



Hakoniwa Shouko

An eastern-style beauty who's a little detached from the world. Her race is Spirit. She fights with a fan as her weapon.

Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Prologue](#)
4. [Chapter 1: The Dismantling Knife and the Worn-Out Rod](#)
5. [Chapter 2: Herring and Dismantling](#)
6. [Chapter 3: Altorese the Merchant](#)
7. [Chapter 4: Revenge and Results](#)
8. [Chapter 5: Spirit of Glass](#)
9. [Chapter 6: The Second City](#)
10. [Chapter 7: The Shadow That Crawls from the Dark](#)
11. [Chapter 8: An Efficient and Lucrative Spot with No Competition](#)
12. [Chapter 9: On to the Great Blue](#)
13. [Chapter 10: A Small Mistake, a Large Experience](#)
14. [Chapter 11: Dimension Wave Kicks Off](#)
15. [Chapter 12: The Frontliners](#)
16. [Chapter 13: Defensive Battle](#)
17. [Chapter 14: Dimension Wave Complete](#)
18. [Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)
19. [About J-Novel Club](#)
20. [Copyright](#)

Prologue

Want a fulfilling new life in another world?

The Second Life Project: Second Wave!

Dimension Wave taking applicants. Deadline approaching!

“How about it?”

The backgrounds and the subjects were so realistic, I could have sworn they were photographs. It had to be a big deal, seeing as the article sprawled across seven whole pages of a gaming magazine.

“I’m not quite sure how to answer that question...”

Out of nowhere, my two sisters had stormed up to me and shoved a magazine in my face. Without providing any context whatsoever, they’d enthusiastically asked, “How about it?” while exuding an air of triumph.

Honestly, I had absolutely no idea what they were trying to ask me. The magazine article seemed to be about a game, so I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested. Unfortunately, the genre was listed as an MMORPG. Personally, I leaned more into those laid-back games where you cycle through daily routines. You know, like *Harv*st Moon* and *World N*verland*.

My reaction was immediately met with protest.

“Oh come on! Don’t be such a spoilsport!” cried my big sister.

Which was followed by my little sister’s, “Yeah! Live a little!”

Where was all this energy coming from? Not to brag, but the three of us usually got along pretty well for siblings. We played together a lot, and my sisters were both pretty hardcore gamers.

“So anyway, what do you think about the game?” my little sister asked in a saccharine voice. She was laying it on quite thick. She was so enthusiastic it was

creeping me out a bit, but I still owed her a fair chance since we were siblings. I swallowed down that emotion and took another good look at the magazine.

Dimension Wave—it was an online game. From what I could gather, players would work together en masse to fend off enemies that came in massive waves: Dimension Waves, as they called them. Skimming through, it was your typical RPG fare where the players would defeat monsters using a wide array of weapons and magic. There were even several races to choose from.

Oh, but it looked like there was fishing too. That was more up my alley. I preferred a game where you could take it nice and slow.

Hm? This part seems a bit different from your typical explanation. What's this?

The article read: “Players are meant to experience an uninterrupted new life within the game and so, as was the case with the hugely popular First Wave, they will be unable to log out until the game has been completed. With that said, time moves differently in the game than it does in real life. Although it will take a few years for the game to be cleared, this will equate to only twenty-four hours in real time, perfect for office workers who find themselves lacking in leisure time! If you want to take part, please enter the URL below!”

And that’s all she wrote. The article jogged my memory, though. I recalled the stir it had caused a year ago. *The Second Life Project produced by a popular VRMMO studio, was it?*

Just as the magazine said, the game used a system where months or even years in the game would translate to only a matter of hours in reality. It was particularly popular among working adults, and the fact that you had to live out the whole experience from beginning to end without logging out had led to the “Second Life” part of the name.

Due to the nature of the game, they only held a session once a month, and—barring a few contrarians—most people seemed quite satisfied with the experience. At least, that was what I remembered reading online. A friend of mine wouldn’t stop heaping praise on it, so it must have been quite the experience.

However, it wasn't without controversy... There were reports of some players changing how they spoke or acted after a session. It just went to show that spending a few years in the game was enough to influence someone's personality.

On another note. That friend of mine ended up getting a girlfriend in the game, and they're still together in real life. *Ptooeey! Lucky him, huh?*

As a side note...participating in the game wasn't cheap. Or at least, it wasn't supposed to be cheap. Not only was the game itself expensive, but it required specialized equipment to play. And the business, well, it was a business, so there wasn't much to say about that. The point being, it was a game that normally fell outside of a student's price range.

"So, why bring this up?" I asked. Honestly, participating in this was way out of the question. I couldn't see pleading to mom or dad ending in anything but a firm "No."

"Huzzah!"

Then, with the same high spirits, my big sister pulled out an envelope. It was from the Second Life Project.

"D-Don't tell me..."

"Now be amazed! It's a game entry ticket!"

"Where did you get that? You didn't do something illegal, did—"

"She won it in a gaming tourney! This was the prize!" my little sister happily explained, completely disregarding my joke.

There was only one tournament that could have offered the entry ticket as a prize; it had to be the arcade fighting game tourney held by one of the company's subsidiaries. I'd read about how it was a packed event with a deluge of people who joined in just to get those very tickets. *To think my family was a part of that crowd... It's an odd feeling.*

"And get this. One ticket is good for three people!" my big sister smugly proclaimed.

And my other sister was so excited, it looked like she might zoom off at any

second.

“Three...? That’s a dubious number, don’t you think?”

Isn’t it usually two or four? I’d heard stories of couples and spouses taking part together to deepen their relationships. And other stories where they broke up because their relationship fell apart in-game...

Anyways, does that mean I can join too? No... Wait a second.

“Hey, how much would these go for on auct— GHAAH!”

My little sister’s fist found its way into my right cheek before I could finish.

“As if we’d ever sell it, stupid!”

“I mean, we could sell one piece of paper and go on a family tri— GHAAH!”

This time, my big sister’s fist caught my left cheek.

“Personally, I think we can wait until we’re working adults before we pay mom and dad back for all they’ve done for us.”

How faithful to their desires they were. But then again, the ticket wasn’t mine to begin with. I didn’t really have a say in what happened to it.

“So there’s the two of you and... Are you planning to invite another friend?”

“Huh?” they both cried out.

And, “Hm?” I grunted back.

They were both looking at me in disbelief.

“You don’t want to play?”

“No, not really.”

It did sound enticing, but the fact it was a VR game gave me second thoughts.

“I don’t have the right constitution for VR game systems.”

VR game systems, or more specifically, dive-type online games, were a breath of new life that stirred up the world of online gaming. It was a futuristic concept that—until recently—had been limited to the realm of cyberpunk science fiction.

Indeed, they were supposed to be the dive-type games of hopes and dreams, but though they did cause a commotion when they first launched, they were only well received by a handful of gamers.

This is something I think a lot of Japanese gamers will understand, but for starters, the experience itself was a factor. The digital worlds of dive-type games just didn't sit right with a lot of people.

Just like how pixel sprite games still maintain their popularity, the players who had gotten used to gaming while staring at a screen just found it to be a completely different and less enjoyable experience. I was born into an era of beautifully rendered 3D models, so it didn't bother me, but I heard there were quite a few people who resisted the transition from sprites to 3D. But, well, if that's all there was to it, I wouldn't have been so averse to dive-type games.

That brought me to my second point: the strong influence of human brain waves on performance. Recent discoveries proved that brain waves, or what was termed computational power, could vary greatly between individuals. In essence, the source of what was previously called instantaneous decision-making ability or decisiveness was determined to be related to the speed of electronic transmissions within the brain. Unfortunately, this transmission speed also affected the performance of dive-based games, leading to a disparity in user experience based on natural ability.

In short, there were gamers cropping up all over the place, complaining that the starting line wasn't the same for everyone. Save for a few players who managed to adapt well, the demand for dive-type games wasn't nearly as high as expected.

That being said, touch screens weren't well-received at first either. As science progresses, I'm sure the consoles will improve too, and individual ability will be less of a factor. But we'll first need to get to that point before these sorts of games really take off.

Actually, I think I heard something about that recently...

"Fret not, dear brother," my little sister assured me. "The pod-type system has a built-in brain wave standardizer program, so it should be all right for anyone to use."

“Ah, right. So that’s why the entry fee is so high.”

The pod-type was a higher-spec version of a VR gaming system. Unlike the usual setup where a head-mounted display was plugged into a normal computer, a person was fully immersed in a pod filled with a special breathable liquid as they connected to the game. It was a device straight out of a mad scientist’s lab.

As I’d let on before, this machine was why people needed to enroll to participate, and it cost a fair bit of money just to run it for an entire day.

“Okay, I get that even I would be able to play, but don’t you two have anyone else you want to invite?”

“I’ve been given the chance to play with two other people, so won’t it be more fun to play with my little brother and sister?” said my big sister.

“Yeah, yeah!” my little sister chimed in.

Finally, I relented. “Then I’ll join you. Thanks.”

Yeah, there was no way around it. It made me pretty happy to hear them say that. And so, I ended up participating in *Dimension Wave*.

†

Thus came the day of the game. The three of us hopped aboard a train and made our way to the venue. Even though my sisters had pestered me into coming early, the place was already packed when we got there.

All we had to bring were our entry tickets, and USB sticks containing character data, which were distributed to players in advance. Since character creation was a lengthy process owing to the game’s specifications, they wanted it done in advance.

My character was one I’d meticulously planned out three days prior—I’d decided to go with a muscular giant of a man. I realized that macho characters might not be the most popular, but I personally found them cool.

As for race, the options were Human, Demihuman, Elf, Jewel, and Spirit. I ended up going with Spirit. It was a rare race in these kinds of online games, one that apparently lacked the concept of HP, MP, and level. The official site

only had a little bit of info, and I'd have to figure the rest out on my own. Honestly, it was a toss-up between Jewel and Spirit for me, but I ultimately settled on Spirit. I was a sucker for strange gimmicks.

Incidentally, my big sister chose Human, while my little sister went Demihuman. I didn't ask them about it, but after I'd spent enough time putting off the question, they stormed up to me in a huff and told me of their own accord.

"Oh, it looks like they're starting to let people in," I announced to my sisters, who had become antsy in anticipation, prompting them to begin their fretful advance.

Along the way, we passed through a station where I handed an ID-embedded ticket to an employee in exchange for a blue, plastic key with a number on it. Then farther down, the path divided in two. It seemed to split between men and women.

"See you later!"

"Buh-bye!"

After waving my sisters goodbye, I went down the men's path and arrived at a changing room. It was quite spacious too. I tracked down the locker with a number that matched the one on my key and found a set of clothing inside. They had to have been made with the measurements I'd provided to the official site along with my entry number.

I quickly started changing into them. The clothes had a design like those pilot suits you see in anime and felt strangely skintight. In fact, they were embarrassingly skintight. Seeing how the guys to my left and right were both donning theirs in embarrassed silence, they seemed to be thinking the same thing.

Apparently, the dive pods originally got a bad rap owing to the fact that players had to enter them completely naked, so the company went and designed clothes specifically for them. These clothes also contained emergency life-saving features, among other things. It was yet another cost that added to the high entry fee.

With that on my mind, I finished changing and made sure to lock my locker before hurrying along.

“Whoa...”

What greeted me was the sight of rows upon rows of the sort of pods I could imagine being used to put someone into a cold sleep. Each was meant to facilitate an entire person, being just about as large as my bed back home.

“Let’s see what we have here...”

Where and how to stick the USB, how to properly close the pod, it was all indicated with large, conspicuous stickers that didn’t leave any room for misinterpretation. As directed, I stuck my USB stick into the port, entered the pod, and made sure it was properly sealed before I slowly settled in.

As there was still time before it began, I thought about what I’d do in-game. My sisters both mentioned they’d take combat-focused jobs, but I had something else in mind. I wanted to try out the *fishing* I’d seen in the magazine.

Admittedly, fishing did seem like a bit of an odd focus when playing an MMORPG, but kicking back and taking it easy did seem to fit with the Second Life producer’s MO. Not that there was any point in dwelling on it now. Surely I’d find my own objective if I played enough of the game.

As I was lost in thought, I suddenly realized that I’d completely forgotten about the events that lent their name to the title of the game—the Dimension Waves. It was up to players whether they wanted to participate or not, and I was still on the fence about it. But I just knew my sisters were going to join and...I wanted to be able to provide a bit of support, at the very least.

“Oh?”

“Well then, participants, it’s almost time. We ask that you please refrain from exiting the pod until the game begins.”

I thought I had longer to go, but as it turned out, I’d been immersed in my own thoughts for quite some time. I was only snapped out of it when a voice played on the sound system, and a liquid began to fill the pod. The liquid was green... Or rather, it was just taking on the colors of the lights in the pod.

Was this part of the presentation? It seemed to be a colorless substance. It filled the space in no time at all, and though I immediately stopped breathing by reflex, soon enough I instinctively resumed out of want for air.

I was surprised. I could actually breathe. I'd still been half in doubt up to that point.

Loading Data 0%... 100%.

Load Complete. Performing Brain Wave Standardization Stress Test.

Images were streamed into my eyes—no, they were flowing directly into my brain. A scene unfolded before me, even more beautiful than reality. It was a video of a fantasy town with all sorts of people moving to and fro. The sound was also crystal clear, picking up everything from the touting of a nearby merchant to the disorderly footsteps of the crowd.

Due to my poor physical compatibility with VR, I usually got terrible lag whenever using a standard VR game system. Yet surprisingly, everything was playing smoothly, and the resolution was immaculate. *That's a specialized machine for you.*

Test Complete. All Procedures Complete. The Game Will Now Begin.

I still wasn't very comfortable with words being sent directly to my brain without going through my ears. It felt like I'd slipped into a world of science fiction, but surely the level of modern science was just higher than I thought. It would have been nice to say I was excited, yet honestly, I felt strangely unsettled. I glanced around nervously when suddenly, my vision cut out.

"That one was a bit unpleasant."

This wasn't limited to games; it applied to all dive-type systems in general. The sensation of having your vision go black like that didn't sit right with me; it

felt too much like turning off a TV.

An unsettling reminder that the world I was living in wasn't reality.

Benedictio vitae tuae!

Blessing... Life... "A Blessing Upon Your Life"?

Latin wasn't really my forte, so I couldn't know for sure. I pondered these foreign words as my consciousness slowly faded away.

Chapter 1: The Dismantling Knife and the Worn-Out Rod

The text, “First City, Lurolona” appeared in the bottom right corner of my vision.

“Hmm...?”

I’d been unconscious for a few seconds—no, less than a fraction of that if we were calculating in real-time. If the developer’s explanation was to be believed, my flow of time would be completely different from this moment onward.

So we’re supposed to live here until the game’s complete?

I looked around and found myself in a scene that surpassed reality.

White stone pavement, a western castle that towered in the distance... On closer inspection, the pavement was slightly dirty. If I had to describe it, perhaps I’d say it added a sense of reality? The stones certainly existed; they were part of a real, lived-in world... It was that kind of dirtiness.

“Oh? It’s started! Hey! Umm... Your in-game name... Right, Therese! Over here! C’mon!”

“Ah, there you are! Ta... I mean L’Arc!”

A handsome man and a pretty woman were staring deeply into each other’s eyes. They were a Human male and a Jewel female. Did that mean they were real-world acquaintances that managed to spawn near one another?

“Aight! Let’s have some fun, then! The game’s only just begun! I’ve been pretty busy lately, so let’s stretch out this short vacation as much as we can!”

“Of course! We haven’t been able to see each other lately... It’s been so long since we were alone together...”

“Right on!”

Look, I get that you’re putting out a rosy atmosphere, but you’re not alone...

At the very least, I'd confirmed the fact that there were players who plotted to stretch out their time off with the game. It wasn't a complete waste of time to stick around.

The voices of those who'd just logged in chimed in one after the next and soon I was surrounded by the noisy hustle and bustle of a crowded street. I'd played VRMMOs before, but this was the first time it had ever felt so real to me.

"Now then, let's keep my excitement in check, and start the... Hmm?"

I heard a strangely high-pitched voice.

The character creator let you freely customize your voice type, but the one I heard was a female voice that just screamed, "I made *liberal* use of that system." I'd definitely set a stern, gritty voice; at least, it wasn't anything close to the loli voice I was hearing. *Did I make a mistake somewhere?*

I have a...bad feeling about this. I quickly checked my reflection in the window glass of a nearby store.

"Yeah, that's clearly a girl, thank you very much," I muttered to myself.

And not just that... Long, jet-black hair, a young body, tiny hands, tiny feet, a practically nonexistent chest. My clothes—presumably starting equipment—consisted of a simple, white dress.

The game even went as far as to recreate the sensation of wearing a skirt, including the chilly, airy feeling between my legs.

Kizuna†Exceed has received a multi-chat request. Do you accept?

A voice echoed directly in my head. The sender was Tsumugi†Exceed—a name I didn't know.

But, come to think of it, that's pretty similar to my name. Let me guess, you're the one who did this to me.

There was a system ding as soon as I accepted the *multi-chat* thingy, and immediately, the noise died down and I could hear only two other voices.

“Ah, there you are, big bro.”

“Yoohoo.”

In fact, they were two *very* familiar voices. They seemed to be using the exact same voices they had in real life.

“Don’t ‘there you are, big bro’ me! Why did my character’s name and appearance change?! And don’t think you’re off the hook either, stupid sis!”

My older sister’s name read Kanade†Exceed, and I felt a growing urge to lodge a complaint at their naming sense. The three of us shared a last name, following a kanji, symbol, western name format. *This sounds like a terminal case of chuunibyou.*

“I mean, your big sis always wanted another little sister,” my big sister claimed.

“I wanted a little sister too!” added my little sister.

And together, they asserted, “That’s why we had our brother join in!”



KANADE T. EXCEED



TSUMUGI T. EXCEED



“I...see.”

I let out a sigh. To think I'd already be lamenting my life in a video game. Here I was, wondering why they never asked me what appearance I'd chosen... As it turned out, they'd already rewritten my data yesterday.

“That's not all.”

“Hmm?”

“We're going to be living in this world for months, maybe even years. I wanted a connection, something to tie us together.”

“Sis...”

She had a reason, apparently. *No, wait, is that any reason to turn me into a girl? Isn't this a case of unauthorized access on my computer? And wait, I have to keep this up until we're done with this game?!*

“And...”

“Go on.”

“When we introduce ourselves, don't you think calling us the three sisters rolls so well off the tongue?”

I just stared at her for a moment in silence. *Am I supposed to laugh here? I'm pretty sure this is where I get mad.*

“Fine... Whatever. I guess going with a different gender will really make this feel like I'm living a second life.”

Being the only boy among my female siblings, I'd experienced this unfairness several times before. This was supposed to be a fun game, and shouting at my family was only going to put a damper on that.

“So what are you going to do now?” my little sister asked me.

“Hmm, well, for starters, I'll get a fishing skill and start fishing.”

“You really love all that side content, don't you, Kizzy?”

“Kizzy...”

What is this? This indescribable discomfort? Why does it feel like they've

stationed me as the youngest of the three sisters?

“At least continue to call me *big brother*.”

“Aww...”

“You already turned me into a girl. It’s the least you could do.”

“Urgh, well, have it your way.”

And why does it sound like she’s being forced to make a huge concession?

“I plan on going out to hunt. Same old. What about you, Kanade?”

“I haven’t decided what type of gear I’ll be using yet, so I’ll have to start at the shops.”

“Then we’re going to be going our separate ways?”

“Right. I’ll call you...I mean, message you later.”

“Sure.”

The chat cut out, and my hearing returned to normal.

All right, I guess I’ll go fishing. It’s what I was originally planning on, in any case. If I remember right, you unlock skills as you go.

I concentrated on opening up the status, skill, and item screens from the menu.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 1000 / Mana: 50 / Serin: 500

Skills: Energy Production I, Mana Production I

Items: Beginner’s Weapon Box, Beginner’s Energy Potion x10, Spirit Manual

I chose the Spirit Manual from my inventory, causing a palm-sized book to manifest in my hand. Flipping through it revealed lines upon lines of text that were not in Japanese, yet I could still read them regardless. The language was

apparently called Spirit Tongue.

“Let’s see here...”

The manual read: “Unlike the other races, Spirits do not have a concept of level, HP, MP, STR, AGI, INT, MND, DEX, or LUK. These values are all combined into a single value called Energy. The more energy you have, the stronger you will become. If your energy increases, you will in turn take less damage from enemy attacks. However, caution is advised, as taking HP damage, and doing any actions that deplete MP will also use up Energy.”

I see, it’s quite an odd race.

The short of the matter was that raising a single superstat would boost offense, defense, HP, and MP, along with everything. But this even included level. Using too much Energy would effectively mean losing levels.

“Mana is an equivalent to the skill points and proficiency levels of other races. Consume Mana to acquire and upgrade skills as needed. Skills are divided between those that consume Energy on use and those that constantly consume Energy. As with other races, new entries will be added to the list of available skills when you perform the corresponding actions required to unlock them. For Spirits, Mana must be used to purchase and upgrade skills from the list. Acquired skills can be maintained by consuming Energy. When a skill is no longer needed, you can downgrade the skill and refund half of the Mana used to upgrade it. If your total Energy drops below zero due to skill cost, randomly selected skills will be downgraded until the Energy value is positive again.”

It seemed that energy management was an important aspect of the Spirit race.

Well, I’ll just take it as it comes.

I closed the manual and shoved it back into my inventory.

Next, I picked out the Beginner’s Weapon Box. The box was lined with all sorts of weapons and—as one might expect from the *beginner* label—they all looked quite plain.

I pulled out a one-handed sword—it was hard to go wrong with swords, after

all. As I tested its weight in my hand, a simple description of the weapon appeared before me. I skimmed it before returning it to the box.

Although there were plenty of weapon demonstrations on the official website, I didn't know which one was right for me; and so, like my big sister Kanade, I had yet to decide on anything. In fact, out of the three of us, it seemed only Tsumugi had a good idea of what she wanted.

"Oh?"

I spotted an interesting weapon among them. *Let's try taking it out.*

Weapon: Beginner's Dismantling Knife

Description: A knife made for taking apart the spoils of the hunt.

Dismantling Weapons—A category of weapons made to take apart flora and fauna. Increased item drops after defeating monsters.

What a short description. The sword one talked about how it could be used with a weapon and the characteristics of the skills associated with it. This isn't giving me anything.

Yep, let's go with it. It seems interesting.

With the dismantling knife in hand, I selected "confirm."

Do I just need to hold the knife to equip it?

The status screen showed Energy and Mana, but it didn't have any entries for equipment. It was hard to tell whether I'd gotten any stronger or not by holding it. With that said, it was pretty common in VR games for anything held to be counted as equipped.

Forget about that. I'll need a rod if I want to fish. Now where can I find a rod? The tool shop seems like a safe bet. I selected the map from the menu. *The town I'm in right now is... It's called Lurolona.* I searched for a bag-shaped map marker and began walking toward it.

The tool shop was a gray, square building, the sign next to it depicting a drawstring bag. The place was already packed with Humans, Demihumans with dog ears and tails, pale-skinned Elves with pointed ears, and Jewels with blue gemstones embedded in their chests. The clientele came in all shapes and sizes.

Is it just my imagination...or are Spirits the only ones I don't see?

Entering the tool shop, I found a plethora of items on display. From healing potions to seeds, to dirty paper, copper, hammers, pots, frying pans, mortars, hoes, pickaxes, shovels, and fishing rods.

Oh, fishing rods.

The rods they had were nothing more than strings tied to wooden sticks; they were shabby little things that looked like they'd come straight out of a shonen manga. But what choice did I have? I couldn't fish without a rod.

Now on to the price...

It was six hundred Serin.

Oh, so that Serin thing on my stat screen was money.

I was, as it turned out, one hundred Serin short.

Do I have anything to sell...? I checked through my inventory. There was the dismantling knife I'd just obtained, my Beginner's Energy Potions, and the clothes on my back. Judging by the feeling on my skin, I was wearing undergarments too, and even if I had no clothes, I could just buy some later. It seemed that one Beginner's Energy Potion could sell for twenty Serin.

"Could you buy these off of me?"

"Certainly. There are Beginner's Energy Potions, correct? One of them will sell for twenty Serin. At five Beginner's Energy Potions, your total comes to one hundred Serin."

There was the ding of a cash register, and the amount of Serin in my possession shot up to six hundred. I got the fishing rod and headed straight back to the counter.

"One Worn-Out Rod, is it? That will be six hundred Serin."

Hey... I know this is a game, but are you really going to call the things you're selling from your own shop worn-out...?

One of the Humans browsing the store even let out a nice, audible, "Pfft."

"Look at this, Therese. It says Worn-Out right here."

"How awful."

If I'd actually been transported to another world, I'd never shop at this place again... But retorting to an NPC was an exercise in futility. I contained the feelings welling up inside of me and claimed the Worn-Out Rod as my own.

Chapter 2: Herring and Dismantling

With the Worn-Out Rod in hand, I arrived at the area on the map slathered in blue—the ocean. It didn't feel right to just cast the line from the sandy shore, so I searched for a random pier, took my position, and dropped the thread.

Ten minutes passed... Not even a nibble.

Going off of the rod's description, it was supposed to be possible to fish even without the *Fishing Bait* item, which increased the probability of getting a bite. Unfortunately, I was coming up short.

Still, when all was said and done, it felt nice to space out and stare at the blue sky. Even if it was all a game, the smell of the salty sea was in no way lesser than reality. Above all, the wind was gentle and the temperature divine; it truly was the perfect day for fishing.

In your typical game, the clouds in the sky would be stationary or would follow set movement patterns. But as far as I could tell by gazing out at them, these clouds seemed to operate on their own physics engine, causing them to come together, disperse, and drift in the breeze.

"Hey, lady. You've got one."

"Oh? You're right."

The rod twitched with light vibrations coming from the tip. I immediately stood and pulled it up. Though I hadn't put in too much force, it lifted all too easily.

Herring Acquired

A herring was added to my item list. *Looks like you really can catch stuff with a stick, some string, and no bait. That's a game for you.*

"Thanks for telling... Oh, they're gone already. Were they in a hurry?"

I tried to offer my thanks to whoever it was that called out to me, but they had unfortunately vanished. Perhaps they'd coincidentally stumbled upon me while they were running elsewhere.

In any case, I'd learned a thing or two about fishing. I dropped the line again.

"Herring, huh? I think I remember them being used in Kyoto-style cooking."

There were pots and frying pans in the tool shop. Perhaps I'd be able to cook up some seafood dishes if I got a cooking skill.

If there's herring, I might be able to catch mackerel, sardines, and horse mackerel too. Maybe even tuna and sea bream if my fishing skill goes up.

Incidentally, what sort of tuna would it be? Albacore, or bluefin? Did they even program in multiple species? Personally, I was quite particular about tuna species. As I let those thoughts consume me, the tip of the rod started tugging again.

Herring Acquired

It was another herring. *Herring... Herring roe, sliced herring, herring soba, salted herring, smoked herring...oh, come to think of it, surströmming is made of herring too.*

Surströmming... I'd seen it on TV before, but I'd never eaten it in real life. Apparently, the smell tended to linger something awful, so I wasn't really keen on trying it anyway.

I'll pick up some kind of cooking skill when I get the chance, I guess. And...if I ever feel like it, I'll make it myself and see how it tastes in-game. I do need to know what game herring tastes like, after all.

†

"This is going much better than I thought."

Two hours had passed since then, and I'd gotten quite a haul: seven herrings, three sardines, and one horse mackerel. Now, I wasn't about to blend reality and fiction, but had this been the real world, it would have been considered a

fine catch. Especially since every fish I caught was edible.

“But...they do vary in size.”

I only caught one horse mackerel, so I wasn't so sure about that one, but the seven herrings did have some variety. Some were longer and some were wider.

Is there a rarity scale? Or maybe there is a quality rating, or something like that?

Thinking back, the tool shop had been selling copper along with everything else, but if that was mined, unrefined copper, then perhaps it came with a quality rating as well. The weapons and armor that used higher-purity ores would be the better ones. Probably.

Come to think of it, I've got that Beginner's Dismantling Knife. The way things are going, I might be able to fillet the fish.

Drawing the sheathed dismantling knife from my hip, I faced a herring.

“How do I even do this?”

I'd never actually prepared fish before, so it was mostly guesswork. *I believe you're supposed to strip off the scales first.*

Using the back of the knife, I started shaving away at the herring. There was a scraping sensation as a number of the scales were peeled off.

Small Fish Scale x4 Acquired

Oh, you're a convenient knife, aren't you? Glad to have you on the team. If scales are items, then the meat and bones are most likely items too. All right!

“Ah.”

I got a bit *too* hyped up and put in a little too much strength. The knife was embedded deep in the fish's torso. And then, without yielding any meat or bone, the herring was gone. This truly was the world of a game after all. Everything leading up to it had hardly felt any different from reality, so I was a bit shaken up.

Anyway, let's try cutting up all the fish I got.

As a result, I ended up with twenty-seven Small Fish Scales, eight Small Fish Bones, four Herring Meat, one Herring Head, one Horse Mackerel Meat, and a Sardine Meat. A part of me felt like the amount I fished wasn't really matching up with the amount of meat in my bag, but so be it. But if we are going purely off item count, that was nearly four times what I caught.

By the way, dismantling required quite a bit of concentration. A small mistake was all it took for the fish to disappear. Going at it with the utmost care, it took quite a bit of time to fillet eleven fish.

Well, I'm sure I'll get some buff to dismantling once I learn the right skills.

Speaking of skills, I hadn't touched them yet. I pulled up the stat screen.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 1300 / Mana: 65 / Serin: 0

Oh? My Energy and Mana went up without me doing anything. Why? Oh, right, that skill did say something about generating Energy.

Skills: Energy Production I, Mana Production I

Energy Production I → Energy Production II

Generate 100 Energy per hour → Generate 200 Energy per hour.

Required Mana to Upgrade: 10

Mana Production I → Mana Production II

Generate 5 Mana per hour → Generate 10 Mana per hour.

0 Energy consumed per hour → 150 Energy consumed per hour

Required Mana to Upgrade: 25

“Whoa! I just wasted three hours!”

I quickly upgraded both of the skills to Rank II. My Energy dropped to 1150, and my Mana to 30. Apparently, a skill’s Energy consumption took effect immediately after it was upgraded.

But now that I’m looking at it, isn’t it a good thing to have my Energy and Mana increase every hour? Or is it faster for the normal races to hunt monsters and level up? Which is it? Well, either way, I’m a Spirit. I need to make do with what I have.

Staring long and hard at the skill list, I noticed that Fishing Mastery had been added in grayed-out text. It seemed that my three wasted hours weren’t a complete waste after all. Incidentally, taking apart that much fish wasn’t enough to manifest Dismantling Mastery.

Before picking it up, I took a look at the skill’s description.

Fishing Mastery I

10% bonus to all actions using a fishing rod.

100 Energy consumed per hour.

Required Mana to Acquire: 30

Unlock condition: Obtain 10 or more items using a fishing rod.

Upgrade condition: Obtain 100 or more items using a fishing rod.

I’d just barely managed to unlock it, but if I picked it up, my Energy gain would actually end up at negative 50 per hour. That was a no-go. I could end up dying out of the blue if I didn’t devise some way to get out of this downward spiral.

Thus, I decided to get Fishing Mastery once I’d gotten my Energy Production high enough to cancel it out. And with that in mind, I sent down the line once more.

“Hmm?”

The moment the thread touched the water, I was suddenly pulled with incredible might.

“Whoa! Wah!”

It had happened so suddenly that I’d reflexively strengthened my grip on the rod, and so my body—the body of a little girl—was yanked along like I barely existed. I simply lacked the strength—or in Spirit terms, the Energy. Though I tried bracing my feet, it did nothing and I consequently took a tumble.

There was a splash, then a burbling sound as my body was submerged in salty seawater. For a moment, I saw a massive fish, but it quickly disappeared from sight.

Come on! I might have been able to catch it if I’d just picked up Fishing Mastery.

The biggest fish is always the one that got away... Or so they say. In any case, I had to climb back up onto land. Perhaps because I was now a game character, I could hold my breath for a lot longer than usual. I gazed at the reflection, the small body of my avatar Kizuna†Exceed, as I climbed out of the water and returned to the pier.

“Phew...”

My clothes were sopping wet as I climbed up. It even showed as a status on all my items.

Since I was staring at the item screen, I decided to check my stats while I was at it—and found that my Energy had dropped by 30. *So I took damage from falling into the ocean, huh?*

“But more importantly, it made off with my fishing rod.”

This was truly what it meant to be taken by surprise. I never thought that the fishing rod I’d spent all my starting money on, and even sold potions to obtain, would be lost in such a short span of time.

“Ha ha ha... You’ve got some nerve...”

It’s decided. I’m going to catch that fish... And eat it!

Chapter 3: Altorese the Merchant

“Heh heh heh...”

Ten minutes had passed since my encounter with that monstrous fish. I sold all the scales, bones, and meat in my possession, and bought a new Worn-Out Rod before returning to the beach. Incidentally, I even bought some bait this time. This put my life’s savings at a pitiful sixty-five Serin.

But regardless, I was going to eat that fish no matter what. I was the sort of person who would hold a grudge. I’d often find myself getting heated over multiplayer versus games with Tsumugi—albeit, my win ratio wasn’t as high as I wanted it to be.

That girl’s just really good at competitive games, I reminded myself, if it was any consolation. After all, she was strong enough to win the right to play this game through a gaming tournament. Her specialty was FPS games, where she was so adept you’d think she was the war god’s gift to the world.

I know I’m not one to speak, but a girl who laughs fearlessly at the ocean is a bit off-putting... But whatever. I’m going after that fish... The Lord (my temporary name for it) will be mine. That would be my reason for existing in this world. A shoddy reason, perhaps, but there was no way I’d stay still after what I’d been through.

“All right, let’s attach the bait...”

I fastened bait to the hook that I’d previously left empty—paste, not a worm, by the way. Perhaps this was because it was the cheapest bait I could buy. I swore I’d buy something better once I had money, but I had to put up with it for now. The shop also sold lures, but I had to forgo those as well. I cast my line onto the surface of the water and concentrated hard on the tip of the pole.

Like hell I’m going to blankly stare at the clouds! I don’t have time for that!

“Here it comes!”

Herring Acquired

Presumably due to the bait, the fish were taking to the hook a lot better than before. *I guess there aren't too many stupid fish who'll get caught without any bait.*

I had thirty bits of bait in stock, so once I'd fished up thirty fish, I'd have to go to the tool shop again.

But the next time there was a tug at the rod, I felt a different sensation than I had before. *Is this some mechanic I'm not aware of?* I wondered. *I might be imagining it, but let's concentrate and pull it up. It'll be a huge find if this affects the quality of the fish I can catch.*

A mechanic regarding item quality had to exist, even if it wasn't displayed anywhere. When I sold my drops at the shop, each individual one had a different price. They were all small fries, so none of them went for too much, but the smaller ones ranged from one to three Serin, while the relatively larger ones went from ten to thirty Serin. It was quite a discrepancy.

I'm definitely getting Fishing Mastery the instant I reach Energy Production III.

"Here we go..."

Instead of pulling the rod up straightaway, I decide to watch and wait a bit.

Yes, there's definitely something different. The tug is alternating. Sometimes it's stronger, sometimes it's weaker. It was like feeling an aura, an indescribable ebb and flow I struggled to put into words conveyed through the rod, and through my arms. The period when the tug was strong would last a little longer than when it was weak.

"Now!"

Sardine Acquired

Sure, it was only a sardine, but it was the biggest sardine I'd ever caught. I could vaguely tell that it was a bit livelier too—there had to be some sort of

variable determined by the fishing process.

Game mechanics like these really get me going.

“Oh?”

The next bite wasn't comparable to The Lord (temp), but it wasn't as weak as the one's before it. The tug was strong enough to actually bend the rod this time.

No, well, this might just be because the rod is too worn-out.

I knew it would be a waste to let it get away. Again, I concentrated on the strength of the tug as I pulled up.

Killer Fish Acquired

Err... What? All of a sudden, my catch reeked of RPG monster. It had been nothing but herrings and sardines—fish that actually existed—but it seemed that wasn't everything. Furthermore, Mr. Killer Fish was thrashing and gnashing with sharp fangs as I tucked him into my inventory. *That's clearly a monster. No two ways about it.*

Had I actually been out in a hunting ground, I got the feeling I'd encounter him as a normal monster. In any case, I was getting the hang of it now. *Let's keep this up and catch a boatload of fish.*

In the end, I used up thirty bait to catch twenty-six fish. Four of them got away while I was trying to measure out the right moment to pull. The species probably determined the time it took for a fish to get away.

My haul consisted of fourteen herrings, six sardines, three horse mackerel, one killer fish, and two bone fish. The last two were clearly monsters. I mean, the bone fish was not a bonefish, but was literally made of nothing but bone; I was a bit creeped out when I first fished one up. It was a bit unsettling to know that these bone organisms lived in the sea.

“All right, then, I'll dismantle everything besides one herring.”

There was something I wanted to test out—whether I'd get more Serin if I

sold a fish whole or if it was dismantled. Even if selling them whole got me more money, I still had to work toward getting the dismantling skill. But having more money was never a bad thing.

I carefully turned my Beginner's Dismantling Knife on my spoils of war.

+

"I'm hungry."

From there, it was an endless loop of fish→dismantle→sell→buy bait→repeat. That took up a few hours of my time. Getting straight to the conclusion, I generally made more money if I dismantled the fish first. I also managed to buy the next level of bait: earthworms.

More importantly, the number of fish I reeled in surpassed a hundred, so I'd fulfilled the conditions to upgrade Fishing Mastery I to Fishing Mastery II. That is, if I actually had Fishing Mastery I. That would have to wait until I upgraded my Energy Production.

But as I found myself immersed in fishing, I suddenly felt an emptiness in my belly. This was supposed to be a complete second life, after all, and thus hunger existed. If I had to describe it in real terms, it was like the sensation of being struck by sudden hunger pangs at 2 a.m.

"I should get something to eat."

Luckily, I had some money to spare. I didn't know how much the restaurants were charging, but it was unlikely they would demand too much Serin in the first town.

I returned the fishing rod to my inventory and started off from the beach I'd set up as my base of operations. There were a few fish I still had to dismantle, but that could wait. For now, I needed food.

"Oh."

Down the road, I could see the same square where we—the players—had first spawned in. The crowd had died down significantly by now, and there were only around ten to twenty people left. Among them were a Human and a Jewel who seemed to be negotiating over items.

How can you run a business when it hasn't been a day since the game began? I wondered. I approached, casually as I could, to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"I'll give you five copper for three hundred seventy-five Serin."

"Thanks. You're a huge help—it's way too expensive at the shop."

They were both wearing their initial equipment, so it was hard to judge, but the one selling seemed to be a merchant, and the one buying, a blacksmith. That was the vibe I was getting.

"Ah, excuse me, ma'am."

I tried to pass by just as they finished up their negotiations, but at that moment, the merchant took a step toward me.

What's this about? I wondered, turning around. There was no "ma'am" to be found.

"No, I mean you."

"Wait, you're talking to me?"

"Yeah, yeah. You. You've got a boyish way of talking."

Oh, now that you mention it, I'm a girl.

The voice that had felt so incredibly wrong at first had quite quickly become normal to me, so I'd completely forgotten about it.

"Well, one thing led to another, and I ended up using a female character."

"I see. So you're an open nekama, huh? More power to you."

Nekama... This was a term referring to real-world men who used female avatars in game. And *open...* in short, I wasn't hiding it. There were plenty of people who just liked looking at female characters more than they liked looking at male characters, so there wasn't really any deeper meaning to it.

On that note, the merchant who called out to me was playing a handsome man whose looks were on the *cool* side of the spectrum. He was taller than me. Had I been in my real body, I would have been able to estimate a rough number, but that was off the table—I didn't actually know how tall my game

self was. Regardless, I had to look up to see him; the first thing that caught my eye was his hair. It was colored a dull goldish color, one that I could see a real person actually having.



“So, did you need something?”

“I caught the smell of the sea off of you, so I thought you might have some seafood items to sell.”

“My smell?”

I tried taking a whiff of myself, but couldn’t really tell. Still, I’d indeed fallen into the sea, so it would be understandable if I reeked of it.

“So it seems. I went to the plains once, and it smelled like grass there.”

“Hmm...”

I thought it was just the smell of the salty sea breeze they’d replicated, but it seemed they’d gone to even greater efforts than that. I could see where all the money was going.

“So anyways, do you have any fish or shellfish? I know someone who wants to improve their cooking skills, so I’ll buy it for more than you’ll get from the shop.”

“Let’s see...”

I put my right hand to my mouth and thought.

There were roughly fifty fish in my inventory—albeit, most of them were herrings, sardines, and horse mackerel. With that said, I’d still yet to unlock the dismantling skill, so even if I wasn’t going to get as much money, I wanted to dismantle my haul before selling it.

“I’m sorry. I’ve got something I want to use them for. I’ll pass this time.”

“I see. I’m Alto, and if you want to send me a chat, send it to Altorese. I can’t buy that much right now, but once I have the Serin, I’ll buy any items you have.”

“Got it. I’ll keep that in mind. But are you sure you should start buying stuff this early in the game?”

“That’s business for you. I bought cheap from the people fighting on the front lines and sold to those who wanted it at a cheaper price than what they go for in the shop. Then, I went off to the front lines to sell potions for a little more than they go for in town. Like that, I’ve got myself eight thousand Serin.”

“Wow, you’re like a real merchant.”

Meanwhile, I only had twenty-seven hundred Serin myself. If I sold all the fish I had on hand, then subtracting the cost of bait, I’d likely get to around forty-six hundred. Still, to get to eight thousand Serin just by reselling, he was quite amazing as a merchant.

“Ha ha ha, if you ever need anything, look no further than the Altorese Company! Or something like that.”

“Then sell me a good fishing rod. I can wait until you get one in stock.”

“A rod? That would be classified as a tool, then. I can make one with the right materials, but I know someone who can do you better. Do you want me to introduce you?”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course! If you don’t have the materials, just promise you’ll buy them from me.”

That’s some merchant spirit.

It was interesting, like watching a real medieval merchant at work. It was like role-play in the truest sense.

“All right, please introduce me, then.”

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

He had a way with words and it was refreshing to hear it. Perhaps he worked in customer service in real life as well.

“Are you putting on an act?”

“I am. One of the characters from my favorite manga is like this.”

“Oh, I see.”

I completely missed the mark, I thought.

Then, with a fine smile and a wave of his hand, Alto said, “I’ll contact him. Please wait for a moment.”

“Sure, but while you’re at it, I was wondering if you could tell me something.”

Alto cocked his head curiously. I'd completely forgotten it in the midst of the conversation, but being told to "wait" jogged my memory.

"Do you know where the restaurants are?"

†

My first meal since I entered *Dimension Wave* was horse mackerel and herring. I directly delivered my fish to the person who'd learned the cooking skill and had them grill it up for me.

Of all the fish I caught, the bigger ones turned out to be especially delicious, so as thanks, I gave the chef ten herrings for free. Incidentally, I also gave Alto three herrings as a referral fee, and he seemed pretty happy about that.

The herring are my envoy of friendship. Maybe I should pick up a cooking skill to get by.

"Still, you've got a wide circle of friends, Alto. Were you in the beta?"

I did recall seeing a recruitment drive for the beta test some time ago.

"No, I hear the beta testers were intentionally excluded from this session."

According to Alto, the beta test was run to ensure the game balance and to make sure that all events triggered and played out properly. Just like the standard version, the testers had to play the game through from beginning to end.

Since the testers knew all about the game's contents, it would be unfair to throw them in with all the players who were going in for the first time. Perhaps owing to management's intentions, it seemed that the game this time was meant to be played with everyone as a beginner.

"I see."

"Granted, there were a few leaks."

"I heard about those too. Though I don't know what they were about."

One of the testers divulged a portion of the game's contents on an anonymous board and got sued since this went against the Second Life Project's contract. I saw that article on the net, but I didn't see the leaks themselves, so I

didn't know what got out.

"So what information was leaked?"

"It's pretty well known around these parts. They found out that the Spirit race was way too weak. As I recall, they can acquire unlimited skills if they want to, but their stats are the lowest of all the races."

"Oh rly..."

"Come to think of it, what race are you? I haven't seen anyone like you."

I looked at myself awkwardly. I would occasionally become semitransparent—that was the characteristic of the Spirit Race.

"I'm one of those very same Spirits. I knew it was gimmicky, so I didn't expect it to be strong. Still..."

"I see. So how is it? Have any issues?"

"Hmm, I've been fishing this whole time, so I don't really know. I haven't run into any trouble yet."

Since all of my stats were combined into Energy, even the slightest misstep could lead to a drastic weakening of my build. As a race, I could see why it was considered weak. But with that being said, it seemed to have a good affinity with someone who just planned to fish or craft in town. My Energy and Mana Production skills meant I'd get experience even if I stood around doing nothing. Still, *Dimension Wave* seemed to be a game mainly focused on combat.

"I see. Let me know if you figure anything out. Thanks to that leak, there aren't many Spirits around, so I'm sure quite a few people are curious."

"Sure, if I feel like it."

"Then I'll be on my way. If you ever need to buy something, don't hesitate to contact me."

"You got it."

He waved his hand and I waved back. And with a bow, Alto turned and was off.

"Phew..."

After a sigh, I looked at the fishing rod—the one Alto’s friend made—in my inventory.

Wood Fishing Rod +2

A pole made of a Supple Bough, Common Worm String, and a Copper Fishing Hook: every material seemed to come from a different source, which just made me admire Alto more. As for the “+2” modifier, Alto said that the bonus was just a matter of luck, but I suspected that wasn’t the case. It probably had to do with the creator’s skill level, ability, and the quality of the materials. I’d carefully chosen a good-looking Supple Bough, Common Worm String, and Copper Fishing Hook from a selection of many such items he’d shown me, and that had hopefully contributed to it.

Also, the total cost was only seven hundred Serin. This was a far better deal than buying a six-hundred-Serin Worn-Out Rod, considering its performance. Someone had gone out of their way to make it for me, so I wasn’t going to let a fish take it away this time.

Oh right, have my Energy and Mana gone up yet?

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 1320 / Mana: 60 / Serin: 2000

Skills: Energy Production II, Mana Production II

Energy Production II → Energy Production III

Generate 200 Energy per hour → Generate 400 Energy per hour.

Required Mana to Upgrade: 50

I had the Mana, so I promptly upgraded to Energy Production III.

Now, I’ll be able to get Fishing Mastery in two hours.

“I’ve got the skills, and I’ve got the rod. My stomach’s full, so why don’t we get to round two... Oh!”

I was struck by a flash of inspiration. *Perhaps you can catch different fish at night?*

Since a hunger system existed, a tiredness system undoubtedly existed as well. In that case, when fishing at night, I could see myself collapsing from tiredness. *It’s a bit early, but I should take a quick nap at the inn.*

I’d better send a message to my sisters... I navigated the menu and chose the chat option. *To Tsumugi†Exceed...*

For a while, the sound of a ringing phone chimed in my ears.

“Big bro? Did something happen?”

“Nah, I was planning on calling it a day. I thought I should get in touch, just in case.”

“Huh? Sleeping so soon?”

“Not for long. I want to see if the fish I catch will change between day and night.”

“I see. Got it. I’ll pass the message to Kanade.”

“Thanks. How are things on your end, by the way?”

“Hmm, I’m in combat right now. Same old.”

“Hey now... Are you okay?”

“Aha ha, I’m surrounded, but there’s only five of them.”

Come to think of it, I’ve caught her having casual conversations with our big sister while playing FPS games before. I was on that same battlefield, and it did irritate me a bit. But that was my secret. And her KDA was the highest among us, to my frustration.

“Hey, focus!”

Bzt! I forcefully closed the chat.

Come to think of it, Tsumugi was the one who got the right to take part in

Dimension Wave in the first place. It was only five monsters. She'd probably be fine.

It doesn't sit right with me, but... I guess I'll go find an inn.

From the menu, I pulled up a map and searched for an inn. I picked out five decent-looking ones and personally checked them out one by one. It was a game, so there likely wasn't too much of a difference between the rooms, but the price did change from inn to inn. I ultimately settled on an inn that was neither expensive nor cheap.

"One hundred fifty Serin per night."

The voice of the NPC woman who seemed to be the owner belonged to a voice actress I'd heard somewhere before. I paid the one hundred fifty Serin, got the key, and headed to the room.

Apparently, as soon as the fee was paid, the inn room was yours to use as you please for the next twenty-four hours. I could spend the night, go shopping, and come back if I wanted to. It felt like I was on a vacation.

Putting that aside, I observed the room's interior. There wasn't a single guest to be found. *Well, I guess there won't be many people tucking in early on the very first day of the game.*

Out of the inns I'd checked out, this one felt the most like a normal hotel. The cheapest one had cracks running through the walls.

"This is the place."

I stood before a door that read 101, the same number on the key. Into the keyhole the key went, and the door opened up. It was a normal room, a little narrow compared to a real hotel room, but well within my expectations.

I sat on the bed. It was just about as soft as the bed in my own room. If I wanted to be negative about it, that meant it wasn't as soft as a standard hotel bed.

"For now...let's sleep."

Owing to my living habits, I hesitated to sleep with my clothes and shoes on. So I tossed my shoes aside and stripped off the clothes. And suddenly there

stood a young girl in her undergarments.

“Whoa there, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” the system cried out.

I succumbed to the devil’s temptation. But, to put it simply, I couldn’t go any further than that. Thinking about it logically, they weren’t going to put such an obscene system into a game made for all ages.

“Tsk.” It didn’t actually bother me that much, but I jokingly clicked my tongue and lay on the bed as I’d originally planned.

Once again, the blanket was as warm as the one in my room back home. I draped it over myself, closed my eyes, and was suddenly overtaken by drowsiness, almost like I’d taken sleeping pills. It seemed the system was at work, making it easier for me to sleep.

If only I could sleep this easily in real life, I absentmindedly thought. And before I knew it, my consciousness had completely cut off.

†

“Fwah...” I yawned.

It was quite a deep sleep. How many years had it been since I last slept that well? Even though it was only virtual, you could easily make a successful business out of selling sleep this good.

Umm, how long has it been?

The clock on the menu displayed 22:07. By my rough calculations, I’d been out for around six hours. When I looked out the window, the sun had set and darkness had descended on the world.

“All right, let’s get Fishing Mastery.”

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 2820 Mana: 70 Serin: 1850

Skills: Energy Production III, Mana Production II

Fishing Mastery I

10% bonus to all actions using a fishing rod.

100 Energy consumed per hour.

Required Mana to Acquire: 30

Unlock condition: Obtain 10 or more items using a fishing rod.

Upgrade condition: Obtain 100 or more items using a fishing rod.

As soon as I acquired Fishing Mastery I, 100 Energy was consumed, putting my total energy at 2720. Furthermore, 60 Mana was needed for Fishing Mastery II. With only 40 Mana left, I was a little short.

Regardless, I'd gotten my hands on Fishing Mastery I. I had some hopes for this one. Though I doubted The Lord was going to be reeled in that easily.

"I'm hungry..."

Though I could have sworn I'd eaten just before sleeping, come to think of it, it had been six hours since then. It was only natural that I was hungry. *For now, I'll just eat the leftovers from the fish I had grilled up.*

I extracted a Grilled Herring from my inventory and took a bite.

"Now that I've eaten, it's time to fish. I think my clothes should be somewhere around here."

There they were, exactly where I'd discarded them with my shoes.

I quickly changed into them and took my Wooden Fishing Rod +2 from my inventory. With my preparations in order, I left the inn.

"Have a nice day," the NPC at the desk said as I stepped out.

Outside, the town was dark and silent. I couldn't see anyone else walking around.

Were they all tired and asleep? Or perhaps they were still busy leveling up.

“More importantly, it’s dark. I can barely see anything.”

Obviously, I wasn’t expecting any electric street lamps, but there weren’t any torches either, so it was pitch black. I called up the map, constantly checking my current position as I headed to the same pier from before. I stopped by the tool shop along the way. I’d forgotten to buy bait, you see.

And to my surprise, the shop was open. Real-world private vendors would pale at the commendable business spirit of the NPCs here. Although that was essentially only possible because it was a game. It was like the feeling of going to a convenience store late at night... Anyways, I finally arrived at the pier.

Unfortunately, the clouds in the sky had hidden the moon away. Only the salty sea air and the sounds of small waves told me the sea was there, but the darkness was too deep for me to see it. *Maybe you need a candle item or something like that.*

For now, I squinted and got my bait onto the copper hook. I stabbed my fingers three times in the process, totaling a net 10 damage.

As soon as the line hit the water, I felt a different pull from before.

It’s strong... I think. But what’s with it? This monotonous pull?

I mustered my strength and pulled up.

XXX Acquired

Hmm? It’s so dark I can’t read the letters.

I didn’t really know what it was, but I stuffed it into my inventory anyway. I’d be able to see it once the sun was up. Once again, I attached some bait and dropped the line.

XXX Acquired

Oh?! I hooked a fish the instant I let it down. That’s amazing.

I'd bought close to three hundred bait, but perhaps this wasn't even enough.

All right! I'll fish and fish, and fish the night away!

†

Morning came, and I was on my knees, my head hung, and my hands planted to the ground.

As for the results, I caught close to two hundred...things. It was less that I fished for them, and more like I just managed to snag them. I looked at the list of items filling my inventory:

Empty Can x137, Boot x2, Intermediary Crystal (Unappraised), Herring x40, Sardine x25, Sea Bass x12, Common Dark Fish x4, Zombie Fish x3

"What's all of this?!"

Yeah, there was no getting around it... It was mostly empty cans.

Give me back the happiness I felt, thinking I'd caught the mother lode! In the first place, how do empty cans fit into this world?

I'd managed to confirm my initial suspicions—there was indeed a difference in what could be caught during the day and at night—so that was something, at least. Yes, I wasn't going to tactlessly shout out, *Just how much trash is in this sea?!*

Also, I wasn't going to say anything about that last entry that clearly had an undead attribute. Hopefully, it would give me some good materials if I dismantled it. *No, please do. I'm begging you.*

With that in mind, I began taking the fish apart with my Beginner's Dismantling Knife.

Yeah, I doubt the empty cans can be dismantled.

†

It took two whole hours to dismantle everything. I'd still yet to unlock any

dismantling skill. Seriously, what were the conditions to get it? Now and then, I'd take a break from all the slicing to try grilling some fish on my own, and I managed to unlock cooking before dismantling.

Culinary Art I

10% bonus to all actions involving cooking, and additional recipes.

100 Energy consumed per hour.

Required Mana to Acquire: 30

Unlock condition: Produce 10 or more items using cooking utensils.

Upgrade condition: Produce 300 or more items using cooking utensils.

Maybe I have to fight with a dismantling weapon to get dismantling skills? Is that what I'm missing? I plan to keep fishing for a while, so I can't test that.

Still, the more time I spent dismantling, the more items I got for my trouble. Dismantling weapons were convenient, so I didn't regret picking one. This was just my instinct speaking, but it probably worked on things that weren't fish too. I'd have to see if I ever got a chance to fight a monster.

"Now, to sell some items."

Checking the clock, I saw it read 9:27. Knowing Alto and his strong business spirit, I suspected he was already awake.

Let's try sending him a chat. As I recall, his full name was...

The name, "Altorese Company" was stuck in my ears. I vividly remembered him saying it. Just like when I'd sent a chat to Tsumugi, I heard the ringing of a phone as I awaited Alto's reply.

"Hello, this is Altorese."

A spirited voice that was kind on the ears. He was all business today as usual.

"It's me."

“By that voice, you must be the girl—I mean, the girl character I met yesterday.”

“That’s right, it’s Kizuna.”

“So Kizuna’s your name? I’m realizing I forgot to ask yesterday.”

Now that you mention it... I’d heard Alto’s name, but hadn’t divulged my cringe-inducing Kizuna†Exceed identity. Part of me felt this was intentional on my part. Unfortunately, though, my name was revealed the instant I sent the chat.

“So what can I do for you today?”

“I was hoping you’d buy a few items. It’s all fish, if that’s all right with you.”

“Of course. Where are you right now?”

“If you look at the map, do you see a pier by the ocean? I’m on the right side, where—”

†

We told each other our locations but ultimately settled on meeting at the same plaza where we’d met before. I thought I’d come in quite a hurry, but Alto was already there when I arrived.

He’d been in starter gear yesterday, but that was no longer the case. Business seemed to be booming.

“Hey, Kizuna. You said fish, right? How much fish are we talking about?”

“About this much.”

I accepted the trade window Alto had sent me. Although you could also hand over things normally, according to Alto, this was far more convenient when negotiating a large number of items. I dragged the dismantled scales, bones, meat, heads, fangs, dorsal fins, and more onto the window.

“You’ve already prepped them too? That’s quite a lot. I’m shocked, honestly.”

“Prepped?”

Don’t you mean dismantled? I wondered. But before I could ask, Alto explained.

“Yes, if you use the Culinary Art skill and a kitchen knife to prep a fish, you can get a few extra items.”

“Hmm...”

Is a kitchen knife a dismantling weapon? No, I think it's categorized as a cooking utensil.

It felt like our conversations weren't quite meshing. After all, I could dismantle even when I hadn't learned Culinary Art. I didn't get any extra items when I was making the grilled fish either. *Maybe I ought to buy a cooking knife to see if it's the same as dismantling.*

“I guess that means you learned Culinary Art too, Kizuna. If you need some ingredients, I could sell you a few things.”

“Alto, I know I'm changing the topic here, but do you know what effects dismantling weapons have?”

“Huh? As I recall, they inflict high bonus damage against specific types of enemies, and that enemy type varies based on the weapon. Unfortunately, their base attack power is low, so there aren't many people who use them.”

“I see...”

“Also, if you defeat monsters you have a bonus against, you sometimes get items you can't obtain normally.”

Could this be...something that hasn't been figured out yet?

As far as I could tell, carefully dismantling a fish yielded scales and meat. However, this process could apparently be substituted with Culinary Art, and that seemed to be seen as the most effective method. *If I keep quiet on this, I might be able to make a bit of money,* I concluded.

Naturally, this would become common knowledge sooner or later, but I could make good use of this info before it got out. This was quite common in the opening days of an online game.

“So why were you asking about dismantling weapons?”

“Yeah, well, that's the sort of weapon I use. I see, so it's a weapon specialized for specific enemy types...”

“I see. You really do like playing with finicky mechanics.”

“Pretty much.”

“Getting back to it, how does six thousand Serin sound?”

“That much?”

Alto said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Just yesterday, he’d told me he only had eight thousand Serin, but he’d evidently raked in a lot of money while I was taking it easy.

“Using your Culinary Art takes time, right? This is about what it comes out to if you convert it to an hourly wage. And this is quite a quantity. I’d even say it’s a bit lower than market price.”

Buy low, sell high. This was the resale trick he’d mentioned earlier.

Very well, then. That’s a lot more than I’m going to get from an NPC.

I pressed “OK” on the trade window and received my six thousand Serin.

“Pleasure doing business with you. Feel free to call me whenever you have something to sell.”

“Yeah, you’ll be the first on the list.”

Now then... I gazed at the empty cans that remained in my inventory. Honestly, having a hundred thirty-seven of them didn’t mean much when they were useless. When I showed one to an NPC, the buying price was either one or five Serin. That depended on whether the can was aluminum or steel.

Wait. Aluminum or steel?

“Hey, Alto. One more question. How much would you buy empty cans for?”

“Empty cans? They’re not worth anything, unfortunately. You’d be better off selling them to a shop.”

“I see... It just occurred to me, but cans are made of aluminum and steel...right?”

It seemed he got the message. As I spoke to him in a hushed tone, Alto’s face turned to shock.

“I...see. We might be able to make ingots at the blast furnace!”

“There’s a blast furnace?”

“Yeah. There’s a production skill that melts down ores to produce ingots that can be worked with.”

“Then could you look into whether or not you can do that with these? If we really can melt them down, I’ve got loads of them.”

I opened the trade window again and deposited five steel cans and five aluminum. If this trash actually had some sort of use, it would be a godsend. Even if they couldn’t become ingots, it was chump change. It didn’t really matter if I had them or not.

“Thank you, Kizuna! This might just be a gold mine!”

“Yeah, if you do hit it big, make sure to give me a piece of the pie.”

“Of course! I’ll look into it right away!”

Like a fish given water, Alto energetically waved his hand and ran off. I just knew he’d give me the results within an hour.

“I have a lot more money now. Maybe I should get some equipment.”

For my weapon, I could request one made as part of the information fee—if the metal smelting worked out. That left armor. At present, I lacked any form of combat skills, so a light outfit suited me just fine.

For shoes... *I fished up boots. Can I wear them?*

I took the boots out of my inventory, stripped off the starter shoes I was wearing, and stuck my feet into them.

“I didn’t think it would actually work...”

And there was a young girl wearing oversized galoshes. With a raincoat and yellow umbrella, the endearing image would have been complete.

All jokes aside, I should go to the armor store and find a player selling clothing.

Still wearing the boots, I started on my way.

Let's talk results. My intuition had hit the mark, and the empty cans could be converted into aluminum and iron ingots. The fact that we couldn't get steel probably had to do with game balance. I felt some meddling on management's part.

Alto and his blacksmith friend covered up the information. I'd secretly fish up empty cans by the boatload, and discreetly hand them over. Rinse and repeat... I spent my time making the big bucks.

†

The day after I started selling empty cans, Kanade and Tsumugi met up at the hunting ground to discuss their thoughts on the weapons they'd chosen.

"Hup!"

Tsumugi took a swipe at the Dark Porcupi that rushed her.

"Oh... One-shot with a basic attack! That's more than twice the damage I've been dealing!"

"Forget about the bronze weapons in the shop, this is even better than the weapon drops we're getting out here. I was right to buy one."

"You got one too, Kanade?"

"Yes, though it was a bit pricey. But I think the performance matches the cost."

"One of the crafter players said it's low quality, but it's more than usable."

"Right?"

As they chatted, their respective parties were both attacked by Ad Balloons: formidable foes from the nearby field that took on the shape of large balloons with faces.

"Wind Slice!"

Tsumugi swung her Iron Sickle, while Kanade used a sword to deflect its powerful bite. There was a massive pop as their weapons both tore through the Balloons and caused them to burst.

"They must have found an iron mine already. I wonder where they found

that?”

“The crafter said he didn’t really know. There’s a player that has iron, but they won’t say where they’re getting it from.”

“Oh... I think I heard that too. Well, it’s still early game, so first come, first served, I guess.”

“Something’s off, though... A player who was gathering info from the NPCs said that iron equipment was only supposed to be available after reaching the Second City. That’s what the NPCs are saying, at least.”

“You can’t access the Second City until someone clears the unlock quest, right? I tried challenging the boss, but I got done in pretty bad... It’ll be hard unless I level up a bit and get better equipment.”

“No, it’s probs a raid boss. We’ll barely be able to beat it if we get a bunch of people together.”

“I guess so. So who’s going to rally the troops first...? It’ll be first come, first served.”

“Naturally!”

By that point, the sisters had finished testing out their new equipment.

“The monsters in this hunting ground are starting to feel too weak. I’m thinking of finding a new place.”

“You too? Well...this equipment is amazing. How far do you think we can go with it?”

“Some people are already saying they’ll try the unlock quest with this equipment. Maybe it’s doable now?”

“Maybe so! Ah, that’s right. You know that field that only appears at night? It might be easy picking with this equipment too. I’m thinking that’s the best hunting spot from now on.”

“Oh... I remember seeing a kid using a fan weapon out there. She was putting up a good fight with bronze equipment. I’d imagine she wants to challenge the unlock quest with the drops she gets there.”

“I think I know who you’re talking about! The pretty player with the Japanese flair, right?”

“We can’t fall behind, can we?”

“I’m not going to lose to you either, Kanade.”

“I could say the same to you.”

“What do you think big bro’s doing now?”

“It’s him we’re talking about. He’s probably fishing like he said he would be.”

“Yeah, he tends to lose himself in minigames. Once we’ve got a stable thing going over here, we need to invite him out to hunt.”

“That kid’s convinced himself that he has terrible athletic abilities, but this is a game. We’ve got to show him how to have fun with it.”

“Yeah! Ah! Looks like the boss has spawned!”

“Hey, wait! I’ve got first dibs! Fast Bash!”

Kanade succeeded in getting a preemptive strike on the Violin Beetle—a rhinoceros beetle-shaped boss monster that used an instrument as its weapon. She parried its counterattack with her shield just in time for Tsumugi to join in with her Iron Sickle.

“No fair, sis! I was going for it.”

“We’re all aiming for the same thing! The headpiece this thing drops sells for a fortune!”

“You’re not even equipping it?! But it’s so cute!”

“What’s the use in focusing on appearance when the game’s just begun? It’ll be outclassed soon enough—though I’ll admit, it’s pretty good right now.”

“This is our chance! Wind Slice! Wind Slice! Windmill! Everyone! Snatch those drop rights away from big sis’s party!”

Tsumugi’s comrades nodded at her words before raining down upon the Violin Beetle.

“Ah! C’mon, people! If you let them take this from us, we’ll have waited

around for nothing! All together now!”

“On it! Follow Kanade’s lead!”

Kanade’s and Tsumugi’s parties got fired up to take the boss down.

“I got it! Tadaa!”

Having obtained the Emerald Ribbon dropped by the Violin Beedle, Tsumugi fastened it to her hair and struck a pose. After the items had dropped, there was a brief rock-paper-scissors match to decide who got what, and this was the result. Her victory was met with some applause.

“Good grief... You got the drops this time, but I’ll have no mercy next time.”

“Naturally! If there is a next time, I’m not going to lose either!”

“Let’s move on to the next one, everyone! Use the money from this hunt to get some of that iron equipment that’s entered the market!”

“Right on!”

Now that they’d finished exchanging information, Kanade and Tsumugi went their separate ways to hunt their separate game.

In five days, those who’d managed to assemble ample equipment put their strength together and succeeded in unlocking the Second City. In the field beyond the Second City, they discovered a quarry where iron ores could be excavated.

†

Five days after I began making a killing with empty cans, they finally found a place where they could mine iron ore. As it turned out, the quality of the ingots made from empty cans wasn’t very high, and my profits naturally declined. After a brief talk with Alto, we decided to call it quits on the empty can business.

Regardless, my early investment in the can boom meant that I had quite a bit of Serin to my name. I even got a reliable businessman named Alto on my friend list.

On a side note, I bought a cooking knife to see if using it would be the same as

dismantling. Even if I went through my usual dismantling process without acquiring Culinary Art, I could only produce slices of fish meat with it. It didn't yield any other materials. This seemed to be a very similar, yet separate system.

"Hit me up if you have another profitable idea," Alto told me.

He probably had a decent impression of me.

Also, for reasons unknown, I could only fish up Empty Cans at night.

Alto publicized my findings alongside the depreciation of iron. Eventually, this became a semicommon way of making money for both broke players with fishing skills and broke players with smithing skills.

Chapter 4: Revenge and Results

“Now then, isn’t it about time I got back at that fish?”

I’d been distracted by all the money I was making from the empty can trade, but my goal was ultimately to fish up The Lord. It wasn’t to reel in empty cans—no, certainly not. After a week, with a significant boost to my Energy and Skills, perhaps it would be possible. I checked my stats just in case.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 6340 / Mana: 150 / Serin: 148540

Skills: Energy Production VI, Mana Production IV, Fishing Mastery III, Dismantling Mastery II, Elemental Conversion I

Energy Production VI

Generate 2000 Energy per hour.

Required Mana to Upgrade: 2600

Mana Production IV

Generate 50 Mana per hour.

1400 Energy consumed per hour.

Required Mana to Upgrade: 3200

Fishing Mastery III

30% bonus to all actions using a fishing rod.

400 Energy consumed per hour.

Required Mana to Upgrade: 400

Dismantling Mastery II

20% bonus to all actions using dismantling weapons.

200 Energy consumed per hour.

Required Mana to Upgrade: 200

Elemental Conversion I

Turn items into Energy.

The amount of Energy I gained with Energy Production was the same as the amount of Energy I used per hour. But thanks to Elemental Conversion I, I was barely managing to gain more.

The mastery skills could be upgraded after I reached item quotas for each of them. Fishing Mastery depended on the number of fish I caught. As for Dismantling Mastery, it finally unlocked after I managed to obtain a thousand items through dismantling. Though the first level required obtaining a relatively small number of items, from the second level onward that quota shot way up. For example, unlocking the upgrade to Fishing Mastery I required catching one hundred fish, then five hundred for the next level, and a thousand after that. Dismantling Mastery followed a similar scaling.

According to Alto, combat-related Masteries were supposed to increase based on the number of monsters defeated with the corresponding weapons. Perhaps anyone who did know about dismantling (like me) didn't want to publicize it, but the only rumors surrounding dismantling weapons had to do with them giving special bonus items when defeating enemies with the corresponding weapons. There weren't even any whispers about what I'd been using them for. They boasted low offensive stats, so most people stayed well away from them, in any case.

Well, I'm sure someone will pick up on it eventually. Those people who called you a pitfall will realize how indispensable you really are.

I was now wearing a set of blue garments called the Bluebug Clothes.

There was a superstition among my fishing buddies that any fisherman who wanted a big haul would wear darker-colored clothing when fishing at night. This was apparently done in real night fishing as well. I didn't know whether it actually did anything or not, but I was always out fishing all night to support the

empty can business, so I decided to wear these clothes as something of a good luck charm.

Yet again, I found myself dangling my line into the sea. Back when I first hooked The Lord, it had been midday. There was nothing to guarantee it, but if I wanted to catch that fish, then day fishing was probably my best bet. Today, I'd be getting together with my sisters for the first time in a week. *I'll definitely fish up The Lord to show them the results of my week of training.*

And so, this fiery determination drove me for ten whole hours.

"Hey, little lady, how's your haul today?"

The voice came from L'Arc, the player standing beside me. He'd always say hello whenever he passed by, so lately, we'd gotten to talking a bit. Along the way, he'd become a regular customer who'd personally come to buy fish from me. According to him, he was playing the game with his girlfriend and taking in the sights with her.

"Today's the day I catch the big one, so that's all I'm focusing on today. Also, I'm not a little lady."

"You designed such an adorable avatar and even set your voice like that. How are you not a little lady?"

He gave off the vibe of a reliable older brother and was easy to talk to, but it was also hard to argue with him...

"That's not my fault. My sisters did it."

"Ha ha ha! So you're saying your sisters pulled a fast one on you? That's a tragedy, that is. Well, we're all here to enjoy the game, so why not make the most of the hand you've been dealt?"

"I wanted to be a macho fisherman."

"You would have been far less approachable if you looked like that... I'd say you're better off like this."

"Yeah, yeah. You're disturbing my fishing. If you want to buy fish, you'll have to wait."

"You got it! I can't wait to see the results," L'Arc said, and with a wave of his

hand, he was gone.

L’Arc would talk to me about various things, offering me information that was different from what I’d get from Alto.

“Now then...”

I’d been casting my line since six in the morning, but unfortunately, it was nothing but herrings. I hadn’t even felt a single tug from The Lord. It had likely been by pure coincidence the last time I snagged him.

But this time, this time for sure. I’d fish him up no matter how many days it took. That was what I’d decided.

Herring Acquired

“Another Herring? Why are there so many Herrings today?”

As my Fishing Mastery rank increased, my probability of catching other fish was supposed to have gone up with it—but today, for some reason, I was only getting Herring. The fishing basket I bought just for cosmetics (since the fish went into my inventory anyway) was packed full of herrings.

“Does the god of herrings have a bone to pick with me?”

Not that I expected God to descend into the world of a game. *No, maybe it’s precisely because it’s a game that grand beings like gods can exist.*

“Hmm...?”

A suspiciously large, dark shadow crossed the water’s surface.

Is it here?! I thought, my hopes growing as I strongly gripped the rod.

Don’t be impatient. Never rush. Stay calm, but maintain the fire in your heart.

I was different than I was back then. I was definitely going to catch it and eat it.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon, c’mon...”

I muttered to myself, concentrating not on the shadow, but on the tip of the rod. I focused on the fundamental movements I’d learned in all the days I’d

spent fishing.

“This is it!”

The line jerked forcefully. It was the same powerful pull that had once yanked me into the ocean.

I stood, mustering strength into my arms and legs to brace myself. And immediately, I felt the strong tug on the rod. It was clearly harder to judge the right moment to pull than it was for normal fish. It came as a split-second burst within long periods of weaker pulls. But I wasn't going to let it slip away. I pulled back each time the tug grew strong. It continued trying to wrench the rod out of my grasp, but I wasn't going to lose.

“Don't underestimate Fishing Mastery III!”

Cautiously, swiftly, but surely, we performed a dance of offense and defense. It pulled stronger than any prey I'd fought before. It truly was the pull of The Lord.

And after the battle had raged on for perhaps thirty minutes...The Lord's strength began to wane. Not one to let my chance slip by, I gave chase. The rod grated and creaked, and though my gamified body could hold on without issue, there was no telling when my concentration would fail me.

“One last spurt!”

Repeatedly, I struck at the split-second tugs, again and again, and again. And finally, The Lord burst from the water's surface— †

“Aha ha ha hah! What's up with that?! That's one huge herring if I've ever seen one!”

A haggard expression haunted my face as I met up with Tsumugi and Kanade. Slung across my back was a massive fish... It was The Lord: a massive herring.

Who could have guessed The Lord was a herring?!

Walking around with a huge herring on my back, people couldn't help but point and whisper. It was torture. I'd essentially run into my sisters just as I was considering stuffing it into my inventory.

Tsumugi was filling albums with screenshots...essentially photos of me.

Screenshots could be stored on the same USB sticks we'd used for character data. Even I'd snapped some photos of a few of the fish I'd caught before. I got some of The Lord as well, naturally.

"You shouldn't laugh, Tsumugi... Pfft!"

"You're not any better!"

Seriously, I never thought The Lord would be a herring. But why a herring? It's not seen as a particularly tasty fish.

In any case, I managed to meet up with the two of them. This allowed me to see their in-game appearances for the first time...and there was only one thing I had to get off my chest.

"Why am I the smallest?"

"I wanted another little sister."

My big sister picked Human as her race. The fact she was beautiful was only natural—given it was a game—but she had put a lot of work into her appearance. There was a certain gloss to her that had her stand out from the defaults. Her breasts were decently large in reality, and they were large here as well. For some reason, she seemed a bit particular about them, as she even gave them a bit of sag.

"I wanted a little sister too!"

Tsumugi chose a Demihuman. Her fox ears twitched about as cute accents to her design, and her face was quite similar to our big sister's. Her chest was neither big nor small. To put it simply, she was dating-sim-main-heroine-sized. Height-wise, she was slightly taller than me... Perhaps around middle schooler height?

"And since I was created as the littlest sister, I'm a loli, huh? Yes, I understand. That makes sense."

And I was a Spirit. My body was faintly transparent, and I was completely flat. My build was rather small to boot. Meanwhile, my looks somewhat resembled my sisters'. I guess it did give a vague sense that we were related.

I barely contained a sigh.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have any complaints, but let’s forget about that for now.”

“I see you can’t stop sighing in amazement at your perfect little girl body!”

“So how’s the week been for you two?”

“He ignored me!”

The sun would set if I took the time to address every little bit of my little sister’s nonsense.

“Really fun!”

“We’ve just about established a routine.”

They both started going into what had happened over the past week.

As was pretty much expected of her, Tsumugi grinded away like the game addict she was and was the highest level. Not that I had a level to begin with, but she was devoting practically every hour of the day to leveling up, so she was most certainly stronger than someone who hadn’t even set foot outside of spawn. She even frequently bragged about the ribbon she got as a drop from a powerful boss. Apparently, she and her comrades were the ones who managed to defeat the boss that stood in the way of unlocking the Second City.

My older sister Kanade was more the slow and steady type. Unlike Tsumugi, who thrived in fast-paced FPS and action games, Kanade preferred RPGs. She took every action with care, ensuring she had the strength to succeed before moving forward. If Tsumugi and Kanade were to ever fight, then the fact that Kanade even accepted the match in the first place meant that Tsumugi would lose. Now, Tsumugi was the war god’s gift to the world, and all this essentially meant was that I couldn’t imagine my big sister accepting her challenge anytime soon.

The reason my big sister didn’t go all out—the reason she wasn’t on the front lines like my little sister—was apparently because she’d spent three days picking out a weapon. She insisted she couldn’t fight at peace if she didn’t find a style that suited her and went around trying out every weapon type available. She was a role model to all gamers, if you wanted to look at it that way.

“How about you, big bro?”

“It’s been decently interesting for me. I’ve been fishing.”

“Huh? Kizuna, have you done nothing but fishing?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right. I don’t mean to brag, but I haven’t taken a single step out of this city!”

Those cold eyes... It’s almost like they see me as some sort of pervert!

Yet the fact that I felt no shame from their looks proved that I wasn’t one. This brought me joy from the depths of my heart.

“Hmm...” Tsumugi groaned. “There’s a river in the Second City. Why not have a look? What weapon do you use?”

“Dismantling weapons.”

The Beginner’s Kitchen Knife sold at the stores was apparently not a weapon, so it boasted no offensive stats.

“That’s the one with the low attack, right?” said Kanade. “The one where you get bonus items if you use the right weapon on the right monster, right?”

“That’s the one.”

Apparently, even the two frontline players didn’t know how to actually use them. Perhaps they even saw it as a joke weapon type.

“There’s some things that can only be obtained by using dismantling weapons. If you get some of them, give them to me!”

“Really?”

“A few, yes. A lot of players will buy them even at a huge markup. But since dismantling weapons have such low damage output, not many people want to go to the trouble. And it’s not like there are too many special drops either.”

“I see. Maybe it’s about time I fought a monster.”

This was starting to sound interesting. Perhaps the dismantling techniques I’d learned would let me take apart monsters too. *I’ll try fighting a monster tomorrow. It’s about time I bought a weapon.*

I never really felt any need, so I ultimately didn't buy one when I was dealing in empty cans. But apparently, dismantling weapons were about defeating the right monsters with the right weapons. In which case, it would perhaps be impossible to take them apart with only the starting equipment.

"Do you want me to buy you some good equipment?"

"It goes against my pride as a big brother to be treated by my little sister."

"What are you talking about? I'm always lending you rare items in normal MMOs."

Oh, right. This game was so realistic I'd frequently get it mixed up with reality, but at the end of the day, it was a game.

"I'm not really pressed for cash. Introduce me to a good crafter, and I'll pay for it myself."

"Even though you've done nothing but fishing?"

"You know those iron ingots that disappeared from the market?"

"Yeah. They were being sold up until yesterday."

"To be honest with you, I was the one collecting the materials for them."

"Really? What were you using? Altorese keeps insisting it's a trade secret, so we never figured it out."

"We're planning on releasing the info now that iron ore's been found. But yeah, I'm not strapped for money."

"But getting back to it, where did you get the iron?"

Tsumugi's fox ears pricked up as I faced her down with a fearless smile.

"The secret," I said, "is empty cans."

Gazing at their startled faces, I felt a bit of satisfaction about what I'd spent my time on the past week.

†

The next morning, I dismantled the giant herring in my room at the inn. The difficulty mainly came from the small size of the Beginner's Dismantling Knife,

but I went at it slow and steady. A tuna knife would have been nice, but unfortunately, I had no such thing.

First, I used the back of the blade to strip off the scales one by one. Then, once the scales were removed, I thrust the tip of the knife into the fish's belly, opening it from belly to tail in one clean cut.

The materials I ultimately obtained:

Low-Tier King's Scales, Low-Tier King's Whiskers, Low-Tier King's Fangs, Low-Tier King's Heart, Low-Tier King's Eyes, Low-Tier King's Sturdy Bones, Highest-Tier Herring Meat, Highest-Tier Herring Eggs.

Oh, so that herring was female... I kept that idiotic thought to myself.

Since my Dismantling Mastery had reached its second level, I received some system assistance, and I luckily managed to dismantle the whole thing. Incidentally, I also promised to meet an acquaintance of Tsumugi to have weapons and armor made for me. I had materials from The Lord, so perhaps I'd get a good weapon made out of them.

†

"Looks like I can make something called an Isana no Tachi," said the blacksmith Tsumugi was friends with.

She was a girl, by the way. She was such a skilled blacksmith that rumor claimed that half of the weapons on the frontmost lines had been made by her hand. She was seeing a surge in popularity. She was a Jewel by race. The red gemstone embedded in her chest let off a cool sparkle.

"Still, where did you find these materials? I've seen all sorts of materials in my line of work, but never something like this."

"Umm, I fished it up."

"Oh, so you were the one everyone was talking about yesterday!"

I hope they were saying nice things...

Anyway, It turned out that I could get a strong-sounding dismantling weapon from The Lord's materials.

As I stared at her with sparkling eyes, the blacksmith woman somewhat bashfully gripped her hammer. The hammer let off a radiant light as she shouted, “Weapon Creation!”

Its light spread to a high-level portable blast furnace into which she inserted the materials. A thick, glowing, molten substance spread out across her anvil, and she began to strike it with a powerful clang. I didn’t actually know the blacksmithing process, but it was interesting to watch.

Being a blacksmith looks fun, I thought. But right now, I’ve got more than enough on my hands with fishing and dismantling.

After a short while, the Isana no Tachi was complete.

“It’s pretty big.”

It was a tachi, a longsword used in feudal Japan. The word was made of the kanji for “large” and “sword,” and it certainly deserved the name. It was so large, I could even see it appearing in a certain monster-hunting game. I was hit with my second surprise as I realized that this was supposed to be a dismantling weapon.

“Oh? You’ve got a + bonus. You’re pretty lucky.”

I was handed the Isana no Tachi +1; it was lighter than expected.

Is my Dismantling Mastery helping me lift it?

“Oh, now I remember. Isana’s an old word for ‘whale,’ I think.”

“Hmm...”

It was either a weapon to use against whales or a knife meant to take apart the bodies of such massive life-forms.

I’ll keep it as my trump card, I concluded. And so, I had her separately make some smaller weapons, including an Iron Butcher’s Knife, an Iron Poultry Knife, and an Iron Paring Knife for beasts, birds, and plants respectively.

“Thank you!”

“Don’t sweat it. It was fun, making such peculiar weapons. If it’s all right with you, I’d like you to come to me if you ever stumble upon some interesting

materials.”

“Are you sure? I’m not a frontline fighter.”

“I can choose who I want to make weapons for.”

“I see.”

It was like she was role-playing in a different way than Alto. *Maybe I should do a little role-playing too. Like a jaded, retired angler, maybe.*

“I’m Romina. That’s r-o-m-i-n-a, Romina.”

“My name is Kizuna. Just change the kanji in my little sister’s name to get Kizuna†Exceed. Feel free to contact me at any time. I don’t have many materials yet, but I’ll sell them to you before anyone else.”

“That’s good to know. There aren’t many people who use dismantling weapons.”

“Are they that hard to find?”

“They are. I assure you. It would be fine if you could always get good drops with the right weapons, but the drop rate isn’t even that high. I’ve heard that their proficiency gain is also the worst, and you wouldn’t ever call them strong, not even as a joke.”

“I see...”

“So if you get any special dismantling drops, I’ll buy them off of you anytime. Luckily, I’ve got money to spare. I’ll be waiting for your call.”

“Understood.”

“Until next time, then.”

She proceeded to use a warp item—a Return Transcript. Just one of those went for a thousand Serin. The frontline blacksmith was rolling in money.

All right, we’re going on different paths, but it’s time for me to take a step forward too.

Yet the moment I was about to enthusiastically set off for the fields to hunt my first monster, my eyes turned to a certain stall. The main merchants and crafters had already begun moving on to the Second City, but there were still

quite a few of them doing business where it all began.

One of them—one of the products at a street stall—caused my heart to tremble. A boat.

It was a small rowboat that could only fit two people tops. The seller was a Jewel girl with a blue gemstone in her chest who was staring absently at the sky. Compared to Alto, she seemed to lack ambition.

Her equipment didn't go beyond the cheap clothes sold by the local shops. She was wearing overalls, perhaps due to personal preference. Not many people wore those, owing to the countryside feeling they gave off. I was indifferent about them myself.



But more importantly, the boat. I concentrated on the boat. *Won't I be able to catch more fish at sea with it?* I wondered.

In short. I wanted it. I needed it.

"What is it...?" the spaced-out girl muttered.

She's kinda...bad at customer service.

"How many Serins for this?"

After a pause, she said, "Forty thousand."

"Forty thousand?! Thank god. I didn't know what I'd do if you said a hundred thousand."

I'd never seen anyone selling a boat before, and I'd feared they might go for that high. But forty thousand, while a bit pricey, was still affordable.

"I'll give you forty thousand Serin, then."

I inserted forty thousand Serin into the trade window. Then, the boat disappeared, and an entry for Wooden Boat +3 appeared on her side.

"It's +3? That's pretty nice."

"I chose the materials...carefully."

"Oh, you noticed how quality works?"

"Most people with crafting skills notice eventually."

Well, that makes sense.

I'd noticed just from fishing, so it was perhaps only natural to notice.

"But if you can just hand over forty thousand like that, are you rich?"

"Not exactly. I just came into a bit of money lately."

It's the grace of empty cans. I have more than enough saved up, so I should use it when I need it.

"That's what every rich person says. Don't be surprised when the poor start complaining."

"Did something happen?"

“Nothing really... I was just told my boats are too expensive.”

“Well, are they?”

“Going off material cost, no.”

“Then I don’t see why anyone should complain. It’s a waste of time worrying about it.”

“Hmm... I threw in some oars too.”

“Thanks. I’ll come by again if I need a new boat.”

“Hmm...”

An elusive shipwright she was. In any case, I got myself a boat. My original plan was to leave town to hunt monsters, but I turned in the complete opposite direction and heeded the call of the ocean once more.

†

Scanning through my inventory in front of the usual pier, I brought out the Wooden Boat +3. I slowly boarded it, taking care not to capsize.

Oh, I’ve been on a boat in real life before, and nothing feels off. Let’s try rowing.

“I’m hardly going anywhere...”

There was presumably a skill to go with it. It was likely either a boating skill or an oar skill.

But so be it. We’re going out into the ocean with this!

†

An hour went by. Perhaps since I lacked the right skill, I could still see the land after all this time. *No, it’d be dangerous if I got too far away. Let’s start fishing.*

“Hmm? What’s that?”

A dark shadow approached from the sky opposite to the land. On closer inspection, it was a bird: a hawklike bird with a sharp beak. It was slightly larger than the hawks I was familiar with.

It’s got to be a monster...right?

I took out the Isana no Tachi... But that made the boat shake wildly. It felt like I was going to fall off.

“Dammit! Was it too heavy?!”

There had to be some weight limit for boats. Swiftly, I stowed the tachi away and switched to the Iron Poultry Knife—a dismantling weapon with a good affinity against bird monsters.

All right! I won't sink with this one.

“Now. Take this!”

I swung the Iron Poultry Knife at the large bird—the Killer Wing—only to miss it completely. The fact I was on a boat didn't help, but it was mostly owing to my lack of battle experience. Taking advantage of my amateurish swing, the Killer Wing stabbed me with its characteristic beak.

“Khh!”

I took 50 damage. A glance at the status screen told me I'd lost 50 Energy. I had known as much from the start, but Energy accounting for all my stats was an undeniable fact. I nodded at this revelation while attempting another attack on the Killer Wing.

Come on, I thought as I swung the Iron Poultry Knife again.

Krch!

An old RPG-esque damage sound played out as I landed a clean hit. Its HP went down by a third. But here I was, using the sort of expensive iron weapon that the teams on the front line were using... Was the Killer Wing just that strong? It didn't matter. For now, I needed to focus on defeating it and nothing else.

“Take this!”

Again, I mustered my strength and swung.

By the end of our slugfest, I'd taken 550 damage and earned 300 Energy. It was an awful net negative. If you'd allow me to give an excuse, the boat's rocking kept tripping me up.

I would have (probably) done better had I been on land.

Putting that aside, I checked to make sure there were no other birds around before taking out my fishing rod.

I'd bought bait in advance, small shrimp this time. They were a tier above worms with a price tag to match. I'd only bought them to commemorate my purchase of the boat.

As per usual, I concentrated every fiber of my being onto the tip of the rod and waited.

Sea Bream Acquired

Oh! Finally, Sea Bream! I felt so moved the first time I fished up sea bass, but the extra weight of this catch added to my enthusiasm. It was all thanks to Fishing Mastery III.

I immediately attached new bait and got back to fishing. It wasn't long before I was greeted by a powerful tug. It felt quite a bit short when compared to the giant herring, but I was still getting used to fishing on a boat. The fish wasn't an issue—it was me. I had to learn to utilize my strength. But that didn't mean I was going to let myself lose. I stuck to the basics and pulled.

Albacore Tuna Acquired

"All right! Finally, tuna!" It already felt like the boat was worth it. Albacore Tuna: as I recall, it was also called germon or longfin tuna. My heart pounded away in my chest as I brought the tuna up to my inventory space.

Whoa! For a moment, it was like the boat was about to sink. I quickly and forcefully stuffed it in before the weight could do any more damage.

Like that, I felt a sense of satisfaction as I dropped my line yet again.

†

A week went by. I'd completely forgotten my original purpose and devoted

myself to fishing once more.

Can you blame me...? Ocean fishing turned out to be a lot more fun than I was expecting.

At times, I'd drift so far I couldn't see land anymore. I'd find myself surrounded by monsters where I'd barely escape alive by the skin of my teeth. I was nearly killed by an Aqua Killer Whale monster far beyond my level and nearly had my boat destroyed by a Blue Shark. But even when the massive Brave Bird monster was chasing me down, I continued to fish.

Ironically, I eventually found out that the place where I caught my first albacore tuna was actually the safest, but...ignore that part. I also added Helmsman Skill and Shipboard Combat skill to my repertoire. Both were skills essential to operating a boat.

The Helmsman Skill assisted in steering the boat and helped with rowing the oars as well. Shipboard Combat—as the name implied—negated the debuffs that came with being out at sea. From what I could tell, those debuffs would eventually turn into buffs if I upgraded the skill enough.

“But I want to go even further...”

From what Alto told me, the path to the Third City would soon be found, and the battle against the boss would begin. Granted, these were all rumors.

When I heard about the other stuff going on in the world, I felt like asking myself... *What am I even doing out here?* But then, when I looked out at the sea, my mind would be consumed by naught but an earnest desire. *I want to see what lies beyond these waves.*

There had to be something. Otherwise, why would there be all these monsters in the ocean? But it was impossible for me. I couldn't do it with my current abilities.

If I pushed myself too hard and lost all my Energy, that would lead to the worst-case scenario, and unfortunately, the whales and sharks were all stronger than me. For now, my best bet was to raise up my Energy and Mana in earnest.

I wanted to live the fishing life a bit longer, but if I wanted to rise any higher, I needed to resolve myself to fight on land as well. Incidentally, my tuna and sea

breast items fetched a fine price. L'Arc was delighted when I shared some with him.

Chapter 5: Spirit of Glass

Finally, I stepped out into the Raphania Plains. It felt like I was two weeks too late, but I finally passed through the front gates of the First City, Lurolona.

Just beyond the city walls, a long, meandering path stretched out like a snake through the vast fields of grass. This was evidently a very late start to my leveling journey, as I couldn't see a single soul around. Anyway, I carried my Isana no Tachi—my weapon with the highest attack—on my back as I walked.

It didn't take much walking before I came across a canine monster called a Common Wolf. With a firm grip on the tachi's hilt, I let out a jumping slash.

There was a great, exhilarating “*thud!*” followed by silence. The Common Wolf faded away after having been split clean in two.

“Huh?”

I ended up one-shotting it. Just how powerful was this weapon? Without much choice in the matter, I stowed the tachi away and took out the Iron Butcher's Knife. It was fashioned in the shape of a broad and long cooking knife and looked like it would pack a punch. For what it was worth, this knife did seem to count as a dismantling weapon, though it was probably usable in cooking as well. It was light compared to the tachi, making it easier for me to walk around and search for enemies.

“There's another over there.”

As one might expect from the very first hunting ground, the monsters did not automatically aggro to the players. They were so-called practice dummies.

“Hrah!”

One hit didn't do it this time, although it did drop the Common Wolf's HP bar by three-quarters. My joy at this realization was brief, as quickly the Common Wolf let out a belligerent howl and pounced at me.

“Whoa!”

Not only was I not used to fighting, I'd also never properly played a VR game before. It was hardly any larger than a puppy, but my knees buckled a bit as it jumped.

"Kh!"

I took 5 damage, meaning I lost 5 Energy. It would certainly be difficult to earn Energy like this. I could see why Spirits were known as a feeble race. But I wouldn't stand still and let my Energy drop any further.

Once more, I rushed, this time with an aimed thrust. My attack hit the mark, and the Common Wolf fell to the ground.

"Phew... Having a good weapon helps."

That wouldn't have been as easy with the starting weapon. In addition, I had stored up a fair bit of Energy. It was all these factors coming together that gave me such an easy victory.

"Now...to experiment."

This one's corpse remained, unlike the Common Wolf I'd split in two. I turned my Iron Butcher's Knife on it.

Unlike with fish, I had some qualms about taking apart a dog, but this was technically a game designed for all ages. I managed to obtain Coarse Fur, Beast Bones, and Common Wolf Meat without any graphic depictions.

It's as I suspected. If I properly dismantle it, I can reliably get items.

This was probably an effect limited to dismantling weapons, but how was it that no one else seemed to know about it? It seemed pretty self-explanatory, but... Perhaps no one felt compelled to cut up a wolf for cooking.

After all, it was a game that cost a lot of money to play... Even though there were supposedly loads of participants, it wasn't constantly online for people to play and test things... But speculating wouldn't get me anywhere. I decided I'd continue hunting and raising my dismantling for a while.

†

Partly owing to the high performance of my weapon, I quickly realized that this wasn't the hunting ground for me. I continued wandering, searching for the

right field for my strength level when I came across a short green creature with a spear... A monster called an Assault Goblin was fighting against a girl.

She was pretty far away, but I could tell she was taller than me. That said, I'd been made into a loli character thanks to no fault of my own. I couldn't imagine many people being shorter than me.

She looked younger than my big sis but older than Tsumugi. High school age, perhaps? Yeah, she was about the same size as my female classmates, so that was probably correct. Not that I had any idea what she looked like in real life. Her equipment took the form of an indigo kimono with tasteful gold patterning. Her weapon of choice was a fan.

Going off the words of big sis Kanade—who'd tried out every weapon type—this was apparently an all-in-one weapon that blended offense and defense with attacks that mainly consisted of thrusts and blunt strikes. However, the girl wasn't attacking, instead maintaining distance from the Assault Goblin with a look of impatience. As her fan was letting off a white light, I could tell she was invoking a skill, but it did not seem like she was taking the initiative.

"Why aren't you attacking?"

The girl noticed me, my careless words giving the Assault Goblin the opportunity to thrust its spear at her. The girl gracefully locked the spear between the segments of her fan and parried the force. *So she's strong after all. At least, I wouldn't have struggled to block that.*

"Wild Dance First Formation: Rapid Strike..."

As the girl muttered the name of her skill, her glowing fan sallied forth, the back portion with the hinge slamming into the Assault Goblin's forehead again and again until finally, it fell to the ground powerlessly.

"Phew," the girl let out a light sigh. And then, "What were you going to do if I got hit?!" she shouted at me.

"Sorry. Did I do something I shouldn't have?"

"It wouldn't have been a problem for any other race, but I... Hmm?"

"Something wrong?"

“You’re also a Spirit? My apologies.”

“Okay...”

Her tone suddenly softened and she began speaking to me in a more friendly tone.

“I’m sure you understand, but if a Spirit takes an attack, it directly impacts the efficiency of their experience yield. For that reason, I was fighting while taking care not to be hit whenever possible.”

“So that’s what it is.”

Sure enough, back when I fought the Killer Wing, I gained 300 Energy upon defeating it but took 550 damage overall. This left me at a net negative of two hundred and fifty. That was the biggest inconvenience of having every single stat depend on Energy. With that said, the girl’s equipment seemed far too good for her to be fighting here.

“Are you curious? I ended up losing a lot of energy the other day.”

Presumably, I’d been staring at her so hard that she was able to see right through me.

“Are you sure you should be telling me that?”

“Telling someone does not change what happened.”

According to her, she’d been on the front lines with a party that she’d hit it off well with from the first day of the game, but she’d acted as a shield during a boss battle not too long ago.

As Spirits substituted Energy for HP, they had an overwhelmingly higher HP pool when compared to the other races. This was also why she used a folding fan that was a mix of offense and defense, but fighting on the front line had considerably reduced her Energy.

And once her party saw that her abilities had weakened, the members flip-flopped and demanded she be expelled from the party. This put her in quite a bad mood and caused her to leave on her own, and now, she was fighting solo to grow stronger.

“And now I’m complaining on and on to a fellow Spirit who has done no

wrong. I apologize dearly. It really got to my head,” she apologized once she’d said her piece.

It seemed she really was irritated at her former party members.

“It doesn’t bother me. Still, I always heard about stuff like that, but I never thought it actually happened.”

“They are but fiends. I am ashamed of myself for ever treading the same path.”

“That way you talk. Is it some kind of role-play?”

“Role-play?”

“Have you never heard of it? It’s sort of like acting as a character.”

“I see. This is simply the way I usually conduct myself. Is that an issue?”

“Not really.”

It was rare to find someone like her in an online game. Of course, if I was the skeptical sort, I’d conclude even this was part of the act.

After thinking for a moment, I proposed, “Hey, do you want to form a party? We’re both Spirits here. We should be able to understand one another to some degree.”

“Are you certain? My energy is a mere 20,000.”

“I’m around the same ballpark. In fact, this might work out perfectly. You’ve got to know the most efficient grinding spots, right?”

“Yes, if it’s up to the Second City.”

“Then I’d like to team up, if it’s okay with you.”

The girl put her left hand to her mouth in thought before forming a soft smile.

“Understood. I shall accompany you.”

“I’m Kizuna. Here’s to a good working relationship.”

“My name is Hakoniwa Shouko. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Her bow was so graceful that I instinctively found myself bowing back and saying, “Likewise.”

This was kinda starting to feel like a marriage interview.

†

“Looks like it was true when she said she was on the front lines,” I whispered to myself.

Shouko completely changed when it came to battle, letting off an intimidating presence like a demon. She herself said it came from the sense of security she felt now that we’d paired up. More importantly, it was easy for me to slice in with my Iron Poultry Knife during the pauses in her dance of offense and defense.

“You doubted me?”

“I was fifty-fifty.”

“What a terrible person you are.”

“You say that, but I’m just going off your testimony. It’s not like I saw it myself.”

“Then do you believe me now?”

I offered a sincere nod.

She would capture enemy weapons between the ribs of her fan, and by applying some horizontal force, she could snap the weapons with low durability on the spot. Seeing as the probability of weapons breaking seemed to increase against swordlike weapons, perhaps it was designed as a sword counter.

But, to actually achieve this, you had to catch the opponent’s weapon. The way Shouko could deftly pull off such a divine feat before unerringly shifting to defense and weapon destruction was so refined that it was almost like she was dancing. It was hard to believe she’d only started playing only two weeks ago.

“What have you been doing so far, Kizuna?”

“I’ve been fishing at the First City this whole time.”

“Fishing? Yes, your sardines are quite delicious.”

She closed her eyes, put her hands together, and gave me her sincere gratitude.

Err, praying to me's not going to get you much... In any case, forming a party with Shouko helped bring stability and reliability to battle. We were both Spirits, so we naturally and instinctively fought while taking great care to avoid any and all damage.

"Come to think of it, Shouko, do you know anything about dismantling weapons?"

"I have heard that they provide a bonus to the items dropped by monsters."

"I see."

Now what to do? I thought. The body of a Flame Condor lay nearby. If I dismantled it, I knew I'd get some decent drops. And even if a monster came while I was hard at work, I knew that Shouko would be able to defeat it. When it came to player skill, she was leagues ahead of me, and I could let her guard me with peace of mind. Surely someone would realize how to dismantle sooner or later. Revealing it now wouldn't be an issue.

"I'd like you to keep this a secret, but dismantling weapons have a hidden effect that isn't widely known."

"Is that so... What sort of effect would that be?"

"Watch what I'm doing here."

I used the Iron Poultry Knife to slice off the Flame Condor's right wing.

Shouko clapped a hand to her mouth. "Kizuna, they may be monsters, but I do not condone the act of disrespecting the dead."

"I'm not. Watch closely."

I performed a simple dismantling. Before long, the body had been converted into four items: Flaming Feather, Burning Feather, Bird Bone, and Condor Meat.

"My! So you're someone who greatly respects life. I, Hakoniwa Shouko, am greatly impressed."

"Hmm...?"

She had suddenly gone in the completely opposite direction.

"To take life away... Yes, it is unavoidable as we are living beings ourselves."

But to not let any part of that life go to waste is a wonderful thing.”

“So that’s what you meant.”

Shouko was sounding like some sort of priest, and she had a peculiar dignity to her that had me nodding along. I didn’t mean to be rude, but she came off as the sort of person who’d honestly say, “The farmer puts their blood, sweat, and tears into every grain of rice...”

I get that I’m agreeing with her, but I don’t really picture people like her playing video games. It’s easier to imagine her living elegantly as a noble lady. Not that I was going to complain. Everyone had their hobbies.

“As you can see, people don’t seem to recognize their actual function.”

“I see. This is purely my speculation, but I believe the problem lies in the explanation.”

“How so?”

“Yes, well. The description for dismantling weapons states, ‘Dismantling Weapons—A category of weapons made to take apart flora and fauna. Increased item drops after defeating monsters.’ I suspect there is a lack of proper explanation.”

Sure enough, there was a bit of missing information there. The way the description put it made it sound like the monsters would automatically drop extra items on defeat. In all actuality, these bonus drops probably had to do with attacking critical points. In the case of the Flame Condor we’d defeated, striking the joint of the wings would have given extra items. But that would be exceedingly difficult to execute during actual combat. The bird had been flapping its wings very fast, after all.

“I have a rough grasp of the situation, but why must it be a secret?”

“Naturally, because there’s profit to be made if no one else is the wiser. The items we just got can be sold for pretty high, can’t they?”

“But would it not benefit the world to publicize this information?”

“Shouko, are you just going to hand that information to the same people who used you and cut you off?”

“I see... A secret it is, then.”

“You didn’t take much convincing.”

“I am not a saint. Some people deserve my kindness, and others do not.”

That came as a bit of a surprise to me. Well, it wasn’t like I went out of my way to be kind to people I hated either. In fact, even if I didn’t go as far as harassing them, I would try to avoid encountering them as much as possible. Shouko seemed to share that mentality.

“If that is the case, I understand. It will be just between us.”

“Thanks, that’s a huge help.”

I’m glad she’s quick on the uptake. Shouko turned out to be far more perceptive than I’d expected. She seemed to be a smart girl.

Come to think of it, there was something else that made me think she was smart.

“By the way, did you memorize every weapon explanation?”

“Yes, I tend to read game manuals very thoroughly.”

I hadn’t known her for long, but I already got that feeling. It was hard to put into words, but despite what her appearance suggested, she gave off the impression of a curious soul whose mastery of cell phones and computers encompassed the obtuse functions that no one knew or cared to know.

“When selling, would it be best to reduce the sale amount and keep some on hand, then?” she asked.

“Right. If there’s too much on the market, someone’s got to notice that something’s off.”

“You know, I think fortune has smiled upon me.”

“You think so?”

That was hard to believe. She’d wasted two weeks’ worth of effort in one boss battle and lost her comrades in the process. I’d personally classify that as a misfortune... Had it been me, I would have still been sulking in bed.

“I came to know one of my few brethren, moreover, it was someone like you,

Kizuna. At this rate, I'll have to send my gratitude to those who pushed for my dismissal."

Though after a pause she added, "Not that I'll actually do that," with a soft smile.

How to put it, I was picking up the scent of a natural-born seductress from her. My heart almost skipped a beat.

"On another note, you *are* a woman, Kizuna. I think you should choose your words a little more carefully."

"Right... So we should start from that."

I explained that—owing to certain circumstances—I had the appearance of a girl despite being a man inside. I emphasized that, if possible, I wanted to be treated as a man.

Ultimately, the sun had begun to dip and the evening sky had turned the world crimson by the time that we'd finished chatting. As a side note, hunting as a pair raised my Energy gain efficiency to levels completely incomparable to anything I'd ever achieved before. It was all thanks to our gracious Queen Shouko.

Chapter 6: The Second City

The Second City, La Ilfi.

“So Kizuna, you are Tsumugi’s brother?”

The end of our grind-fest brought us to the Second City. The city was apparently inaccessible until someone completed the unlock quest. This restriction wasn’t too limiting, though; the First City was quite large with an extensive region surrounding it. It would take more than a day to reach the Second City unless you were going in a straight, steadfast line.

With the hunt over, we were in the middle of splitting the spoils, and Shouko seemed to notice a connection from the name displayed on the screen. Well, it was perfectly normal to notice something. It was quite a unique name.

“Yeah, is she causing any trouble for you?”

“I consider her a lively and wonderful person. In the battle to open up this city, I believe I would have been weakened even further had it not been for her. Words are not enough to express my gratitude.”

“That’s good to know. Tsumugi gets pretty carried away when she’s gaming. She might ruffle some feathers, but she means well. So if you see her again, try to keep an open mind.”

From our conversation earlier in the day, I’d realized they’d been on the same battlefield, and thought that perhaps they’d seen one another before. I’d never expected them to actually know one another. Apparently, they encountered one another frequently in the hunting grounds, so perhaps Tsumugi knew about Shouko too.

Anyways, it was time to divvy up items. This applied to most online games, but as long as there wasn’t a designated system, it was up to the parties to decide among themselves how loot was distributed. Some games just distributed them randomly and that was the end of it, but *Dimension Wave* did not seem to have a special system for item distribution.

We didn't obtain any rare items (unfortunately) so we were just going to divide everything in half.

"I apologize for the trouble."

"What are you talking about? I've been pretty much dependent on you in battle. I can at least handle this."

"Yes, thanks to you, Kizuna, it seems like I will be financially blessed."

"Hearing that makes it all worth it."

It was thanks to dismantling weapons, to be more precise.

Incidentally, we were still holding to our previous agreement. Shouko and I weren't going to disclose what we knew about the effects of dismantling weapons. There was no telling who could be listening, after all.

If this was a normal online game, that info would have definitely been detailed all over the boards by now. This lack of a walk-through was part of what made it a Second Life.

"All right. So what are you going to do after this, Shouko?"

"Let's see. It has been around two hours since I last checked. I was thinking of allocating my mana and hunting again. If it's all right with you, Kizuna, would you care to join me?"

It dawned on me at that moment. I'd often and frequently forget to update my skills. This was partly because I didn't frequently open my stat screen, but I decided I'd check it more frequently from now on. As a Spirit, Energy and Mana management was vital.

"Fine, but... The sun's about to set. Is there a reason we're heading out now?"

"There is a hunting ground that only opens at 8:00 in the evening and closes the next morning. It is a splendid place to gain Energy efficiently."

"I see... I might drag you down, but I'd love to join. If you're okay with it."

"I would be delighted to have your company, Kizuna."

We agreed to head out again after an hour of rest. During that one hour, I made sure to check my status. I couldn't just leave my mana hanging.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 19740 / Mana: 1650 / Serin: 109230

Skills: Energy Production VIII, Mana Production V, Fishing Mastery IV, Dismantling Mastery III, Elemental Conversion I

The skills I wanted to eventually pick up were...Energy Production IX, Mana Production VI, Fishing Mastery V, Night Vision I, Helmsman Skill I, Shipboard Combat I, Cleaver I, and Fast Dismantle I. Helmsman Skill and Shipboard Combat went without saying.

Night Vision, as the name suggests, mitigated the decrease in eyesight during the night, and provided a buff to combat ability during nighttime battles. As I recall, it was unlocked by being active for a total of twenty-four hours during the night. The last two weren't on the list yesterday, meaning I'd only met the conditions today.

Their effects...

Cleaver I

A basic attack skill for dismantling weapons.

Inflict significant damage when severing bones or joints.

50 Energy consumed upon use.

Required Mana to Acquire: 200

Unlock condition: Defeat 100 or more monsters with dismantling weapons.

Upgrade condition: Defeat 500 or more monsters with dismantling weapons.

Fast Dismantle

A support skill for dismantling weapons.

Grants a self-buff that boosts dismantling speed for a set period of time.

100 Energy consumed upon use.

Required Mana to Acquire: 300

Unlock condition: Dismantle 100 or more monsters with dismantling weapons.

Upgrade condition: Dismantle 500 or more monsters with dismantling weapons.

Both were skills that were useful in combat. Cleaver was clearly an offensive skill and was practically essential for hunting. *Shouko was using combat skills all the time. So she was consuming Energy with every use? I'll at least need to thank her later.*

Getting back on track, Fast Dismantle seemed to be an essential skill for party play. The most trouble during our hunting came during the time I spent dismantling. Time and again, I'd had to leave Shouko to fend for herself. Items obtained from dismantling sold for a lot, so there wasn't much we could do, but just learning this skill would make up for it somewhat. It seemed indispensable. And of course, even if I was playing solo, I wouldn't want to take an attack from behind while I was in the middle of dismantling.

I picked up both skills without hesitation. Fortunately, they weren't skills that consumed Energy every hour; they only took Energy when I used them, so I could pick them up without much consideration. It cost a bit of mana, but I hadn't saved up enough to upgrade anything else, so that wasn't an issue.

The manual mentioned that Energy also served as MP, which was quite advantageous in some situations. You could use skills infinitely so long as you had the Energy. Though considering how long it took to build up Energy, it was best not to fire off shots at random.

Spirits were truly a race that had to be very mindful in battle. Using Shouko's stories as a reference, even minor things could lead to becoming drastically

weaker. The fact she had endured in the boss battle for so long all came down to her massive stockpile of Energy serving as HP. We were a versatile race with high offense and defense—as long as we had Energy.

Unfortunately, Energy was limited. That was the biggest issue. I either had to spend it wisely, or find some way to compensate for the cost. That was the biggest problem I had to tackle. For now, I would turn off Culinary Art whenever I didn't need it.

“Now then, I'm here at the Second City. Why don't I fish until it's time to go?”

†

“Sorry, I'm late.”

I encountered an acquaintance by chance, and ended up running past the promised time. Of course, I sent Shouko a message saying I'd be late, but that didn't change the fact I was late anyway.

“No, it doesn't bother me. Did you run into any trouble?”

“I was borrowing a kitchen to cook.”

Cooking in-game was simplified considerably. The system would display a list of available recipes based on the items on hand. Grilled fish was the simplest dish, and the taste would vary based on the type of fish and any additional added seasonings. You could make it as long as you had a stove...well, any fire, really. To be honest, you could even make them by the streetlights and other decorative fires.

When it came to cooking, both my parents worked... And with my sisters being as they were, I was often the one doing the cooking. Although my big sis knew how to cook too. So I did have some knowledge when it came to cooking... But that didn't seem to be reflected in the game. It seemed that more recipes would become available to me if I raised the skill higher. At the very least, I wanted to make sashimi, but that was impossible with Culinary Art I.

“So you're a cook too...interesting. I'm starting to see why you noticed the trick to dismantling.”

“Yeah, here's my apology. Sweetfish or cherry trout? Which would you

prefer? They're both grilled with salt."

Sweetfish and cherry trout were usually caught at slightly different times of year. But this was a game, so perhaps river fish could be fished up regardless of the season.

"In that case...the sweetfish."

Shouko accepted the sweetfish after weighing her options. Anyway, we were going to engage in night combat, so there were a few things I needed to know.

"I'd like to ask this while I can, but is there anything I have to do? Any necessary process? I think I've mentioned it already, but I don't have much combat experience. I'm not knowledgeable about the rules surrounding hunting grounds."

"Right, well, I will hold the light source, so you don't need to worry about that. Oh, do you have any warmer clothing, by any chance? It gets cold at night, so it wouldn't hurt to have a coat," Shouko explained after courteously clasping her hands together and offering her gratitude to the salted sweetfish for its sacrifice. According to her, the gesture itself was bad manners where she came from. But it was common enough in this world and, *when in Rome*, as they say.

"A coat? Unfortunately, I don't."

"Then would you like to use my old one? It's a bit worn, but it is imbued with cold resistance. It should be able to withstand the cold of every region we've discovered so far."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. I was already looking for a way to dispose of it since I no longer needed it myself."

Shouko proceeded to hand me a rather large haori jacket. As an item, it was listed as the Powdersnow Haori; it provided weak cold resistance and increased defense. Despite how light it looked, it had an assigned weight value that made my body feel a little sluggish when I wore it. This wasn't just an issue because I was small either, so these were usually only worn when it was cold.

"If I had to say, my clothes lean more toward Western fashion. Is this all

right?”

I asked for her opinion once I'd donned the haori. It was an honest question. I was wearing a black dress called the Geist Dress. I chose it since it had the best specs out of everything that could be easily thrown together, but it did give off a bit of a gothic Lolita vibe.

It was Spirit-exclusive gear, for what it was worth. The buff it provided was a slight reduction to the damage inflicted on a Spirit's Energy. The fact I could only wear cloth armor like this was one of the drawbacks of dismantling weapons.

I looked around and saw someone with a dagger at their hip, but even they were wearing light armor. The low defenses were undoubtedly another reason there were so few people willing to use dismantling weapons. Not that I could really complain—after all, being a dismantling weapon user alone made you a pseudo-crafter unfit for combat.

“It looks better than I thought it would.”

“That's a concerning way to put it, but...thanks. I'll treasure it.”

Even if it didn't look good on me, I just had to use it for the effects it provided. That was common enough in an online game.

“So where are we headed? Also, I'll be a bit more prepared if you tell me what monsters we'll be facing in advance.”

“Certainly. To explain briefly, there is a place called the Forest of Everlasting Darkness that only appears at night, and we will mainly be targeting the Darkness Lizardmen that inhabit the—”

Summarizing Shouko's explanation, there were points where Darkness Lizardmen spawned in droves, and they were great for gathering Energy. However, these Darkness Lizardmen wielded bastard swords and boasted high offensive strength, making it tough for those who only had magic or attack skills. Because of this, most people avoided it unless they had very specific builds.

Normally, no one would even think to go without at least one person with shield skills, but our total Energy level put us above the enemy. The fan was a

mix of offense and defense with excellent weapon-destroying capabilities that made Shouko a very good match for the Darkness Lizardmen. Taking this into account, she was even able to go solo in the Forest of Everlasting Darkness.

“From what I’m hearing, dismantling weapons will be a bad matchup, but are you sure about this? I might just end up mooching off of you.”

I couldn’t shake the feeling I was already mooching off of her. Even so, I’d still managed to inflict decent damage as my weapons had good compatibility with my foes.

“You have the ‘you know what.’ Even if all else fails, you will never be completely useless.”

“I see. The ‘you know what.’”

She was, of course, talking about dismantling.

The drops of the monsters in a field that people rarely hunted in would definitely sell for a lot. Depending on the items that dropped, we could even use Elemental Conversion too. It was clear she didn’t invite me without careful consideration.

“All right, it’s a pleasure to work with you again.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

And with that, Shouko performed a magnificent bow in spite of the crowd around us.

Chapter 7: The Shadow That Crawls from the Dark

“Cleaver!”

As I cried out the word, my Iron Butcher’s Knife glowed with a red light. The weapon, imbued with centrifugal force, drew an arc as it forcefully sliced through a Darkness Lizardman.

There was a thud as the monster’s bastard sword stuck into the ground still attached to its severed right hand; I pursued on with another attack against the weakened creature. Before it had the chance to roar, the Darkness Lizardman fell.

“That’s one down. Are you okay, Shouko?”

“No problems on my end! Wild Dance Second Formation: Wide Bloom!”

Shouko’s fan was glowing before she even invoked the skill. She spread the fan wide, slicing through two Darkness Lizardmen with a special effect of scattering flower petals.

One of them collapsed while the other turned its bastard sword on her. She caught the blade in her fan, breaking the weapon with a sharp crunching sound.

“Charge,” Shouko muttered.

Her fan began to emit a faint white glow.

Even as she spoke, she thrust her fan into the Darkness Lizardman to deal damage.

She seemed to be managing fine without my assistance, but I swung my Iron Butcher’s Knife from the side anyway. By chance, my strike perfectly synchronized with a blunt blow from Shouko, causing the Darkness Lizardman to fall.

“Kizuna, are you injured?”

“I’m not. I’m fighting better than I expected, though I doubt I can handle two at once.”

My Energy gain outweighed the damage I received.

Meanwhile, the glow of Shouko's fan continued to intensify. This was the special property of fans. Many offensive fan skills needed to be charged up. Shouko would charge for between ten seconds to three minutes. The longer the charge, the stronger the glow and the power. During that time frame, she would block monster attacks and weave in normal attacks. If I had to bring up a fault, it would have to be that both its offense and defense were half-baked. Most of the fan's attack skills had a wide area of effect, making for low single-target damage. Meanwhile, its defense fell short of a shield.

"All right, I'll start dismantling them. Could you take care of any enemies that appear?"

"Understood."

I directed my Iron Butcher's Knife at the fallen Darkness Lizardman and began stripping away the scales. Then, realizing that the skill's effects had worn off, I muttered, "Fast Dismantle..."

My dismantling speed shot up. While it wasn't included in the skill description, it also had two hidden effects. First, the skill gave a boost to my dismantling success rate. Even though my dismantling became somewhat sloppy with the increased speed, the number of items I obtained was pretty much the same as when I wasn't using the skill. Second, it made my body feel a bit lighter when using dismantling weapons. It seemed that dismantling speed used the same modifiers as attack speed.

Anyway, I had three corpses to work with, so I had to hurry. The air echoed with the metallic sound of Shouko blocking another enemy attack. She'd already entered combat. Enemies were spawning quicker than anticipated, so I had to hurry.

If there were fewer than three enemies, I'd continue dismantling—we'd agreed on this in advance. I continued to focus on my work. Though I understood that this was the job of someone who used dismantling weapons, that understanding didn't stop me from feeling impatient.

But right now, I need to do my job. Nothing more, nothing less.

“I’m done. And you... Looks like you’re doing just fine.”

I finished dismantling the third one just as Shouko defeated the Darkness Lizardman she was fighting. Without needing any further instruction, I got straight to dismantling the new body on the pile.

This was very efficient. I could see why the place used to be a popular hunting ground.

“How is your Energy?”

“I should be asking you that. You’re always using skills, but how’s that working out for you?”

“My Energy Production is at X rank. This much is not an issue.”

She was two ranks higher than me. As expected of a former frontliner. She had a good assortment of skills to boot.

“In that case, you could probably make a lot if you just trashed your unnecessary skills and spent a few days relaxing in town...”

“There is a limit to natural Energy recovery, and it’s quite low.”

“Oh... I see.”

I’d never really fought before, and I’d never reached that limit, so this was news to me. *So they included something like that*, I thought. It made sense, all things considered. No one would struggle if they could get stronger without doing anything to deserve it. I continued to work as we spoke, reliably acquiring Darkness Lizardmen loot.

“Phew...” I took a deep breath. The wave of monsters had dried up, and there was nothing left to dismantle.

We returned to the camp we’d set up at the back of a straight, unbranching cave in the middle of that forest. There was little risk of getting ambushed here. The hunt had carried on for nearly two hours already, and I had mostly gotten used to it.

“Are you all right, Kizuna?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You mustn’t push yourself. We’re Spirits; the slightest misstep can be life-threatening.”

“This is easy compared to all the times I tagged along with Tsumugi in other MMOs.”

“Understood. Then let us continue for another hour and see how it goes.”

The Darkness Lizardmen were just as lucrative as Shouko said. We were defeating them in great numbers, and this meant a great haul of dropped items. Yet despite that, we hadn’t seen anyone else. It was mostly thanks to Shouko that the hunt was so stable. Without her, this would probably have been too risky.

Of course, the terrible visibility was the biggest bottleneck. But the Energy gain efficiency was so good I was even considering picking up Night Vision.

My total Energy had already surpassed 20,000. I could only hope it continued to increase like this.

“Hmm...?”

“What’s wrong? Something happen?”

Shouko wore a puzzled expression. It was the first time I’d seen that look on her face.

“No, I just heard a strange sound.”

A sound? I tried honing my ears.

I hadn’t picked up any relevant skills, so this was purely down to concentration. But...

Krsh, krsh, krsh, krsh, krsh.

I could hear the sound of something running.

“There!”

Shouko swung her fan toward what looked like nothing at all. With a snap, a semitransparent object revealed itself in a puff of black smoke.

“Please hold! I daresay, I am not your enemy!” pleaded a figure clad from head to toe in black like a ninja.

This was likely some sort of Concealment or Hiding Skill. But still... “I daresay?” Why was it that everyone I met seemed to be role-playing?

“This is hardly a situation where such excuses will pass. Now out with it. What is your purpose in approaching us?!”

“If I may, you have it all wrong. It was not that I was hiding from you. I daresay, the boss monster was chasing me.”

“The boss monster here... Do you mean the Dark Knight Lizardman?”

“You know about it?”

“Yes... It rarely drops anything, so even though you can get some valuable materials, most don’t consider it worth the effort. It’s rarely hunted nowadays.”

It happened in every online game, but it was always sad to see a hunting ground decline like this. *This field must have been bustling with players all the way up to the point that the Second City was unlocked.*

“I daresay, I was collecting materials for dark attribute equipment, but I had the misfortune of encountering it. Thus, I ran. My stealth skill, I daresay, served to dull its reaction speed.”

“I see. Assuming your story is true, where’s that boss monster right now?”

I had a feeling I didn’t want to know the answer, but I asked anyway.

“Right in front of this cave.”

“I knew it...”

I’d considered the possibility from the moment I heard the ninja’s initial excuse. But even as I timidly peered at the cave’s entrance, I saw nothing but uniform darkness.

“I daresay, I have acquired Night Vision, so I can see it clearly.”

“I see. Then say the boss is there. What do we do?”

The Return Transcript item that could have brought us back to town couldn’t be used in the Forest of Everlasting Darkness, which was treated as a dungeon. Meanwhile, the cave only had a single path with only one exit. And that exit happened to be occupied by the boss.

“Do you know what you’ve done?! We can’t afford to die so easily!”

We Spirits couldn’t afford to die. If we did, our Energy would drop to 0, significantly weakening us. It was essentially a complete level reset.

Though I tried to maintain a calm facade as I thought over it, I was panicking inside. We risked losing not just today’s gains, but all the Energy we’d accumulated thus far.

Is there any way out of this?

“I daresay, I am in the same boat! I cannot die either!”

“Wait. We’ve got our circumstances, but why can’t *you* die? The other races just have a minor death penalty. It shouldn’t be such a big deal.”

“I am a Spirit, I daresay.”

I was left speechless. I pressed a hand to my forehead, my eyes drifting to the cave ceiling. Despite Spirits being rumored to be an incredibly rare minority, why were there three of them that just so happened to gather up in an unpopular dungeon? Just how astronomical were those odds?

“We’re Spirits too.”

“My word!”

“I am delighted to meet another of my kin. However, I wish it had been under different circumstances.”

I had to agree with Shouko there. I would have preferred to have come across the black-clad ninja at another time and another place.

“For now, let us find a way to endure the hardship together. What we need now is not to assign blame, but to overcome this crisis.”

“Yeah, Shouko’s right.”

Whatever strategies we threw together, it was hard to imagine any conventional approaches would work against the boss. It was a boss, after all. Shouko was competent enough, but I was using dismantling weapons—far from ideal, damage-wise.

It was clearly reckless to expect victory in a head-on fight, and equally

unreasonable to expect too much from our new recruit. The reason being that this ninja had been running from that boss only moments before.

“I daresay, I must atone for this sin with my death!”

“We’re putting our heads together because we want to avoid that, right?”

“Little one...”

Hey. Who are you calling little one? I at least looked old enough to be an elementary schooler. It wasn’t like I was a small child...

“It’s Kizuna. Don’t call me little one.”

“Oh, how courteous, I daresay. My name is Yamikage.”

“Are you a ninja...?” I asked.

Shouko chimed in, “I didn’t know ninjas were real.”

“Well, this is a game.”

“O-Oh, right...”

In any case, we’d introduced ourselves. The figure in black was called Yamikage. He seemed to be performing a very stereotypical ninja role-play.

An open nekama, a formal-speaking Japanese girl, and a ninja with a forced verbal tic... What a cringe-worthy party we were.

“Is the boss still in front of the cave?”

“It shows no sign of moving, I daresay.”

“Just to be sure, can you read the monster’s name?”

I glanced at Shouko, who immediately noticed my gaze. She always looked people straight in the eye when she spoke, and that proved convenient in times like these. Even if we hadn’t known one another long, it was still possible to pass messages like this. Surely.

Nope, that didn’t do it. She’s just staring back with a question mark over her head. It’s hopeless.

We’d only first met today, in any case. It would usually be impossible to understand one another at a glance.

Incidentally, I was simply trying to tell her to make sure the ninja got the boss monster's name correct. Not that I thought Yamikage was lying, but there was still a nonzero chance that he was trying to MPK (monster player kill) us Spirits, which would be the worst possible scenario.

"I don't think I even have to ask, but can we win with just the three of us?"

"Back when we were training to open up the Second City, the field was much more lively," Shouko explained. "We managed to overwhelm it with numbers, but that doesn't seem likely right now."

"Impossible, I daresay."

Is it a strong boss that requires a higher level or something? That's rough.

"Anything'll do. Can anyone think of a way to get out of here?"

"If I may ask, what about running away?"

"You barely made it here with your life, didn't you?"

The escape plan was rejected. Next, Shouko raised her hand. Her clear eyes looked into mine.

"Got a plan?"

"What about having someone act as a decoy to draw it away?"

"Reasonable enough, but who's going to do it?"

"I'm the one who suggested it, so it should be me."

She seemed quite resolute, but I personally rejected the idea. Shouko had already lost a large amount of Energy in a boss fight not too long ago. This was just my personal take, but as a fellow Spirit, I didn't want to make her go through the same thing again.

"I'm against it."

"I daresay I can't agree with it either."

To my surprise, Yamikage also showed some strong opposition. Perhaps we shared an opinion since we were both Spirits.

"Why not? That seems to be our best option, given the situation."

“Lady Hakoniwa, if we are to take up your proposal, then I daresay I should be the one in that role.”

“You may think ill of me for saying this, but Kizuna, Yamikage, you both lack a strong defense. In that regard, I have defensive skills I can use with my fan. If luck favors me, I might even be able to get away safely.”

“But I am the cause of this. I mustn’t let an innocent member of my kin sacrifice themselves.”

Shouko and Yamikage both insisted they would become a sacrifice.

“Rejected! Both ideas are rejected. Why are you both so eager for self-sacrifice?! The important thing is that we all escape together.”

They both cast their eyes down. Had this been a death game from a manga, it would have been an emotional scene, but no one actually died in this world. A debate over self-sacrifice was pointless. Of course, Yamikage was partially to blame for this near-MPK situation, but it wasn’t intentional. There was no point in pursuing it further.

We were all playing as Spirits, one of the less fortunate races, and we understood one another more than anyone else could. The idea of sacrificing a fellow Spirit to save ourselves was sickening. Right now, seeking other options was our top priority.

“Come to think of it, I never asked. What’s your build like, Yamikage?”

“I daresay, I took Night Vision I, Concealment I, and Drain VII.”

“Drain?”

“It is classified under Dark Magic,” said Shouko. “A skill to steal HP or MP from an enemy and make it your own. And that’s quite a high level too.”

“Indeed. I daresay, if a Spirit uses it, you can siphon Energy from monsters.”

That’s pretty convenient. But VII? Just how much did he raise it?

“Is your Energy actually ridiculously high or something?”

“Not exactly. I have a little over 20,000.”

“Huh? Twenty thousand? You’re about the same as me. How’d you use it

enough to get it to VII, then?”

“I am at negative 3000 Energy, I daresay.”

Hey... Yamikage was likely referring to his hourly rate of producing Energy. Based on the skills acquired, Spirits like us could end up with a negative production rate. It was possible for Spirits to pick up any skill that they wanted. There was nothing preventing Energy calculations from going negative, so you could take as many as you wanted. Logically, it was possible to do. But the short of the matter was that this ninja was losing 3000 Energy every hour.

“And you’re somehow gaining like that?”

If he was getting enough Energy to compensate for that massive loss, it would be a splendid, legitimate build. It was one of those high-risk-high-reward strategies.

“I am gaining around 1000 every day, I daresay.”

His was a triumphant face filled with a ridiculous level of self-confidence.

“Kizuna, I think this ninja is...”

It was bad enough for even Shouko to look concerned. I turned away to play it off.

Hey, there are players like this out there. A fair number of them too. I’ll even go as far as to say it’s people like him who make online games fun to play.

For reference, I was at around 23,000, Shouko was at 25,000, and Yamikage was at 20,000. Shouko had the highest base Energy Production, which meant that the plan she proposed was the safest option. However, that was the one idea I wasn’t going to accept.

“I guess we won’t get anywhere if I can’t even see the boss.”

“I daresay I can see it.”

“Well, seeing is believing, as they say. It would be quicker for me to see it myself. I’ll take the skill.”

I navigated the menu, brought up the skill list, and selected Night Vision I from my list of available skills.

Night Vision I

A skill to navigate the darkness of the night.

Converts nighttime negative vision modifiers into positive ones.

200 Energy consumed per hour.

Required Mana to Acquire: 200

Unlock condition: Be active at night for 24 hours or more.

Upgrade condition: Be active at night for 168 hours or more.

Once I obtained Night Vision I, I gazed outside of the cave. At Rank I, it was still dark, but I could see the general shape of things and the outlines of trees.

Yep... It's definitely there.

There stood a massive figure clad in black armor, a Lizardman. It was wielding an equally massive shield and lance and looked far stronger than anything the three of us could defeat on our own. Additionally, it looked like it would be very difficult to break that weapon with a fan.

First and foremost, it's huge. That's a boss monster if I ever did see one.

"Ah!"

"What's wrong?"

"I think I just realized why the boss hasn't come in here even though we've been chatting for a while. If I'm right, then—"

I told them the plan I'd come up with.

"Is that really possible?"

"I think so. It's a common trick in a lot of games."

"But I daresay, how will we draw aggro?"

“I have an idea for that too.”

Just maybe, we could turn this crisis into an opportunity.

†

I stood at the entrance of the cave. In my hand was a fishing rod, a weight attached where the hook should have been.

“All right, are we all good?” I gave a final check, confirming two silent nods before I gave the rod a great swing.

With the control I got from Fishing Mastery IV, I stuck the Dark Knight Lizardman head-on with the weighted line. In terms of damage, it likely only dealt a point or two. It hardly registered as an attack, but it was more than enough to get it to target me.

“Here it comes! Prepare for the worst!”

As soon as the Dark Knight Lizardman was hit by my attack, it came at me as fast as a violent gale. If we faced it normally, we’d have been cut down in an instant, but...

With a horrendous crash, the Dark Knight Lizardman collided with the cave’s entrance.

Indeed, the large Dark Knight towered higher than the ceiling of the cave. It existed in a wide variety of games—a tactic where you get a monster stuck on the environment. This was a common trick for easy leveling. In most online games, it was eventually patched out. But luckily, the tactic still applied to the current version of *Dimension Wave*. There was a chance of failure, of course, but after much discussion, we agreed it was worth trying. Perhaps management would fix it or penalize us if they saw this, but we were just doing whatever we could to survive. Who could complain about that?

“Now we hit it until it dies!”

“Understood!”

“I daresay!”

The rest was simple enough. We made full use of the weapons and skills at our disposal to launch an endless assault on the stuck enemy. I drew my Isana

no Tachi and slashed at the Dark Knight Lizardman caught in the entrance. A dull clink filled the air; unfortunately, it seemed to deal little damage.

I hadn't been able to tell from a distance, but all the areas not covered by armor were shielded by scales providing staggeringly high defense. I glanced over to see Shouko repeatedly striking and thrusting. Meanwhile, Yamikage chanted while pressing a magic-type weapon—a scroll-shaped grimoire—against his mouth. After a few seconds, green particles were drawn from the Dark Knight Lizardman and into Yamikage as a dark aura enveloped him. This had to be Drain, the dark magic skill.

For Shouko and myself, using attack skills was out of the question. We didn't even know how much HP the boss monster had. If this turned into a prolonged battle, we'd only be weakening ourselves the more it dragged out.

"How is it this sturdy? Can anyone really beat this thing in a fair fight?"

"Yes, we did it a number of times with my previous party..."

Our chatter continued over a ceaseless battle.

"I daresay, I've only heard rumors, but you are supposed to pin it down with multiple tanks while a spellcaster attacks with light magic from a distance."

"I was the one kiting it. At first, its attacks were so fierce we were forced to retreat."

"I see. So it's got high physical defense."

Our compatibility with the Dark Knight Lizardman was likely the absolute worst. Dismantling weapons and fans were far from the strongest physical weapons, and then we had Drain—a spell that shared the same darkness attribute as the enemy. Without abusing these mechanics, our chances of winning were zero. After all, my attacks were making a dull and weak clinking sound, and this was the strongest weapon I had. Incidentally, metallic monsters with high physical defenses were apparently best dealt with using axes and blunt weapons when magic wasn't an option.

"Anyway. As long as it doesn't try any funny business, we just keep hitting it!"

"Right!"

“I daresay!”

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. We continued repeating these endless, one-sided attacks for the eternity that awaited us.

†

Thirty minutes passed.

“I-It’s still not going down. Just how much HP does this thing have...?”

It would attack if we got too close, so we continued to unleash our might from just out of reach. Shouko’s fan range was especially short and she’d occasionally have to go on the defensive and parry its strikes.

The Dark Knight Lizardman seemed to be programmed to try to retreat now and then. This seemed to be a countermeasure imposed by management. Even so, the AI was pretty dumb. Whenever it happened, I’d use my fishing rod to deal a point or so of damage and aggro it back within our attack range.

“Back when this was still a lively place, all sorts of people participated to take it down. Do you think it’s regenerating, perhaps?”

“Nay, I daresay our attack power is simply very low.”

Yeah, you’re not wrong about that, but should we really be saying that ourselves?

The three of us had already unleashed what was practically an endless volley of attacks. The armor had shattered, and the scales had cracked at the points we had continuously attacked. By attacking these exposed vitals, my dull *clinking* had evolved into a meatier *chking*. I was...presumably...dealing more damage than when I started.

Still, it was mentally straining to waste so much time on a single monster.

“You shall be the nourishment for my soul! Drain!”

Having used Drain consecutively for thirty minutes straight, Yamikage’s Energy had surpassed Shouko’s. He had around 27,000 now. That was proof of just how high the Dark Knight Lizardman’s HP was.

“Oooh?”

Right after those familiar green absorption effects played out, the Dark Lizardman began to move differently than before. It raised a loud, ear-shattering roar before collapsing with a heavy thud. It no longer crashed into the cave; we were free from the tremors that came each time it did.

“I daresay we’ve done it.”

“You little...! That’s a death flag right there!”

“Urgh, you’re right. But nay, my little sister I left in the village...for her sake, I daresay, I can’t die just yet!”

Oh no. I’m starting to enjoy his sense of humor.

“What are you people doing...? Seriously. This win was a valuable experience.”

I took on Shouko’s cold stare as I confirmed our enemy’s defeat. Sometimes, bosses of this sort would simply pretend to be dead. I approached with caution.

“It may be playing possum, I daresay. Please be careful.”

“Got it.”

“No, I don’t think it is.”

“Why not?”

“Despite everything, it called itself a knight. I can’t imagine it would do anything so underhanded.”

Well...she has a point. The enemies that played dead were most often demons or barbarians. Lizardmen themselves were pretty much barbarians already, but this one was still a knight, for what it was worth. Perhaps it kept up honor in its own way. As things stood, we were the ones who had bested the honorable Dark Knight Lizardman with a fiendish trap, but I decided to purposely ignore that part.

“It dropped...” Yamikage started. He’d dealt the last blow, and thus, he was the one who got the items, “Darkness Fragment, and Dark Lance Shard.”

“Those materials sell for a lot. We’re in luck.”

I wasn’t strapped for cash, but it was nice to get valuables. There was nothing

wrong with keeping them around.

According to Yamikage, they were both materials to craft two-handed spears. Since they added a darkness attribute to the weapon, they were highly sought after by spear users.

“Dismantling weapons are truly impressive, I daresay. Just as rumored, they yield the rarest drops.”

Now comes the main issue. What should we do?

Shouko shot me a questioning look. To be honest, I wanted to dismantle it. Rather, I wasn't going to come across many opportunities to dismantle a boss monster. The items I obtained would probably be highly useful for weapons and armor.

I weighed out the benefits of hiding it against the items I'd get from the boss.

“We've already fought together, so I guess I'll tell you... You can't beat boss materials, after all.”

“If you're all right with that, Kizuna, I'm sure it's for the best.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?” Yamikage asked.

“Well, just watch. Fast Dismantle...”

I chanted the skill name before using my Isana no Tachi to take apart the massive, fallen Dark Knight Lizardman. The broken armor and cracked scales were beyond saving, but there was plenty more where that came from: Scales, bone, flesh, fangs, eyes, skin, tail, and more.

Still, I guess you can't dismantle parts that are destroyed in battle... That's the complete opposite of a certain monster-hunting game.

Broken parts did not become items. I could only get parts that were intact before dismantling.

“My word...” Yamikage gasped in surprise.

It was a boss monster, and so, the number of items I obtained was just as plentiful as it was from the giant herring. Perhaps that herring had been considered the boss of the fishing area.

“I daresay, what’s going on here? Bonus items? Do dismantling weapons do more than increase the drops when a monster is defeated?”

“The weapon type description was lacking,” explained Shouko. “The true power of dismantling weapons lies in using them on fallen enemies to obtain more materials.”

“This is the first time I’ve been this surprised by this world.”

Either he really was surprised, or he was overacting. *Even if this info gets out, I guess I’ll make more than enough money by selling the materials from this boss alone.*

“Very well. You want me to keep this a secret, I daresay?”

Oh? How understanding.

“From what I can see, both you and Lady Hakoniwa are concealing this detail. You have saved my life, and I shall take this secret to the grave to repay my debt.”

“W-Well, I’d be happy if you did...”

Come to think of it, we almost died because of him. Though he seems genuinely remorseful. I guess it’s not an issue as long as he keeps it a secret.

“Still, if I may, I would like to make a request.”

“What is it?”

“Could you add me to your party?”

“Why...?”

“I’ve made it this far alone, I daresay.”

“Is that true?”

Shouko heard him out, a bit perplexed.

No need to be so confused. It’s hard to get into a party with such a strange skill composition. I held in the urge to retort as I listened to what he had to say.

“I hesitate to say it myself, but I daresay, I have...trouble communicating.”
What was that again? Look, I’m sorry, but it doesn’t really look like that to me.

His role-playing was a bit annoying, and there were probably people that hated that. But there were surely people who enjoyed it too. At the very least, Alto and Romina would accept it no problem.

“I have considered joining a number of parties, I daresay. But when push came to shove, I couldn’t find it in me to approach them.”

“That must...have been tough.”

Shouko seemed to be getting won over.

I don’t know how to tell you this, but with that mindset, you’d be pretty easy prey for scammers in real life.

“Can I ask a question?”

“I daresay, please do.”

“For someone with a communication disorder, you’re talking to us just fine. What’s that about?”

“I am just barely managing to speak by using the words of the ninja: I daresay.”

What sort of logic is that? Come up with a better excuse.

“Even now, I am shaking uncontrollably inside, I daresay.”

“My! Let’s take her, Kizuna. We are all fellow Spirits, after all!”

W-Well, I’m fine with adding him to the party, but... Huh?

“What did you just say?”

“We’re all fellow Spirits, after all!”

“Before that.”

“Let’s take her? That one?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Her?”

Yamikage was clad in baggy black clothes from head to toe, and it was hard to tell what he actually looked like. His mouth was also covered with black cloth and it was hard to determine anything from his muffled voice.

“I daresay, it is embarrassing to show my true face, but since we may fight

together, I want you to see it.”

With that, the cloth covering her head was removed, and there stood a young and pretty girl with silver hair.

†

In the end, Yamikage joined the party on Shouko’s recommendation.

“From now on, please call me The Dark Shadow.”

This was the first thing she said upon returning to the Second City from the Forest of Everlasting Darkness.

“Huh?”

What did she just say? Her hype level was through the roof. She was too excited for her own good, even going so far as to display the template symptoms of chuunibyou.

“Very well, Ms. Dark Shadow,” Shouko said with a straight face.

I stared at her, dumbfounded. It seemed she was the type that didn’t really get jokes.

“Fine, got it, The Dark Shadow. A pleasure to work with you, The Dark Shadow.”

Looks like that made her freeze up...

“What’s wrong, The Dark Shadow? Why are you so quiet, The Dark Shadow? Please answer me, The Dark Shadow? Have I offended you somehow, The Dark Shadow?”

As I prattled on and on and repeated the name over and over, Yamikage hurriedly corrected herself.

“‘T-Tis a joke, I daresay. Please just say my name normally.”

“I see. Then I’ll just stick to Yamikage, or maybe Yamiko.”

“Very well, it will be Yamiko for me.”

“I daresay, where did the ‘ko’ come from?!”

Because your character design doesn’t match your personality, I thought.

Though I kept that to myself.

A black-clad figure with billowing, silver hair. How do I put it—she was actually pretty cool. She wasn't a traditional sneaky-stabby ninja, but rather a ninja art-focused spell caster straight from the land of Japanimation. The "Believe it!" type. Some would call it unconventional; personally, I liked it.

"It seems you don't like it, so I will settle for Yamikage," concluded Shouko.

"Oh right, I didn't mention this before, but even if we're teaming up, don't expect us to hunt enough to compensate for that negative 3000. I use dismantling weapons, and Shouko uses a fan."

"That is not an issue, I daresay. I have already downgraded Drain."

"Hey, you're losing your identity here."

"Of course, I will continue to be faithful to Drain, I daresay. But as a vassal in service to Lord Kizuna, I must do everything in my power to be useful."

"Say what?"

All of a sudden, she was calling me her lord. I was starting to see where her *communication difficulty* stemmed from. Out of nowhere, she'd come up with things that only made sense to her. It was tough to keep up, but since we agreed to be in the same party, we'd stay together as long as there wasn't an issue.

"Come to think of it, it felt like we were more of a temporary party. But the way things are going, do you want to stick it out?"

"If you're all right with it, then I, Hakoniwa Shouko, have every intention of accompanying you."

It seemed like Shouko wanted to continue working with me.

"What do you say?" she asked me. "The three of us are all Spirits. If we run into an issue, I think we would better solve it among ourselves than with the other races."

"As a life saved by Lord Kizuna and Lady Shouko, I daresay it is my life's mission to become a shadow for the both of you."

They both voiced the same intent, both in ways that were equally difficult to parse.

“Hey, maybe I’m just not picking up on something, but do you two happen to know one another? This feels like it was all planned out, or is it just me?”

In just one day, I’d formed a party with two other Spirits. Both of them were doing a somewhat quirky role-play, and both had strange skill compositions. No, it wasn’t like I was any better, but I did feel a little uneasy about where this was going. Of course, it was “uneasiness” in a good sense.

“Yes, it is just as you say, Kizuna. We Spirits came together as though it was set up by a greater force. Almost like it was destiny’s calling.”

No, destiny...sounds a bit embarrassing. But having all our party members being Spirits did make it seem like we’d get along well enough.

“I daresay, we may be rare in the overall population, but we are not exactly an endangered species.”

“Hmm.”

“I have spent my days on an endless repetition of Drain after Drain, my quest carrying me far and wide across the land. And I daresay, I have spotted our kin frequently enough.”

“Is that so? I never saw any of them around me, so I was certain we were a very rare species.”

Not everyone was well-versed in info leaked on the net. It wouldn’t be strange if a few from that pool chose to play Spirits. Some might even choose them precisely because they were considered weak. And there would certainly be a handful who picked Spirit just because they found the semitransparent look to be cool. Of course, there were also plenty who judged things solely based on ability.

Still, hearing that Yamikage occasionally saw Spirits while Shouko—who fought on the front lines—did not... Well, that pretty much laid out the position of Spirits within the world.

By the way, I rarely ever saw them at the beach in the First City that I’d

hunkered down in up until yesterday.

“Well, let’s just say we’ll get along well as fellow Spirits. We’ll go with that. So what do we do from here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm, well I mean, are we going to sleep or continue?”

It was already late at night. The Second City was illuminated by the lanterns of the sparse individuals who prowled the streets, reflecting the night scenery. But it was still an ungodly hour that most people considered past their bedtime.

“Personally speaking, I don’t mind either option. Early to bed, early to rise, as they say, and I think we can do our best tomorrow. I do want to regain my original strength eventually.”

“I daresay, I have always been active at night. I can stay up until five without issues. I have no requests in regards to our ultimate course of action, so I will leave that to you, Lord Kizuna.”

To have no opinion—that was the most troublesome opinion of all. In the first place, why was I deciding? I’d tried my hand at being a guild master in other online games, but those were all tiny guilds where I was just in it for the guild skills.

Well, it’s not like I have an objective at the moment, so we might as well focus on what Shouko wants.

“On that note, Shouko. What was your Energy at before?”

“It was somewhere around 50,000.”

“I-I daresay, that’s incredible!”

“Shouko used to be on the front lines, you know.”

“I see, Lady Hakoniwa, so you were our master all along.”

“D-Don’t say that. I’m not skilled enough to be anyone’s master.”

She had more than enough skill as a player.

Sure, the Dark Knight Lizardman was stuck in the rocks, but she was still out there deftly parrying attacks that would have done some real damage had they

so much as grazed her. She probably would have been able to defend herself even if she was fighting the thing normally.

No, even before that, she'd been able to find Yamikage while she was hiding with her Concealment like it was nothing. Whether or not she was winning in terms of stats—that didn't matter. Sure, I had my biases as a comrade, but it was clear as day that Shouko was a very skilled player.

"I'm sure you know a good place to hunt. How about you pick one out and we can go from there?"

"I have no objections. Thank you for considering my opinion."

"No objections, I daresay. I want to absorb as many souls as possible."

"That settles it."

One way or another, we'd managed to form a party of three Spirits. As an irrelevant side note, we then went on to have a meal using my treasured highest-grade herring ingredients.

Chapter 8: An Efficient and Lucrative Spot with No Competition

To celebrate the formation of our party, I served up my highest-grade herring and bluefin tuna, and as tensions rose, it turned into a venting session for everyone. Ultimately, we all passed out even though no one was drunk.

“So, what exactly’s going on here?”

I recalled what had happened yesterday...

We chatted at the riverbank, glass lanterns in hand as we snacked on the finest herring in all the land.

It started with Shouko’s, “What’s wrong with being a Spirit?!”

Then went to Yamikage’s, “I daresay, is it so bad if I can’t communicate?! Am I truly a plague on this world?! I am not causing trouble for anyone!”

For my part, I did a fair bit of complaining about how Kanade and Tsumugi had forced me to play a girl character, and all the while we grew closer through our grievances. That was all well and good. I remembered up to that part...

But... What is this?

“Mm...mmm...”

“I dare...say...”

Reflected in my eyes were Shouko, wearing a yukata, and Yamikage in nothing but her underwear. And of course, I was also naked except for my underwear.



“Huh? What happened yesterday?”

The game was rated E for Everyone. There were system mechanics that made it physically impossible for minors to drink alcohol, so it wasn't like we could make any mistakes while under the influence. There were no explicit adult scenarios either—the game designers didn't even try to replicate that in the system. I'd heard of some 18+ VR games where it was possible to simulate intimate scenes with the heroines, but *Dimension Wave* was not one of them.

“What time is it?”

Judging by the light streaming in from the window, it at least wasn't morning. When I opened the menu, it displayed the time as 13:24. It was already midday. Just how undisciplined were we, sleeping in the day after forming our party?

“Hey, wake up! Shouko! Yamikage!”

As I raised my voice, Shouko sat up, rubbing her drowsy eyes. She was the only one among us wearing proper pajamas. I had my suspicions that she'd carried us here after we'd fallen asleep.

“Goond mornin' Kijuna...”

“She's still half asleep...”

It had been on my mind for a while now: the beds at the inns were way too good. I'd always sleep soundly for four to five hours, minimum. This was probably a measure against insomnia caused by too much gaming.

No, now's not the time to think about that.

“Shouko. What happened yesterday?”

“Everyone wuz sooo verry sleepy, so we wenn t' the inn.”

“Uh-huh?”

She was struggling to articulate, but I could understand what she was trying to say. It seemed the three of us had walked to the inn on our own two feet.

“It looked dangerous t' leave y'all like thad, sooo I got a large room fer everyone to sleep.”

I roughly understood the situation... But. But there was just one little thing.

“Why are Yamikage and I naked?!”

“Ah!”

Oh, that woke her up.

Shouko fretfully scanned the room and, after a nod, said, “Good morning, Kizuna. It’s a wonderful morning, isn’t it?”

She had an invigorating smile on her face.

“It’s already afternoon!”

†

The truth was terribly simple indeed. Shouko was the one who stripped us, and she’d done it out of concern for the clothes we were wearing. The game replicated clothes all the way down to the finer details, including the wrinkles and creases. The serious wrinkles could linger for quite a long time.

There were cleaning services, by the way, where any stain could be removed for a price. They weren’t too expensive, so the female player base used it quite often. Apparently.

“I’m truly sorry.”

“No, you don’t have to apologize. I should be thanking you.”

“Precisely. I daresay, there’s a chance the system would have cast a debuff on us if we didn’t spend the night in a safe inn. I have nothing but gratitude for you, Lady Hakoniwa,” said Yamikage, who had been incredibly flustered when she woke up.

She said something about being embarrassed to show her bare skin to others.

She even stammered, “D-Don’t look at me...” like a normal person. It seemed her usual, “I daresay” schtick really was part of the role-play. Well, it wasn’t like anyone actually talked like that in real life.

“For what it’s worth, I’m a guy in real life, so be careful. Sure, nothing can happen in this world, but...morally speaking, you know.”

“That’s true. I can only see you as a girl, so it completely slipped my mind.”

Sure, I was using a female avatar, but... I guess it was the same for Yamikage.

Appearance did play a large part. She didn't seem that bothered when I saw her naked—or at least, not as bothered as I could imagine her being if I looked like a man.

Dimension Wave was more realistic than the average VR game and—excluding race-specific characteristics—characters were indistinguishable from real people. Of course, everyone looked like a supermodel, which wasn't exactly realistic, but they still looked like real people.

There wasn't much they could do about it; the two of them only knew me as Kizuna†Exceed, with Kizuna†Exceed's voice and appearance. I wanted them to be mindful, but... *Maybe it's up to me to be more considerate.*

"Now then, we need to make up for lost time. Where are we headed today?"

"About that..."

Shouko began to explain her thought process with a somewhat awkward look on her face.

"The Forest of Everlasting Darkness had conditions that suited us very well. However, if we are to continue to hide Kizuna's 'you know what' from everyone, then any place I know of will eventually get us spotted."

It was a pretty obvious problem when I thought about it. To be completely honest, I didn't plan on hiding it if it proved to be too troublesome. It would be counteractive if that meant we wouldn't be able to hunt as a party.

The idea of hunting at night in the Forest of Everlasting Darkness came up, but that had its limits. The Energy gain was good enough for one or two people, but according to Shouko, it was better to turn elsewhere for three.

"If that's what's holding us up, I don't really mind getting found out. It's not that big of a deal."

"I understand what you're saying, Kizuna. But it feels like a waste to give up the advantage you have over others so easily."

"Indeed, I daresay."

Yeah, that's the thing. If this was a normal online game, we'd be able to read over vast amounts of information online. But in *Dimension Wave*, it was rare to

come across people who even knew about the materials the blacksmiths used to forge their weapons.

Of all the weapon types, dismantling weapons were the weakest and least popular. Those dismantling weapons just happened to have a use outside of combat; that was all there was to it. But Shouko and Yamikage had a point. It would be a waste to reveal the golden goose we'd coincidentally stumbled upon.

"In short, we need an efficient and lucrative spot where there's no competition..."

"I daresay, that's quite a high hurdle now that I think about it! Maybe too high!"

"Yes, we might be asking for too much."

They were all very selfish conditions, akin to demanding a marriage partner with a six-figure salary. Even if such a hunting ground existed, there would surely be someone else there. But even if we lowered our standards, we couldn't completely eliminate the possibility of being seen by someone else.

Perhaps it was impossible from the get-go.

The moment an MMORPG launched, popular and unpopular hunting spots would naturally emerge. The unpopular ones would have fewer people because they offered a poor exchange rate on effort to experience.

"But a hunting ground with absolutely no one else..."

There's no way a place like that... Wait, it does!

Honestly, I didn't have a full grasp on the Energy efficiency, so I couldn't say anything for sure, but at the very least, I knew of one place that had plenty of monsters stronger than the ones in the Forest of Everlasting Darkness. But that place...

"Lord Kizuna? What's wrong?"

"Did you come up with something?"

They both looked at me with hopeful eyes. Their expectations—likely heightened by our battle with the Dark Knight Lizardman—were a bit

overwhelming, to say the least.

“There’s just one place where, as far as I know, no one goes and the monsters are stronger than the ones in the Forest of Eternal Darkness. But I don’t know if I can recommend it or not.”

“What kind of place is it? I daresay, we should decide after seeing it ourselves.”

I was fine with that, but... I didn’t know if Shouko or Yamikage would like the idea. *Well, we’ll have to all decide together eventually, so let’s just throw out the idea.*

“The sea.”

“The sea...is it?”

“Yeah, I once went out to sea from the First City on an item called a Wooden Boat. I had less Energy back then, but the monsters there were pretty strong. I fled at the time, but with the three of us... You know.”

“I see, that is certainly a tough decision.”

There were many unknowns: how many monsters spawned there, could the three of us defeat them, and could we do it safely? And those were just off the top of my head. Still, it did meet all the conditions.

On a boat, the chances of being seen were low. The monsters were strong, and since they were monsters from a place that no one else hunted in, there would be few if any of their materials in circulation. Even if we sold a boatload of special bonus drops from dismantling weapons, we could just make it seem like the monsters there dropped a lot of items and no one would be the wiser.

“There’s another problem, though.”

“A problem, I daresay?”

“My boat’s too small.”

My Wooden Boat +3 could barely fit three people, and that was just if we were cruising around. When it came to battle, there would be no space to maneuver around.

“Where did you obtain your boat?”

“There was a street vendor in the First City selling handmade boats. I got it for 40,000 Serin.”

“Can you get in touch with them?”

“I could try, but I don’t know their name. They were selling on the street, so there wasn’t a store name either...”

“If the boat is handcrafted, I daresay the maker’s name should be carved into it.”

“Is that so?”

In online names, it was common for crafted items to bear the name of their crafters. I looked at the Wooden Boat +3 in my inventory, and sure enough, there was a field that listed the maker’s name: SHERYL. It was in all caps. It was a name that lay on the borderline of common and rare. The way she entered it, I could imagine her trying “Sheryl” normally, only for the name to have already been taken.

“I’ll try contacting her,” I said before opening up the chat menu.

I entered SHERYL, in all caps. Hopefully, I’d caught her at a good time.

It was still midday, around the same time I’d encountered her a week ago. As long as she hadn’t changed her schedule, she’d probably pick up. If not, I’d try again at night.

Naturally, if she ignored my calls three times, I’d give up on trying to contact her, or perhaps try to meet her in person. I could turn to Alto—with his wide circle of friends. Perhaps he’d know something about her.

SHERYL has joined the chat.

“Oh, err, I’m sorry for the sudden call. This is Kizuna†Exceed speaking. I bought a boat from your fine establishment roughly one week ago.”

“...”

Huh? There's no response. Is the reception okay?

No wait, this isn't a phone. There shouldn't be any issues with that, and it's not a complicated name, so I shouldn't be misdialing anyone either.

"Can you hear me?"

There was another moment of silence before...

"I can hear you. As for boats, there is only one person who ever bought a boat from me... I remember you."

"That's good. So I wanted to discuss something with you. The boat I bought the other day is only large enough to fit two people, but do you happen to be selling anything larger?"

"No."

"I-I see..."

I had a bit of hope, but things rarely went that smoothly.

Now then, let's think of something else.

"I apologize for taking up your time. Well then—"

"But, I can make one if I have the materials."

"The materials... Huh."

"Someone who can just throw around 40,000 Serin might be able to get the materials."

I see. The 40,000 Serin was for the material and crafting costs, as I recalled. Her motivation was unclear, but she seemed to like making ships. So long as we were the ones footing the material costs, there was little more a crafter could ask for.

"The material quantities will depend on the size of the boat. What do you want?"

"Would it be possible to make a boat big enough for three people to move around on and fight freely?"

Silence.

“Umm.”

“Wait... I’m calculating.”

It was a pretty tough request.

Say the boat I was using now cost 35,000 Serin to make; I was asking for three...no, maybe four or five times that. It would add up to around 170,000 Serin.

Honestly, that was out of my budget. It was more than I possessed.

“Can you come?”

“Pardon?”

“You. Come here.”

“By here, do you mean the First City?”

“Yes.”

“I can, but I’m in the Second City right now, so it will take some time.”

“I see.”

“So you want to meet in person, then?”

“Yes... If possible, bring the other two people.”

I glanced at Shouko and Yamikage, thinking over it for a second.

“Can I discuss that with my party members first?”

“Yes.”

“When would be a good time to come?”

“Anytime works. You will find me at the same spot as before.”

SHERYL has left the chat.

I wasn’t completely sure, but perhaps I’d made some progress.

“How did it go?”

“I got in touch with her, but...we might have to help with the construction.”

“I daresay, what do you mean?”

“Well, I’ll cover any related expenses, so don’t worry about that. The important part is something else.”

“And that is?”

“We’re going to have to meet the maker in person. She said she wants to meet you two as well. I didn’t make any promises; it’s still up to you whether you go or not.”

She did say, “if possible” rather than requiring them, so it was best to go with whoever was available. She had no real power to force us to do anything. Though personally speaking, I wanted us all to go.

“Shall we go together, then?”

“I daresay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, we’re all at an impasse, and I cannot let you shoulder the burden of overcoming it alone.”

“I am your shadow, I daresay. A shadow must always follow behind.”

I should have been happy, but that last statement sounded like what a stalker would say.

In any case, we set off for the First City on foot. If talks fell through, we could always hunt in the Forest of Everlasting Darkness, even if it wasn’t quite as efficient. We’d have to play it by ear.

†

“There she is. Over there.”

The three of us arrived at the square in the First City, where I’d bought a boat a week ago. The stall was lined with boats identical to the one I’d purchased. And just like before, there sat an expressionless girl with dull blue-gray hair and a marine blue gem in her chest. Sheryl was still wearing those overalls. Just as she had been when I last saw her, she was absently gazing out at the sky.

“That person? So she was a woman.”

“I daresay, it’s always women with Lord Kizuna.”

“Am I being blamed for something?”

Faltering at this peculiar accusation, I stepped out before the stall. Sheryl’s eyes shifted down, locking onto me.

“Hm.”

What was...that supposed to be? Was that her way of saying hello? It’s hard to tell.

“I’m Kizuna, the one who contacted you earlier. I brought my friends, just as you asked me to.”

“Uh-huh.”

“A pleasure to meet you. I am Hakoniwa Shouko.”

“Uh-huh.”

“My name is Yamikage, I daresay. You may call me The Dark Shadow if you wish.”

They both introduced themselves. *But Yamikage, you’re seriously reusing that bit?*

“Yamiko,” Sheryl said after pondering a moment.

“Gah!”

Pfft... I quickly clapped a hand over my mouth.

“Wh-Why do you know that nickname?!”

“Just a guess... Then I’ll call you Yami.”

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one to think of it. In any case, onto business. We’d have to reconsider the whole boat idea if she threw out an outrageous price.

“So, why did I need to bring these two for the boat discussion?”

“I wanted to understand why you needed a boat.”

“Hmm...? The need for a boat has nothing to do with the number of people, does it?”

“Not exactly. You can’t operate a larger boat on your own.”

Well, I couldn’t argue with that. While I could somewhat manage by myself with a smaller boat, a larger one would be much harder to handle.

“So, I wanted to know. Why do you need a larger boat?”

“We simply thought the ocean would offer better experience points.”

“Uh...huh.”

I picked up on a hint of disappointment from her expressionless face. That was as far as it went for the party—but there was more for me.

“Also, I’ve been out at sea on a boat before. Back then, I was overcome with...curiosity.”

“About what?”

“If you build boats, I’m sure you’ve been out there on the water before.”

“Mhm.”

“Call it a delusion if you want, but I’m thinking there has to be something beyond the horizon. How should I put this—it feels like the wind is calling out to me.”

“Uh-huh... I’m the same. I think I can talk to you.”

I shot her a puzzled look. *What’s that supposed to mean?*

My other two party members looked similarly confused. But Sheryl went on while paying us little to no concern. If I wasn’t imagining things, there seemed to be a shred of determination coloring her usual expressionlessness.

“This is just based on my personal observations, but not many people are paying attention to the sea right now. They’re all focused on finding the Third City and ignore it.”

“I daresay, is that true?”

“Now that you mention it, I was out at sea around a week ago, and there wasn’t anyone using a boat apart from me.”

There were fewer players engaging in fishing than I expected. Perhaps a large

part of the player base wanted to establish a stable income before turning to side content. Thanks to this mindset, sea bream and albacore tuna were selling for a hefty markup. Indeed, if Sheryl's words were to be believed, it made sense why fish from the open sea were selling for so high.

Even though I had a monopoly on the empty can market, forty thousand Serin had still been a considerable sum for me. It would be even harder for fishermen who didn't have dismantling to turn a profit. And the frontline fighters who did have the money saved up were all endeavoring to find the Third City. It was only natural for the ocean of the First City to be overlooked.

In a normal online game, countless players would be out doing whatever they wanted, and there would be plenty of people who came to the same conclusions I did. But *Dimension Wave* took place in isolated servers with a nonfluctuating player population. There were no online guides, and word of mouth was limited. Perhaps there were players I didn't know of who'd realized the same things I had about the game, but at the very least, I had yet to encounter them.

NPC restaurants in the First City already sold dishes made from sea bream and tuna. But even with those hints in place, those of us who would abandon the main quest to take up fishing as a hobby were few and far between.

"There's a limit to what you can do alone in this game. At first, I swam out into the sea, but the currents were too strong for me to continue," Sheryl explained.

"Well, it is an MMO."

If you could do everything on your own, playing a single-player game would suffice. Unlike most online games, this one was supposed to simulate a complete second life, so it was presumably possible to go solo. But there was nothing strange with the developers tying important content to interacting with others. There was no strategy guide for the game, and nothing would happen if we didn't drive the story forward ourselves. It could be said that the players didn't have the leisure to test out each and every mechanic. Players who would immediately start fishing and head out to sea in these early stages were rare.

"That's why I was looking for someone strong and rich to take me out to the

sea.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not that strong.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But Shouko here? She used to be out on the front lines. She’s pretty skilled.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, of course. You’re definitely the strongest out of all of us.”

“Th-That’s not entirely true. There’s always a bigger fish,” Shouko rebutted with a faint blush.

Her modesty already made her several times stronger than those players who openly boasted about their strength. At least, that was how I saw it. She recognized her own strength but also realized where she stood. There was nothing less trustworthy than someone who claimed to be perfectly average. For better or worse...I’d experienced that enough times in competitive games.

“I want to see what lies beyond the waves. Even if no one else thinks so, there has to be something. There has to be.”

Sheryl shared my curiosity. No, anyone who had experienced that great, blue expanse would think the same. There had to be something beyond.

“A small boat isn’t enough. The ocean currents become too strong to proceed. I can build a larger boat with the right materials, but the monsters are too strong and numerous, so I’ll just end up dead. Alone...I have my limits. I want you to lend me your strength.”

Personally, I want to work with her... No, I will. Even if the other two are against it, I will.

The hundred thousand Serin I had on hand would hopefully cover the building costs. That left the challenge of defeating the monsters for the materials, but that would be tough for a semicrafter such as myself.

“Kizuna!”

“Y-Yes?!”

Shouko grabbed both my hands and stared at me.

What does this mean, exactly?

“Let’s help her out!”

“Are you sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? To be helpful to others... It is a very wonderful thing.”

Hakoniwa Shouko: a woman with a big heart. Even if I was half-joking, I was glad to have her on board.

“And of course, Yamikage, you’ll be helping out too, won’t you?”

“Indeed. I daresay, this sounds like fun!”

Both of them were surprisingly flexible. When it came to Shouko, she was a former frontline fighter, so I thought she’d go for a more efficient route.

“You heard them. So, what do we have to do?” I turned back to Sheryl and sought her opinion. She was the only one who could build a boat. Her word was the gospel.

“Really?”

“Yeah. We’re all Spirits, as you can see. We’ve got a lot of oddballs.”

“Understood. First, we need—”

To accommodate Sheryl with the rest of us, we needed a boat that could hold at least four people. A large boat would be necessary to withstand the currents. As for the materials we needed to make it, it required five hundred pieces of Treant Wood, two hundred rolls of Sturdy Cloth, twenty Iron Ingots, and ten Wind-Slicing Stones.

It was quite a lot. Even if I put up all my savings, I wasn’t sure if it would be enough. For the Iron Ingots... I could get poor-quality ones from night fishing, but I hesitated to use those for a boat.

“How much do you have right now, Sheryl?”

“Two hundred pieces of wood, a hundred rolls of cloth, and ten stones.”

“Around half, then... We might be able to get the rest depending on market prices.”

“You really are rich.”

It was all just quick cash from the empty cans and tuna business. Anyway, I knew the best guy to ask when it came to the market.

“Wait here. I know someone who gets around. I’ll see if he can help us get some of the materials for cheap.”

Considering our can partnership, Alto would hopefully feel at least a little charitable. More importantly, though, he was always one to jump at any opportunity for profit. It was hard to come across such a perfect moneymaking scheme.

“Very well. Then Yamikage and I will hunt the relatively easy-to-get Treant Wood.”

“I daresay.”

I didn’t know how strong the Treant monsters were, but judging by their reactions, they didn’t seem to be that tough. If the two of them could gather them, I couldn’t ask for more.

“I’ll help too...” said Sheryl.

“Then I better add you to the party. That would be convenient for you, right?”

“Are you sure? I’m Level 6.”

Why are we bringing level into this? It was a game. You paired up with the people you liked, level be damned. At the very least, I found that more fun than playing efficiently.

“Level has nothing to do with it. It’ll be a lot faster if we work together, right?”

“Of course!”

“As long as I can use Drain, I dare not object.”

“Thank you...”

SHERYL has been invited to the party.

“Full Harpoon.”

The Treant collapsed with a sinister expression as it was struck by Sheryl’s harpoon skill.

Her weapon was a harpoon, a weapon well-suited for a style of combat that resembled spearfishing. Though it was technically classified as a spear, she unlocked special harpoon-exclusive skills by using harpoon-shaped weapons.

Since joining our party, Sheryl’s level had gone up by 4, putting her at Level 10.

“That’s our five hundredth piece of Treant Wood, for what it’s worth.”

“Including some poor-quality ones, though. We still need a few more.”

We were all on the same track. We agreed to use the best possible materials for the boat, even if those materials cost a bit more.

“I’m leaving the cloth to Alto—my acquaintance—but it’ll take some time with the amount we need.”

Sturdy Cloth was an item used with the Needlework Skill. Assembling a hundred rolls would take time and money. When I placed the order, he said he might take a while. But, the amazing merchant that he was, he didn’t decline.

“We need to be careful with the iron. The market’s been flooded with poor quality ingots.”

“I daresay, do you know something about that?”

Said ingots all came from empty cans. Now that iron veins had been discovered, they were worth less than trash.

“Not really... Anyways, we’ve pretty much got everything we can gather on our own.”

“Yeah.” Sheryl nodded.

A whole day had passed since then.

Forget Shouko, Treants were monsters even I could defeat with ease. They were not high-ranking monsters by any means. Still, the drops weren’t guaranteed, and collecting five hundred of them required a lot of battles.

Worse yet, few manufacturing skills required Treant Wood (at least that we knew of so far). This meant there wasn't much circulating in the market—according to Alto. The wood could be used to make staves, but the staves sold in the NPC shops were better. There was also an abundance of higher-grade wood, which further reduced its demand.

On that note, Sheryl had apparently been slowly hunting down Treants over the past two weeks. Without a suitable weapon or a sufficient level, it took her a lot of time to get each kill.

“We'll get a few more pieces and return to the First City.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I've been thinking about it, but it's almost like 'uh-huh' is your catchphrase or something.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you doing this on purpose?”

“Not really...”

That was what it was like to work with her. She was a girl of few words, or rather, a poor communicator. She had the same problems as Yamikage, albeit in a different sense. If we spoke, I could understand her, or at least she could get the point across. But it required some effort on both of our ends. Given that most players were dead set on finding the Third City, it wasn't surprising that the girl who had instead turned her attention to the sea was a little strange. Well...it wasn't like I was one to talk.

“What?”

Whoops, she noticed me staring.

“It's nothing,” I tried to cover it up.

“Uh-huh.”

“Anyway, we're almost there.”

“Yeah. Thank you, Kizuna.”

“I'm not the only one helping out. It's thanks to everyone. And of course,

thanks to you too, Sheryl.”

“Uh-huh.”

What? What was that last apathetic-sounding “uh-huh”?

Despite this and that, it’s actually pretty embarrassing to say those sappy lines, you know.

Shouko and Yamikage were both beaming like the sun on a warm spring day, and I could just tell that they were setting everything in place to tease me. I needed to set things straight, and fast.

It was after another two days that we finally had all the items we needed. I went out of my way to buy high-grade iron from Romina and instead of just relying on Alto, I ran around the First and Second Cities, scouring them for Sturdy Cloth. Our efforts paid off and we had all the materials, but my funds were almost entirely depleted.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 26430 / Mana: 4300 / Serin: 16040

Skills: Energy Production VIII, Mana Production V, Fishing Mastery IV, Dismantling Mastery III, Cleaver I, Fast Dismantle I, Night Vision I, Elemental Conversion I, Culinary Art II

There were a few skills I hadn’t acquired, but that I’d fulfilled the conditions to obtain...namely, Energy Production IX, Mana Production VI, Fishing Mastery V, Cleaver II, Helmsman Skill I, and Shipboard Combat I.

While I was running around the First and Second Cities, the other three were out hunting.

It was important to raise Sheryl’s level, but the monsters of the deep were probably too strong for casual leveling. Sheryl was not a combat player like Shouko or Yamikage, but she used a weapon type that had strong bonuses against sea monsters. Strengthening her would be essential for the future.

Without me and my dismantling weapons, we couldn't make use of the "you know what" to increase our revenue. To any outsiders, they probably looked like a strange three-girl party with a quirky composition.

"Kizuna...and everyone else too, please sign this."

As I pondered my skill assignments, Sheryl stood before all the gathered materials and held out a sheet of paper. There was something a bit scam-ish about this setup, but that was far from what it really was.

"What's this?"

"A joint ownership contract, it seems."

"I daresay, what's that?"

As expected of a former frontliner, Shouko was very knowledgeable.

A joint ownership contract.

Apparently, this was a setting that could be placed on a high-value tool or weapon. The members listed on the contract would share joint ownership of the item—in this case, the boat. It was a convenient system that prevented anyone outside of the listed owners from storing the item away in their inventories. And, in case the boat was ever to be sold off for any reason, it would require the permission of all signers, and the money obtained would be evenly distributed among all of them. It was essentially like a real-world deed.

"Hmm, I didn't know the game had a system like that."

It made sense. Sure, it was your own fault if you were careless enough to let someone run off with a valuable item you and your friends had pooled your money to get, but it was irritating nonetheless. The developers seemed to understand this. Perhaps they'd run into similar issues before.

Putting that aside, Sheryl was the one presenting the contract to us—despite our ignorance on the matter. Her desire to reach the sea seemed genuine.

My heart is racing... I don't know what lies ahead, but with the four of us, I'm sure we can conquer the vast sea.

"I'll go first."

Sheryl's name was already on the paper, and when I touched it, Kizuna†Exceed was automatically added to the list. I pressed the "OK" button that popped up. *Here I was, thinking I'd have to write it myself.*

I handed it to Shouko next, and she passed it to Yamikage. Ownership was now shared jointly among us.

"All right. Then the ship... I'll start making it now. I'll let you know when it's done. You're free to do whatever you want until then."

With that, Sheryl began to chant a skill in front of the massive stacks of items. The boat production had begun. I didn't think it would take too long, but Alto mentioned that creating personal homes—essentially houses—took a few hours each. Watching without being able to help was rough, but without the necessary skills, we'd just get in the way if we stuck around. For now, we'd have to trust Sheryl and wait.

"Kizuna, Yamikage, what should we do now?"

"I daresay, I just upgraded my gear the other day. I have no plans in particular."

"I was planning on watching the building process."

"That sounds nice! Then let's all cheer on Sheryl."

Backing off to a respectful distance, we kept our eyes on Sheryl as she got to work. She remained expressionless, but momentarily shot us a doubtful look.

Err...we might be distracting her. Mentally. Yeah, I get it. I hope she understands that we're just a compassionate party thinking highly of our new comrade.

We're just a bit too friendly. Yep.

For now, I prayed. *Please, let our presence not impact the quality of the ship...*

Chapter 9: On to the Great Blue

The ship was finished in three hours. A real ship would have definitely taken a lot longer, but this was a game, after all.

At first, Sheryl would steal some awkward glances at us, but she quickly showed some focus as the ship began to take shape before our eyes. Eventually, a large, cruiser-class sailing ship was completed.

By the look of things, there were quite a few minigames she had to get through over the course of the process. The Sturdy Cloth, which cost more than any of the other materials, had been used for the sail.

I'd never actually seen a sailboat in real life, but it was quite imposing now that it towered before me. It wasn't on the water, so the sail was closed, but I could tell it would be even more incredible once it spread out.

"I guess you need quite a large deck if you want four people running around in battle."

"Uh-huh."

"Oh? That bow-like thing near the stern must be a ballista."

"Uh-huh."

"I'd appreciate it if you stopped answering everything with 'uh-huh.'"

"Uh-huh."

Well, whatever. Today was a day to commemorate—the day our boat was ready. I wasn't going to say anything mean and besmirch our celebration. Not today, at least. As a dark smile crossed my face, Shouko began to fretfully look around. She seemed to pick up on the sort of emotions I felt toward Sheryl.

"Aight, shall we hop right to it, then?"

"Yeah."

"My body's been restless, I daresay, ever since I first laid eyes on the

completed ship.”

Yeah, I can't blame you. The hull was swaying back and forth as though it was excited to venture out into the world.

“Will it be all right, going out, just like that?” Shouko leaked a bit of anxiety about the unknown.

Sure enough, we Spirits were a race that had to move with safety as our number one priority. I understood where she was coming from.

“It's okay.”

“Sheryl...”

Sheryl and Shouko gazed into one another's eyes.

Huh? What's this? Is it the start of something new?

“We'll start by practicing nearby.”

“Practicing?”

“Uh-huh.”

“No, what I'm trying to say is...”

“Uh-huh?”

“Err...”

Shouko was looking at me, her eyes pleading for help.

Yeah, I doubt anything remotely yuri would ever happen between these two. Their personalities just don't jive... Regardless, I did some mediating and we were off.

†

“I'm taking it out.”

I selected the Sailboat from my inventory.

How exactly was I storing a boat big enough for all of us? That was a thought best left unthought. This was a game. I simply accepted that I was taking it out of some four-dimensional space.

There was a splash, a small wave that spread out as our sailboat took its place atop the sea.

“Ah... I should learn that skill before I forget,” I muttered to no one in particular as I selected the skill from my menu.

The moment I acquired Rank I, Rank II was already available, so I upgraded it right away.

Unlike my Mastery skills, it did not list out the exact effects, so I couldn't really tell if the upgrade was worth it. I'd be losing out a bit, but if I didn't feel much of an effect, I could sacrifice half the mana and downgrade it.

Shipboard Combat II

A skill that only exhibits its effect while aboard a ship.

Reduces negative modifiers while on a ship, and provides some positive effects.

400 Energy consumed per hour.

Required Mana to Acquire: 600

Unlock condition: Be active on a ship for 84 hours or more.

Upgrade condition: Be active on a ship for 168 hours or more.

“Aren't you coming along, Kizuna?” Shouko asked me.

I looked around and saw that Yamikage and Sheryl were already aboard the ship.

How swift. How sly.

“We should join them.”

“We should!”

It was a large vessel that provided a sense of stability the previous one lacked.

My first step aboard was a joyful hop.

“Yep. Looks like this one will do it.”

I’d intended to come down with quite a bit of force, but the boat didn’t even budge. If it was like this, then there was nothing to fear even with Shouko and Yamikage on board.

Hmm? I noticed that Shouko still hadn’t boarded. Rather, she had stopped in front of the boat with an awkward, worried look on her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Umm... I’m embarrassed to admit it, but I am a little afraid.”

Oh, sure enough. Boats do come with their own sort of dread.

They swayed, and there was a sort of airy, floaty feeling when aboard. I could understand why she’d be scared.

“It’s okay. I have some experience with the ocean. I’ll help you through it until you get used to it.”

Shouko mustered a smile as she took my hand; I proceeded to pull her onto the ship.

“See? Not so bad, right?”

“R-Right. I think I can handle it if I’m with you, Kizuna.”

“I’ll get the wrong idea if you say it like that.”

“Hmm...?”

My heart just skipped a beat, for crying out loud. Shouko was scary in the way she could occasionally come out with such innocent, defenseless lines. It would be an issue if she was actually conscious of it, but judging by her reaction, she seemed completely unaware. To distract myself, I turned toward Yamikage.

“It’s the Titanic, I daresay!”

“Uh-huh.”

Yamikage was spreading her arms wide at the ship’s prow.

What is she even doing...? Look at that dubious look Sheryl’s giving her.

“Don’t jinx it. It’s going to be all your fault if the boat sinks!”

“Hee hee.”

As I cautioned Yamikage, I heard a slight laugh from behind me. I turned to see Shouko smiling. It was a bemused smile the likes of which I’d never seen on her before.

“It’s nothing to laugh about, Shouko.”

“M-My apologies. I couldn’t help myself.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I was just thinking how fun it is to be with everyone.”

“I...see.”

It’s fun, huh... The draw of an online game was its ability to allow you to play games alongside complete strangers.

“Up until now, I’ve been so focused on getting stronger and nothing else. But perhaps I’m more at home messing around like this.”

“You’re making me blush.”

From an efficiency standpoint, we were probably failures in Shouko’s eyes. But the thought of venturing out into a domain no one had ever seen before did tickle the heart. To share this feeling with others was a little... No, very overwhelming.

“Just one thing, though, Shouko. I never said I wanted to live on gimmicks. It just ended up this way.”

“I know.”

We were headed to the ocean for the Energy gain, and to discern whatever possibilities lay beyond it. I wanted to restore the losses Shouko faced that had taken her off of the front lines. As much as possible, at least.

Naturally, I wasn’t absolutely sure we’d find anything, but if it proved possible, I wanted to help Shouko return to the battlefield—the position she’d once dreamed of occupying. For now, I was still holding her down, but perhaps we could do something with the four of us.

“Aight, away we go!”

“Onward!”

“Oh? Looks like you’re doing something interesting here!”

Ah, L’Arc’s waving us off.

“I didn’t know you could do that! Come back with some funny stories, would you, Kizuna?!”

“Yeah, I’m off! You do your best too!” I shouted back with a wave of my hand.

And like that, we set off into the vast seas.

Chapter 10: A Small Mistake, a Large Experience

“A sailboat really is different!”

That was my general sentiment as the four of us set sail.

Owing to their limited performance, rowboats required time and effort to reach the open seas. In that regard, sailboats were completely different. Sheryl presumably had the Helmsman Skill, and she was the one steering the ship as the rest of us gazed out at the sea. It felt like some sort of vacation.

“The weather is nice, and the sea is very refreshing,” said Shouko.

The in-game weather varied day by day, but today was a beautiful one. There were cloudy days and rainy days, and we were fortunate to have clear skies on our maiden voyage. Going off of Shouko’s positive attitude, I considered this a good start.

“Sheryl, do you know how the monsters are zoned out?”

I had some experience, exploring here and there by boat, but I did not know the exact distribution. As long as I remembered where to catch tuna, the rest seemed far less important.

“Mm. I’ll start where the weaker ones are.”

She adjusted the sails as she spoke. It seemed to be more difficult than I thought it would be. She did say that multiple people were needed to operate a boat, and indeed, it seemed like one person would be perpetually stuck at the helm.

“All right, then I’ll fish to get us some money. I’ll leave the enemies to Shouko and Yamikage.”

“Understood.”

“Roger, I daresay.”

I would assist if too many monsters came in, but the two of them were more than enough to take on one or two. Yamikage taking on fake ninja poses and

muttering, “Nin-nin,” did leave some cause for concern... But more importantly, with so few ship owners in the world, this was our opportunity to sell tuna and sea bream for cheaper than the NPC shops and earn some money. It was our best bet to recoup some of what we spent on making the sailboat.

With that being the case, I took out my Face-Tree Rod—a fishing rod I commissioned while gathering materials for the boat. As you might expect, it was made from Treant Wood, and the relatively good-quality materials gave it a +1 modifier.

Now the rod's been boosted along with the boat.

Lately, I'd been more focused on combat and negotiations than fishing, and it felt like I'd been out of my element for quite a while. Although the sensation of the rod was different, what with the boat cutting through the sea as it advanced forward, fishing was still fishing.

“Do the fish bite more out here?”

“I couldn't tell you. Sometimes you catch, sometimes you don't.”

My success rate was still better than it was in real life, or so I explained to Shouko, who was both my guard and our strongest combat force.

“It's just as you and Ms. Sheryl said, Kizuna. The ocean is truly vast.”

“It is the ocean, after all.”

“No, that's not what I meant. It's not that I was doubting your words. But for there to be no end in sight, it does make me curious to see how far it really goes.”

“Yeah, that's pretty much how I feel too.”

As Shouko gazed out at the distant horizon, I felt a strong sense of kinship. There was no telling how far these oceans stretched. It was unsettling, in a way. The fact that the monsters would grow stronger the farther out we ventured only added to that feeling.

In old RPGs, obtaining a ship would increase the player's range of freedom. But should they steer the ship down the wrong path, they might run into a horde of overwhelming foes and face total annihilation... Hopefully that

wouldn't be the case for us. We could always escape if worse came to worst. I'd managed to escape in a rowboat, after all. On a sailboat with Sheryl at the helm, we could surely find the right place for our strength...probably.

"Enemy sighted. Get ready for battle," Sheryl suddenly said, interrupting my growing anxiety toward the future.

I looked around, rod in one hand, and saw a black shadow to the northeast. One of the Killer Wings I'd fought before was swooping down at us.

"I daresay, this is my time to shine!" Yamikage triumphantly declared. I felt she was reliable enough, but she did tend to get ahead of herself.

"Here I go. Charge..."

Shouko held up her fan, staring down the Killer Wing with her usual fierce determination. She took the vanguard while Yamikage took the rearguard. There was no way a single monster could take them by surprise. *I need to maneuver around on the deck to make sure I don't take any attacks.*

Various thoughts passed through my head as the Killer Wing approached attacking range. Shouko turned her fan on it, while Yamikage began casting Drain.

In the span of a single breath, Shouko dodged and slashed at it with her fan. She was just as graceful as usual, I even felt something invigorating about how she moved, but... Something was strange.

The slash connected and the Killer Wing staggered, that much was fine. It was still alive, but with her consecutive strikes followed up with Yamikage's Drain, I knew it would work out. But as Shouko's powerful attack landed, Shouko was carried along by her own rotational force, dragging her to the outer edge of the ship and—

"Wait, you're falling!"

I barely managed to grab the hand that wasn't holding a fan in time. Shouko's anxious face turned to relief the moment she saw I had caught her.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes!"

Though momentarily taken aback, she quickly nodded and regained balance.

“What happened?”

“Well, my...feet...”

Feet? Oh, yeah, fighting on a boat feels different from fighting on land. I couldn't say for sure, but I'd acquired the Shipboard Combat skill. Whatever I was feeling, it was after my debuffs were reduced. I could see why Shouko would be unable to exhibit her true strength.

Hmm? Did I just hear something big fall into the sea?

Hearing a slight, bubbling sound, I fretfully looked around. *Yamikage's gone!*

“Yami fell.”

Sheryl's calm words heightened my panic. Our combat team was effectively out of commission.

“I'll save her,” said Sheryl. “Kizuna, Shouko, take care of the ship and the enemy.”

“Got it!”

Soon after I nodded, Sheryl jumped overboard. I did remember her saying something about how she tried swimming before she tried boat making. She probably had some sort of swimming skill.

But that thought could wait. For now, I had to concentrate on the Killer Wing.

“Fighting on a ship is different from on land. I'll support you until we get used to it.”

“Understood.”

“I'll make sure you don't fall off the ship.”

Confirming Shouko's nod, I gripped my Iron Poultry Knife. The Killer Wing was a bird-type monster, making it a good match. Besides, it wasn't that strong of an enemy. If we couldn't get past this obstacle, then my dream of crossing the sea would be just that—a dream.

“Here we go!”

I sidestepped the Killer Wing's charge. The deck was wide enough that I didn't have to engage in close quarters.

"Now!"

"Wild Dance First Formation: Rapid Strike!"

Now charged to some extent, Shouko unleashed an offensive skill. She hit the Killer Wing's body from the side, and I also joined in with a follow-up attack of my own.

Thankfully, it wasn't a particularly strong monster. Bird-type enemies were weak to blunt attacks, Shouko boasted superior equipment, and it had been gradually accumulating damage. With all these factors in place, we managed to take it down with that last combined strike.

"But this is..."

"Unfortunately, it is a net negative..."

As we were in a party, the three hundred experience points from the encounter were split between four people. Even with the party bonus, Shouko's use of a skill was enough to put us in the red. Then there was Yamikage, who'd taken damage upon falling into the ocean.

"We need a strategy..."

On a side note, I felt a pull on my rod mid-battle. I caught a herring.

†

"Urgh... That was terrible, I daresay..." Yamikage groaned, dripping with water.

Within a few minutes, Sheryl had saved her, and we'd pulled them back up onto the deck. Still, I never imagined something like this could happen.

I'd once read a manga that explained how land and sea battles were handled completely differently in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In the *Three Kingdoms*, the Battle of Red Cliffs happened on a river, but it was a similar situation. I didn't know the historical details, but Wu won against Wei, overcoming an overwhelming numerical disadvantage with strategy.

I see... Even if players can build their own ships and head out to sea, overcoming these obstacles will be difficult. It might be less labor-intensive to just search on land instead.

Ships were expensive to boot. And even if you had one, it seemed like any and all naval combat would require the Shipboard Combat skill.

“Come to think of it... I remember something about practice.”

Before we set off, Sheryl mentioned practicing nearby. Could she have known this would happen? I sent her a subtle glance. She had the same expressionless face as usual.

“Sheryl, what’s your Shipboard Combat at?”

“Proficiency 124, Level 3. You?”

“Level... I don’t have that. Mine’s at Rank II, though.”

Spirits were different from the other races. Honestly, I didn’t quite understand proficiency or levels.

This was just my best guess, but Level 3 probably corresponded to Rank III for Spirits. For us Spirits, we could unlock higher ranks by spending more time aboard a ship, but perhaps levels had different conditions.

“Kizuna, is it because of that skill that you’re able to move so swiftly around the ship?”

“Yeah. You need to be on a ship for twelve hours to unlock it. Please consider picking it up.”

“Twelve hours, is it... It sounds short, but feels long.”

At first, Shouko seemed eager but looked a little let down when she heard the requirements. Compared to Night Vision, twelve hours wasn’t too bad, but it was still a bit too long for comfort.

“That aside, why did Yamikage fall? She was just chanting Drain, wasn’t she?”

“I daresay, I don’t understand it myself. I was already falling by the time I realized it.”

“Perhaps she was chanting so hard she wasn’t paying attention.”

“I could see that happening...”

Balancing on a ship was mostly done unconsciously. If gameplay-wise, chanting took up one’s full concentration, then falling into the ocean because of it was certainly possible. But would Shipboard Combat even compensate for that? Hopefully it would. If it didn’t, it would pretty much make magic unusable on a ship. Of course, we could have someone else hold the caster in place, but that wasn’t practical...

“Kizuna!”

As I was mulling over it, Shouko suddenly called out to me. When I turned to her, I was met with sparkling eyes. She’d evidently come up with a brilliant idea.

“Why don’t you, me, and Yamikage fight while holding hands?!”

“Huh...?”

No, how are we supposed to fight like that? I mean, I’d be able to stop Shouko from slipping like that. Luckily, her fan was a one-handed weapon. Additionally, I’d also be able to prevent Yamikage from falling overboard while chanting.

But... I imagined a party all buddy-buddy, fighting while holding hands. It would look *rather* ridiculous... *Wait a minute.*

“If that’s all we need, then can’t Yamikage still cast Drain if she’s tied to the mast?”

“I daresay, that’s outrageous!”

“You’d be like bolted artillery. We could even crucify you for the coolness factor.”

“That’s even worse!”

“No. That would ruin the ship’s aesthetics.”

“Well, if Sheryl says no, then so be it.”

“I daresay, something isn’t sitting right with me!”



Putting aside the jokes, I tried giving it some serious thought. Though it would look uncool, holding both of their hands wasn't out of the question.

"Oh right, we have that ballista at the back. Can it be used?"

"It can."

"Then how about we try using that?"

"It costs money."

"Money, huh..."

I'd spent a lot buying ship materials in bulk, so I was running a bit low. According to Sheryl, ballista bolts were more expensive than normal arrows.

"Well, that settles it. I guess you two can start rowing below deck..."

When I peeked inside the ship earlier, I saw machinery in the hold that could be pushed and pulled to row the boat... I didn't know what it was called. We could shove Shouko and Yamikage down there, while Sheryl and I fought for twelve hours.

"What do you mean 'that settles it'?!"

"I daresay, you're making slaves of us! Please don't brand us with crests!"

"Tsk! They noticed."

I thought I'd muttered it quietly, but they picked up on it. Well, even though the boat was large enough for four combatants, there was no way they wouldn't hear me at this distance.

"The capstan?"

"Oh... Is that what that's called?"

I learned a bit of trivia.

"That's to wind the ropes and anchor... Rowing needs a penteconter... I haven't shown you where it is."

"As expected of the maker. You're quite knowledgeable."

"Whatever it is, we won't do it, I daresay!"

And after a few minutes of arguing...

“Hah...fine. It may not be cool, but we’ll go with Shouko’s idea.”

In the end, I compromised and nodded along. Even I thought the slave idea was nonsense.

“Certainly!”

“I daresay, I’m glad to be blessed with a sensible lord.”

They sure were fickle. I expected this from Shouko, but not as much from The Dark Shadow over here. But then, sensing something off, I looked at Sheryl and saw the first real emotion I’d ever seen cross her face: a fearless smile.

“You’re doing a slave role-play next time you mess up... Break a leg.”

Oh, she’s scaring me. Anyway, holding hands while fighting turned out to be a bit much, so I ended up just holding them in place.

†

“Shouko, do you think you can hold them off?”

“I’ll try!”

As planned, I supported the two of them as they fought. My left arm was propping up Yamikage, who was defenseless as she chanted Drain.

In the meantime, Shouko knew she would trip herself up if she launched any thoughtless attacks, so she stayed at the front, parrying enemy blows with her fan. As soon as Yamikage invoked Drain, I would draw a dismantling weapon in one hand and head out to support her. It was a somewhat taxing strategy.

The enemy this time was a Brave Bird—a large, bird-shaped monster roughly a quarter the size of our ship. I didn’t know its attribute, but it had red lines running down its body and looked kinda cool.

The last time I encountered one, I’d fled well aware of my own weakness. With a party, we could fight it to some extent.

Shouko and Yamikage didn’t have Shipboard Combat yet, but once they did, they could probably handle it without me.

While I thought over the matter, Shouko caught the Brave Bird’s attack with

her fan, redirected, sidestepped, and unleashed a flurry of light stabs with minimal kickback.

Are you good yet? I shot a questioning glance at Yamikage, and saw she had just finished preparing another Drain.

“Drain, I daresay!”

She called out as a dark-colored effect swiftly shot out, hit the Brave Bird, and returned to her as a hail of green particles. Despite everything, it was magic-based damage that was effective on most foes. Yamikage had cut off nearly all of her idle Energy gain by investing in Drain, and it in turn had become a very powerful spell. To be honest, I wanted her to use dark magic with a higher damage output, but Yamikage was quite fixated on it, and it wasn't like we were aiming to be the strongest.

Go ahead. Drain to your heart's content, I concluded. Besides, who was I to talk about strength when I was the weakest of the bunch?

“Yamikage, I'm heading over to Shouko. Position yourself away from any attacks.”

“I daresay!”

This is frustrating me. If we were on land, the two of them wouldn't have to wait turns. They were free to fire off as many attacks as they wanted. There was no avoiding it now. I took out my Iron Poultry Knife and came up next to Shouko.

“Think you can do it?”

“Yes. I've charged up quite nicely,” Shouko replied.

I checked her fan and saw it was emitting a powerful light.

Due to our strategy, Shouko was charging her attacks for far longer. The time Yamikage spent chanting was essentially her charge time. In short, this meant her skills were doing a lot more damage, so it wasn't the worst situation.

“I'll cover you after the skill. Go for it!”

“Okay! Wild Dance Third Formation: Cherry Blossom!”

The fan's white glow became a soft pink...the color of Sakura flowers. With scattering petals as the effect, the fan spread wide and slashed with tremendous force.

The lingering line of light it left seemed to denote its attack range. It was a wide-reaching attack, presumably not the best when dealing with a single enemy, but still powerful thanks to the charge time. And, soon enough, the force of the attack caused Shouko to stumble.

"Whoa there."

"Thank you."

Catching her and steadying her was my job. Shouko immediately turned back to the Brave Bird, but...

"Hey...it ran away."

I didn't know if it had reached a certain damage threshold or something, but the Brave Bird suddenly began to rise into the air. In no time at all, the massive bird had flown off into the distance.

Huh? Was all that for nothing?

Then, came a *twang*. From behind me, I heard the sound of scraping metal.

I turned to see Sheryl with the same expressionless face gripping a certain something at the back of the ship. The ballista, a weapon whose bolts cost a pretty penny... I quickly understood the situation.

Sheryl had fired the Ballista to finish it off. And, as evidence, the Brave Bird had started to fall. Looking at my status screen, I saw that my Energy had gone up by 700. It was dead.

"Looks like we managed."

"Uh-huh."

I glanced at her as she muttered her usual phrase and thought, *700 Energy per person. I know there's a party bonus, but that's still pretty good.*

Of course, we couldn't hunt them in large numbers. Not yet, at least. Even so, this was more Energy efficient than the Forest of Everlasting Darkness.

Essentially, the gain we were getting from each kill was substantial.

“So how does the sea fare, experience-wise?” I asked Shouko, our knowledgeable ex-frontliner who knew all about the lucrative hunting grounds.

There were probably plenty of places with better efficiency, but the Brave Bird was among the weaker sea monsters. Maybe it wasn’t so bad?

“It’s better than I expected. It gave as much if not more Energy than the monsters I was fighting when I was on the front lines.”

“That’s good to know. I didn’t know what I’d have done if all that effort that went into building the ship and figuring out tactics was for nothing.”

“However, this is only the start of what the ocean has to offer, right? What could possibly lie beyond this? Frankly, if this is considered weak, it only raises more questions.”

Her point was valid. She just said that the Energy gain was equal to what she’d get from frontline enemies. That meant the Brave Bird was as strong as the foes she’d fought out there. We weren’t going to go for them lest we risk annihilation, but I knew a number of enemies stronger than the Brave Bird. But rather than feeling anxious about this realization...

“That’s why it’s so interesting, right?”

“I guess...so. Whatever lies beyond, it is completely unknown to us.”

That was what we called anticipation—a sense of adventure. It was the simple desire to head out just because we didn’t know what was there. It was not a feeling restricted to Sheryl or myself. I was happy to see that Shouko could share in it too.

There was no telling what lay behind that horizon. And that was precisely why we had to find out for ourselves.

“Oh, but we’ll need to retrieve that thing from the ocean. Our funds have to come from somewhere.”

But now wasn’t yet the time. I told Sheryl about dismantling weapons. There was no need to hide it, seeing as there was no one else fighting in our hunting ground.

And like that, we continued to fight for the twelve hours it took to unlock Shipboard Combat for everyone. Back then, we still didn't know...that the calamity drew closer with each passing second...

Chapter 11: Dimension Wave Kicks Off

It happened around a week after we'd started life at sea. Shouko and Yamikage had learned Shipboard Combat, and we could now travel farther out from shore...

"We're pretty much into the open ocean by now. Don't you think it's about time we try going even farther?"

"Perhaps. Lately, it's been easier to move on ship than on la—"

Shouko paused before finishing that thought. Her soft expression shifted. She turned toward the seas behind us—toward the First City. Curious, I turned as well but saw nothing amiss.

"What's wrong?"

"The wind. I felt it blowing from the front and back at the same time. I found it a little concerning."

"That's definitely strange..."

Sheryl pointed at the sail. Sure enough, it was cycling through a pattern of peculiar movements.

"I daresay, what's happening?"

Yamikage, who had been on lookout at the front of the ship, approached us with a questioning look. I tried to relay what I'd heard from Shouko and Sheryl...but before I could, it happened.

"This is...not good! Kizuna!"

All of a sudden, Shouko wrapped her arms around me and firmly grasped a nearby rope attached to the sail. I didn't even have the chance to ask her what had happened.

There was a grating, ominous sound, like something being pried open. It was like pain itself. The closest thing I could think of was the sound of nails being run across a chalkboard. But this one was several times, several tens of times more

unpleasant.

Then...there was a shattering. It was a shrill ear-shattering sound like glass smashing against the floor. It came exactly where Shouko had felt the wind—from the First City.

“What?!”

This was a sight that could never occur in reality. Black lines were running through nothingness as if it were a fracture in the very fabric of space itself. Immediately after, an explosive gust of wind erupted from the direction of the crack.

“Urgh!”

Shouko let out an anguished voice. Understandably so—the wind had struck the ship directly. The sail flapped wildly... No, worse. The entire ship was airborne. I’d seen footage of tornadoes on TV before, and this could easily rival it.

“Yamika—”

Yamikage and Sheryl were being tossed around by the storm, their voices lost in the wind. This was a game, and no one was going to die, but seeing humans tossed around like playthings... I felt I might develop trauma from this.

†

How much time had passed...? A minute? Maybe several? The explosive winds had continued long enough to dull my sense of time.

“Kizuna... Are you...okay?”

“Yeah... Yeah, I am.”

It was only after hearing Shouko’s voice that I finally realized it had stopped.

Looking around, I saw we were atop the boat. The sailboat itself was intact, but I could see bits of wood floating in the water. If this wasn’t a game, I would have assumed they’d come from the First City. But it was a game. They were probably just placed there for effect.

“Are you damaged?”

Damaged? I immediately pulled up my status screen to check my condition.

Fortunately, I was unscathed. I was exactly the same as I had been before the storm. *No, wait, that question itself is strange. It's almost like she's implying she took damage.*

"What about you, Shouko?!"

"Only around 500 damage. It is nothing important."

"That's good... Wait, no, it's not!"

"Considering what just happened, getting away with only 500 damage is a small mercy."

I paused, and then conceded, "Yeah, I guess so."

I breathed a sigh of relief. It could have been thousands or even tens of thousands.

"But what was that?"

"Kizuna, please look at the sky."

"The sky...?"

I looked up to see red. There was nothing but red as far as the eye could see. The sky had been dyed the color of wine. It was a color reminiscent of blood—a concerning color. There was something very unsettling about it.

I could do nothing but stare at it, dumbfounded. And it wasn't just me. Shouko was just as taken aback. But now wasn't the time for that.

"Shouko, we need to find Yamikage and Sheryl first."

"R-Right!"

I had seen them being caught up in the winds.

If they fell into the ocean, the water would provide some cover from the wind, but Yamikage couldn't swim. She'd take significant damage. As a fellow Spirit, I needed to mitigate that as much as possible.

I scanned not just around the ship, but in the distance as well. A wind like that could have blown them far, far away... *Stay safe, both of you.*

“I see them!”

“Really?!”

Looking in the direction of Shouko’s outstretched finger, I saw a figure floating in the water. I immediately acquired Helmsman Skill and began to operate the ship. Now wasn’t the time to worry about Energy or Mana, or any of that nonsense.

“Are you okay?!”

“Mm... Yami’s with me.”

My steering was clumsier than Sheryl’s, who’d been handling it up until now, but I managed to bring the ship close. Sure enough, Sheryl was holding up Yamikage.

“Sheryl, please grab on!”

“Yami first.”

“Understood.”

As instructed, Shouko pulled Yamikage up before reaching her hands out to Sheryl. Naturally, the two of them were drenched from head to toe, as were we from all the water the wind had picked up.

“Yamikage. Is your Energy all right?”

“I took around 2000 points of damage. But I daresay, I am always gaining more than everyone due to Drain. It isn’t an issue. Please focus on Sheryl.”

Honestly, 2000 was a lot. Spirits had high defenses, but Sheryl was a Jewel. I didn’t know her maximum HP, but seeing as she wasn’t dead, she had evidently avoided the death penalty.

“I’m fine. My HP is just in the red.”

“That’s not fine at all.”

I forced her to rest despite her claims and steered the ship toward the First City. I couldn’t focus. My eyes would naturally drift toward the sky above.

Dimension Wave.

We all looked in that direction; we all knew without anyone needing to say it. Indeed, those black cracks continued to assert themselves in the airspace above the First City.

†

Kizuna†Exceed has received a multi-chat request. Do you accept?

On the way to the First City, I received a call from Kanade and Tsumugi. It was undoubtedly about the Dimension Wave. I was already planning to contact them once we touched land, so I joined the call while holding the wheel.

“Big bro! Are you okay?!”

“Are you hurt, Kizuna?”

Two very loud voices assailed me without any warning. It was a game, yeah, but after what happened, I could understand their concern.

“Yeah, I was out at sea. Thanks to Shouko...my comrade, I didn’t take a single point of damage.”

“That’s good... Two of my party members got death penaltied,” said Tsumugi.

Kanade begrudgingly added, “Three of them on my end.”

“That many?”

They both reported their casualties with somber voices. According to them, so many players had received the death debuff that it was disheartening to even count them all up. The damages were far greater than I had anticipated. The party Tsumugi belonged to was presumably a frontline party. It had to have been pretty bad if two of them died.

Perhaps the sea cushioned us, or perhaps we were just too far from land, where the epicenter was. This was just speculation on my part, but if those winds had smacked us into walls, it probably would have done more than 2000 damage. Taking that into account, we were lucky.

“So what’s the situation right now? We’re out at sea and don’t have much information.”

“Sea? You mean the coast?”

“No, farther out.”

“Can you even go that far? How did you get there?”

“There aren’t too many ways to cross the sea in an RPG.”

“I see!”

For them to get it just from that... Such was the sorrowful tale of two gamers.

They’d undoubtedly imagined a ship or some similar item.

“Right now, there are...a lot of people investigating.”

“Investigating?”

“Yeah. Based on the location of the crack, it’s probably between the First and Second Cities. Some sort of event must have opened up somewhere around there. That’s what most people think.”

“I see.”

Now that I think about it, we know next to nothing about the Dimension Waves, even though they’re important enough to be in the title of the game.

It was clear that the red sky and the cracks were related somehow, and it made sense for it to be a large-scale event. Regardless of whether we were participating or not, getting information was crucial.

“Big bro, can you make it to the First City?”

“I’m on my way right now.”

“Then let’s meet up in the square once you get there.”

“Got it. I’ll end the chat for now.”

The Chat has ended. Returning to regular conversation.

As the call ended, I turned to see Shouko, Yamikage, and Sheryl staring at me. *What’s the big deal? I was just on a normal call...err, rather, a chat.*

“Wh-What?”

“Was that from Tsumugi?”

“Yeah, my big sis and Tsumugi.”

“So your older sister is here too.”

“Come to think of it, I don’t think I mentioned that. The three of us are playing together.”

“I daresay, why are you acting separately, then?”

“Now that you mention it, I wonder why.”

She had a point. If the three of us were playing together, why were we all going our separate ways? Looking back, it might have been best for the three of us to form a party. But I’d declared my focus on fishing from the very start, so perhaps the two of them showed some tact and left me be.

“We’re going to meet up once we reach the First City.”

“It’s very important to confirm the safety of your family.”

“Shouko is right, I daresay. Kizuna, why don’t you go ahead of us?”

“They said they were okay. It’s not so urgent that I need to rush there.”

And it wasn’t like this was one of those death games that often popped up in fiction.

From my admittedly biased perspective, my sisters were far better at games than me. From the vibe I was getting, it didn’t seem like they’d died even after taking a direct hit from the Dimension Wave. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about them, but it wasn’t like we had to meet right this second.

“It’s not just that.”

“It’ll be fine. They fight on the front lines, for what it’s worth.”

“Not that. Kizuna, I want you to return to the First City and gather information.”

I see. She has a point.

Owing to the distance, returning on ship would take a lot longer than using a return item. In that regard, it made sense for one of us to go ahead and gather

information.

“But it doesn’t have to be me, does it?”

“You are the one with the widest circle of friends. Kizuna, you are the best for gathering information.”

“Sheryl is right. I think you’re the best fit, Kizuna.”

“I am bad at talking to people, I daresay. Please understand.”

Certainly, asking Tsumugi, Kanade, Alto, and Romina would likely be the quickest way to get a handle on the situation, but it also felt like they were pushing the trouble onto me. And then, there was me, barely holding back from giving it all a delighted nod despite everything. Was I a sister’s boy or something?

“Thanks. Then I’ll go ahead and gather as much info as I can. Let me know when you’ve arrived.”

“Mm.”

I pulled a Return Transcript—an essential item for Spirits—from my inventory. I always carried three for emergency use, but these things cost a thousand Serin a pop...

No point in complaining. Time is money, as they say.

Right now, dealing with the Dimension Wave was more important than the thousand Serin. With that settled, I used the Return Transcript, leaving the three of them behind.

Chapter 12: The Frontliners

“The damage seems pretty significant.”

That was my first impression of the city.

I didn’t know if the buildings of Lurolona had been built specifically to endure the Dimension Waves or not, but they were crumbling here and there. The sights had changed drastically from when I’d last seen them.

Perhaps it was because the city had been my base of operations for nearly two weeks. Sure, I knew it was all a game, but I still felt conflicted seeing such familiar places destroyed. By contrast, all the players I passed by seemed to be as lively as could be.

A major event like a Dimension Wave was akin to a large-scale patch in a typical online game, after all. They were presumably thrilled about whatever event was going to come next.

“Still, it’s cold.”

Before, the First City had been relatively warm; perhaps it was because of its proximity to the sea, or because it was the first locale that all new players were dropped into. It was a welcoming environment with the climate of a mild autumn day. The sort of warmth that’d make you sleepy if you zoned out for too long. However, the Dimension Wave had caused the temperature to plummet.

Come to think of it, temperature in a game was an interesting topic. It was like we had truly entered another world. Surely, this was part of the Second Life Project’s attempt to implement as much realism as possible.

Now then, I need to gather some information like I said I would. Let’s start with my sisters. I can contact Alto after that—he gets his info from all sorts of places.

With a goal in mind, I was about to set off only to feel something off coming from the sky.

“Snow...?”

Yes, it was snowing. Of course, I wasn't the only person to realize this, and quite a few people were turning pale. It was just a special particle effect, as far as the game was concerned, but it added a sense of eeriness as if we'd fallen victim to a natural disaster. It was like the end of days foretold in Norse mythology.

“Shouko... I'm borrowing your strength.”

I pulled up the menu, then the inventory, and produced the Powdersnow Haori that Shouko had given me before. It hadn't been so cold out at sea, but I was definitely going to need it here. Just as before, my clothes were mainly Western in their design, so I knew it didn't suit me, but the Powdersnow Haori felt even warm beyond its parameters.

Before long, I'd arrived at the square that was our meeting spot. This was where I had started the game. In the square were people who wouldn't usually be found there—the ones wearing full-plate armor, and those in high-grade robes with large staves. It went without saying. These were the frontliners. It felt a bit strange to think that Shouko had been among them up until a week ago.

“Tsumugi is...”

I walked a lap while fretfully scanning the area. Compared to our lightly equipped party, there were many players with hefty weapons like two-handed swords. It was a somewhat daunting sight, but in retrospect, that was probably more natural for an MMORPG.

“Kizuna!”

Tsumugi's voice echoed from my right rear. Both my sisters were using their real-life voices, so I picked up on it immediately.

It feels...a little off-putting to hear those familiar voices in a fantasy setting.

“Tsumu—”

She dived into me before I could finish saying her name.

“Whoa!”

I thought it would be impossible to catch her, but I gave it a go anyway. The

impact caused me to spin three times like it was some sort of anime.

“Mph!”

Her beast ears twitched rapidly, back and forth, as if to express her excitement at our reunion. I reached out to pat her head, but Tsumugi was taller than me. It wasn't exactly the image I was going for, but I ended up straining to pat her from below.

Darn, this is a bit uncool.

“Huh?”

“What's wrong?”

“Nah, it's nothing. You look like you're doing all right, bro.”

“You look well too...and you also look pretty high level.”

Pitch-black armor with red accents and a long segmented skirt of matching colors beneath—it was a balanced mix of coolness and cuteness. Her weapon was stowed away, so I didn't know what she was using, but it felt like anything would suit her. It felt a bit odd having this knightlike little sister when I was such a plain older brother. But, since our goals were different, it was only natural that our equipment was different too.

“Ah ha ha, I just hit Level 26.”

“Twenty-six?”

I found myself repeating the number she threw out. This was because Sheryl was at Level 21. Our hunting efficiency greatly improved after Shouko and Yamikage picked up Shipboard Combat, and Sheryl steadily increased her level. According to her, leveling became much more difficult after Level 20, but still, she was only five levels away from Tsumugi, who had fought on the front lines all this time.

“Is there something wrong with my level?”

“N-No, it's nothing.”

I instinctively played it off, but what was the meaning of this? *Wait, it's probably the typical MMO level curve. Fast at first, but you need an*

extraordinary amount of EXP from the midgame onward. That must be it.

“You’re Tsumugi’s older brother, I take it.”

A party of four came from the same direction as Tsumugi. The one who spoke up was a Human man. As her older brother, hearing someone call her name so casually sparked a bit of my protective instinct, but I reminded myself that it was a game. Here, names were often simplified for convenience.

Yeah, he’s just using her in-game name. He wouldn’t do that with her real name.

The man had red-tinted brown hair and white armor, taking on the appearance of a hero straight out of an RPG. Judging by his demeanor, he seemed to be the leader of Tsumugi’s party.

Behind him was a Human woman in a robe with a two-handed staff; a young Jewel man with a book—or rather, a grimoire; and an Elf boy in light armor. Including Tsumugi, it was an array of different races.

“Yeah, I’m Tsumugi’s IRL brother, Kizuna.”

“I’ve heard about you. I hear your big sis and Tsumugi here turned you into their little sister.”

“Pretty much... But I’m having my fair share of fun.”

“Nice to meet you, Kizuna. The name’s Rosette. Everyone calls me Rose.”

Rose reached out for a handshake. With no reason to refuse, I shook his hand and continued the conversation.

“I don’t think I have to ask, but are you a frontliner?”

“Yeah. Thanks to Tsumugi and Ray.”

He was like a dating sim protagonist—that was my first impression of Rose.

I didn’t know who Ray was, but it was likely one of the three behind him. A typical RPG party composed of three men and two women. If we were going off of genre conventions, the woman with the staff was probably Ray and used light magic. The young Jewel man with the grimoire would handle the four elements, while the light-armored boy would be an archer. That would leave

Rose to be the tank. A good fit for the party leader.

By the way, I later asked, and as it turned out I was completely correct. My intuition wasn't too shabby. Not that it was much to brag about—it was hard to go wrong with that party comp.

“Hiya, little lady!”

I turned to see L’Arc approaching.

“L’Arc! Yoohoo!”

“Oh, a yoohoo to you too, Tsumugi.”

L’Arc started chatting very familiarly with Tsumugi.

“You know him too?”

“Yeah, he’s a fellow scythe user.”

What a strange connection, for both Tsumugi and me to know someone for different reasons.

“Is your big sis Kanade around?”

“You know our big sis too...?”

Amazing. He’s assembled the complete Exceed set.

“We hunt together sometimes. She gets along well with Therese, so we talk a bit too. I had the vague feeling you guys were related.”

“Fine, whatever... So anyway, Tsumugi. How far has the investigation of the Dimension Wave gotten?”

“There’s a new area on the road to the Second City that wasn’t there before.”

“An event map, huh?”

Either there was something to be found there or a battle to be fought. A boss monster emerging from that crack seemed like a likely possibility.

“We think something’s gonna happen in three days,” said Rose.

“Three days... I see.”

“Yeah, that seems about right.”

Three days from now marked exactly a month since we arrived in the world of *Dimension Wave*.

I see. That's very possible.

From a game design perspective, a big event happening one month in made sense. Of course, we could be completely missing the mark and further investigation was necessary, but it was safe to assume something was going to happen in three days.

And, if a big battle was going to happen in three days... The first thing I had to do was reveal the effects of dismantling weapons. As soon as that info got out, it would likely raise the overall strength of the player base. I'd made plenty of money already, and surely I could trust the party that supported Tsumugi in her — “Hey now, what's all this, then? What's the hero doing, hanging around with a Spirit?”

I'd made my resolve, but just before the words could leave my throat, someone else approached Rose. It was a blond pretty boy—granted everyone was attractive in-game.

“It's you again.”

Rose—who had been calm to that point—gave a displeased frown.

“Sheesh...you never learn, do you?”

L'Arc let out a troubled sigh. Understandable. Given his attitude, he certainly wasn't the sort I wanted to be involved with.

The blond guy led along three others, their equipment and composition somewhat reminiscent of Rose's party. They were probably around the same level. It was fair to assume they were frontliners too.

“It may be true that Spirits are a weaker race. But you don't have to say it to their faces,” Rose retorted.

Is he...defending me?

I was only meeting him for the first time, yet he was standing up for me. *He's probably a good guy.*

“But it's true they become weak as hell after taking a little beating, right?”

The four of them cackled away... And there was just one thing on my mind.

Seriously, what's with these blatant manga-esque thug characters? I'm struggling to believe people like that even exist. What were they thinking when they joined this game?

"Have you forgotten how much she contributed in the battle to open the Second City?!"

"Having high HP is a Spirit's specialty."

"Even so, we would have lost without her. That's just a fact."

Rose and the blond guy began arguing like I wasn't even there.

Frontliners have it tough, I thought. It was pretty much unavoidable in an online game.

The high-level players often fought over experience points, items, hunting grounds, and whatnot. I'd been around the block a few times myself, so I wasn't too worried. Feeling a slight tug on my sleeve, I turned to Tsumugi.

"They're often arguing over hunting grounds," she whispered in my ear. "Because we have similar party comps."

"I see."

Meaning the four thugs I saw were tank, spellcaster, spellcaster, and archer. That was a typical and efficient party. And if they were geared toward the exact same content, naturally, their hunting grounds would overlap.

"So, what are they arguing about?"

"Well during the battle to open up the Second City, a Spirit player essentially secured our victory. We probably would have wiped if it hadn't been for her."

"He's right about Spirits having high HP, after all."

In exchange, that Spirit lost a good chunk of their Energy. *Where have I heard this story before?*

"I don't see this Spirit around. What happened to them?"

"Yeah, around...two weeks ago, I think? I haven't seen her around since then, so she might have left the party."

“Hmm.”

That was right around the time I stopped sea fishing and ventured out into the field.

That’s...Shouko, right?

I did recall Shouko mentioning she took part in that battle. Naturally, I couldn’t discard the possibility of them being a completely different person, but the situations matched up. She called them *fiends*, or something like that. As it turned out, they seemed to be obsessed with efficiency.

Judging by Shouko’s fighting style, perhaps her enemies weren’t only monsters. Her weapon of choice was a combination of offense and defense, slightly more on the defensive side, while she used cloth armor with a focus on evasion. This meant she could block enemy attacks and dodge whenever necessary. I could see why she’d have an important role in a party that went all-in on efficiency.

“Hey, don’t blame me, hero. I’m just warning you not to let a Spirit in. They’ll drain you dry.”

“That’s up to us to decide.”

“Sucks to be you, then. We’re leaving; it’s not like we’ve got all the time in the world.”

With that snide remark, the blond guy and his party walked back down the same path they’d come from. He seemed quite invested in the conversation, despite his claim of being busy. But whatever.

“Sorry about that. If he upset you, I apologize.”

“Play online enough, and you’re sure to run into a few of them.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“What’s the point in getting stressed out over a game? It’s pointless, entertaining guys like that. Just play the way you want,” L’Arc came out with quite a mature response.

“And Spirits are indeed weak,” I conceded.

Our combat abilities weren't very high when compared to the other races. There were ways to exceed the other races, based on how we went about it, but that would require a lengthy detour. But when I said that, L'Arc and Rose both were quick to counter.

"Don't be so self-deprecating," L'Arc admonished me.

"I don't think that's true," Rose added.

"Really? I'd love to hear the perspective of a frontliner."

"As I said to those guys, we would have lost the battle to open the Second City if it hadn't been for a Spirit. Spirits might be weak against mobs, but they're strong against bosses."

"I see."

Thinking back, Yamikage's Drain did quite a bit of damage against the Dark Knight Lizardman, back when she was losing 3000 Energy an hour. It would be difficult for any of the other races to deal that much damage within two weeks of the game's launch.

Additionally, since everything was calculated using HP, or rather Energy, Spirits were quite hard to kill.

My experience over the past four weeks made it abundantly clear just how hard it was to stockpile Energy, but we were still doing decently even against mobs... Shouko did say that the sea was pretty lucrative... *But I have other things to focus on right now.*

"The Dimension Wave is more important. For now, let's enjoy the festival."

"I guess so. So, Kizuna, what are you going to do now?"

"I met Tsumugi, so after I meet up with our big sister, I'm going to start gathering information."

I couldn't just space out after I'd made a promise with the rest of my party. Alto was probably running around somewhere, scouring for info. If I could just get in touch with him, it would be easy enough to grasp the current situation.

And if something really was going to happen in three days, I wanted to update my weapons and armor. I had a boatload of materials from the monsters of the

sea. I promised Romina I'd prioritize her when selling special dismantling drops, and it seemed I'd be able to honor that promise too. With only three days left, I needed to spend my time wisely. I needed to act quickly and carefully.

"I'll do some investigating on my end. Rosette. Take care of Tsumugi...my sister."

"Why did you say it like you're entrusting me to a boyfriend?!"

"Well, it's you."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Ha ha ha, Tsumugi's our firepower. She's the one taking care of us."

That's the war god's gift to the world for you.

"Oh come to think of it, little lady," said L'Arc.

"What? And by the way, I'd appreciate it if you stopped calling me a little lady..."

Just because I'd been forced to crossplay, that didn't mean I'd given up on being a man.

He could at least spare me from that part.

"Well say what you want, but if that's what you look like in-game, I think little lady fits you just fine. To be blunt... I can tell a *lot* of work went into that appearance."

"Of course. Me and big sis put our hearts and souls into making it. It's our masterpiece! I think we managed to put in a sort of charm you won't find anywhere else!"

I could feel my bloodlust rising as Tsumugi proudly stuck out her chest.

If you two didn't arbitrarily put in that unnecessary effort, I wouldn't have had to play the game looking like this.

"Back to the point. You've got fishing and cooking skills, right? I know a good quest for you. Wanna try it with me?"

"Will I get something out of it?"

L’Arc stuck up his thumb. “Well, just trust me and come along. I hear it’s nothing difficult.”

†

“So, L’Arc. Where are we headed?”

After parting with Tsumugi, I reunited with Shouko before letting L’Arc guide me through the back alleys of the First City. To my surprise, Shouko and L’Arc knew each other. As with my older sister, they were only at the level of light greetings, but still, they knew one another by face.

He’s...got a surprisingly wide circle of friends, this guy.

Meanwhile, Yamikage and Sheryl were waiting on the ship.

Yamikage emphasized her shyness and insisted she had to stay behind. Sheryl, on the other hand, wanted to perform some serious maintenance on the ship and check for any damage. Inevitably, it just became me, Shouko, and L’Arc.

“No need to rush. It’s just around the corner,” L’Arc said, ushering us to a...house. It was a house in a small plaza just out of the alleys. There was there, standing by the NPC who stood in front of the house.

“Oh, there you are! This way, Kizzy!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Long time no see, Kizzy! How’ve you been? I’ve been having so much fun every day, you know? But man, the atmosphere around the place has changed a lot, wouldn’t you say?”

L’Arc and Therese... They both give off this sort of flippant impression... I mean, I get that they’re not bad people, but...

“Oh, and Shouko’s here too! It’s been too long!”

“L-Long time no see.”

Shouko’s expression seemed a little stiff.

“I know, right?! Those guys are just awful! Awful, I say! Don’t you ever forgive them! We need to punish them somehow! If you want, I know someone who can help with that.”

“Umm... Err, please, don’t mind me. Your words alone are enough. In fact, I would prefer you did not do anything unnecessary...”

“You’re so kind, Shouko! I need to become a kind girl like you! Right?! L’Arc?!”

“You’re already kind enough, Therese!”

“Oh, L’Arc!”

Wait, they’ve started flirting.

I leaned over to Shouko and whispered to her in a private chat.

“Shouko, let me guess. You’re not good at dealing with these two.”

“I’m very sorry to admit it, but yes... I know they’re not bad people, but their words and attitudes are very concerning...”

“Yeah... I get where you’re coming from.”

I was used to it, as I occasionally ran into people like them among my sisters’ friend groups, but they weren’t the sorts I approached myself.

From the way L’Arc talked, he sounded kinda like a working adult, but it was like he was a student who grew up without maturing... I didn’t mean any ill will, but I imagined these two in real life as a (very doting) delinquent couple who grew up together while keeping that same spirit.

Since L’Arc could handle things maturely, he was fine for casual conversation. When the two of them were together, however, I suddenly felt like an outsider staring in on a sappy romance.

“Oh, almost forgot. Kizzy, try talking to this NPC,” Therese said, putting her lovey-dovey time with L’Arc on hold.

“Ah. Sure.”

For the time being, it seemed best to do as she said.

“Umm...”

When I spoke up, the NPC...a broad-shouldered woman who looked like a housewife turned to me and started speaking.

“Hello! Beautiful day, isn’t it?!”

I looked up to see the *beautiful weather* she was talking about. Ever since the Dimension Wave started, the sky had been filled with dark clouds...

From the house came a sound effect. "Mama! I'm hungry!" A voice to be sure, but it didn't feel like anyone was actually speaking.

"I'd say a fried Horse Mackerel is a perfect lunch for a day like this..."

The time for lunch had long passed. The sun was setting, but...it was better not to worry about it.

Quest: Horse Mackerel for Lunch

Objective: Give three Horse Mackerels to the town housewife.

A new entry appeared on my HUD. I shifted my eyes from the NPC to L'Arc.

"You got the quest, right? Once you hand over the Horse Mackerel, we can move on to the next one."

"You have some, don't you, Kizzy? I always see you fishing."

"Well..."

As instructed, I manipulated the quest screen and deposited three Horse Mackerel from my inventory.

"Huh? You're giving them to me? You shouldn't have! Here, this is my thanks! And a bonus!"

The NPC lady gave me...500 Serin and one Fried Horse Mackerel.

I guess that means I completed the quest?

"Mmm! You brought me such a good Horse Mackerel! If you don't mind, could you bring some fish to my daughter too? She lives in the northern part of town."

Yep, that seems to be the end of it.

"Umm... I got a Fried Mackerel."

“Great! Now let’s go see her daughter character in the north!”

How should I put this... Yeah, I see where this is going. This is one of those so-called chain quests.

“Kizzy, do you have Culinary Art?”

“Oh, yes. I have it up to Rank II.”

At Rank II, I unlocked the sashimi recipe, so I’d been making a lot of sashimi lately.

Shouko and Yamikage were very delighted when I offered them some. Grilled fish was all well and good, but sashimi had its own appeal. It was especially delicious when done with fresh, high-quality fish. That taste alone made me feel like it was worth it to take part in this game.

“Then you should be all right. Even if it doesn’t work out, I can make it and give it to you, so don’t worry. You ultimately need grilled fish and sashimi.”

“Oh, I make that all the time.”

“Then no problem. This time, you’ll need five herrings and two sweetfish. Do you have them?”

“I have both.”

I had more sea and ocean fish than anything else, but I’d managed to catch the sweetfish when I went to the Second City with Shouko. I’d secured a few more in the Second City’s river while building the ship with Sheryl.

“It would be perfect if you had some sea bream too.”

“I have that...”

“That’s Kizzy for you! You had some last time, so I suspected as such.”

Well, that’s a fish you just naturally get when you fish from a boat.

“Are we just going to go around questing?” asked Shouko.

“Seems like it. Hey, do all the quests have to do with fish?”

“This series of quests is quite long from what I hear,” said L’Arc. “But I think you’ll appreciate the rewards you get along the way.”

“All right...”

And so, under L’Arc and Therese’s guidance, we delivered various goods to various NPCs one after the next. And...

“Hmph. Well, not bad I guess. Take this for your troubles.”

Quest Cleared!

Received Basic Fisherman’s Recipes and Cooking Proficiency!

The final clear reward came from a grumpy-looking old fisherman NPC who lived in a hut right by the shipyard where Sheryl had built the ship. New cooking recipes, apparently.

As for the proficiency, I was a Spirit. Instead, the conditions and Mana required to advance to Culinary Art III were lowered somewhat.

“Aight! That should do it. Do you see Fried Sea Bass among the new recipes? That one’s my recommendation. Eating it gives an Attack Power (Small) and Attack Speed (Minor) buff.”

Wow...looks like I picked up quite the cost-effective boost.

“How did you manage to find this quest, L’Arc?” Shouko asked.

“Oh, I have a habit of talking to every single NPC I can find. Outside of hidden quests, I have a general grasp of most of them.”

Oh... He’s the sort of person who places more weight on quest completion. Then I’m guessing the rewards and EXP you can get from quests have got to be substantial.

“There’s more to it too,” Therese added. “You have to show a fish to this NPC.”

I tried talking to the NPC again.

“Fine...show me how skilled you are. Then, we can start.”

Quest: Fish Testing

Objective: Show the Old Fisherman a fish.

“Wait... You caught the Lord of the Harbor... Very well. That’s enough. Then...take this bobber... I’ll test you again later.”

The NPC suddenly declared the quest cleared.

Another Quest Cleared!

Received 3000 Serin, Lurolona Bobber and Fishing Proficiency!

Lurolona Bobber / Rank: Epic

Equipment Type: Fishing Gear/Accessory

Equip Conditions: Fishing Mastery IV+

Fishing Rod Performance Up (Small), Improved Fishing Consistency (Large), Increased Chance of Rare Fish (Medium)

A masterpiece, the finest to ever be crafted by the fishermen of Lurolona. By attaching it to the fishing line, you can control the types of fish hooked to some extent. Additionally, the chance of catching rare fish is increased.

It has the potential to grow based on the fish caught.

Oh, I guess there are bobbers in this game. I’ve been mostly focused on the rod and hook, but I’ll start using them from now on.

This was a very welcome accessory for me. What’s more, it was labeled Epic. Did that make this a heroic-level reward? For what it’s worth, it seemed to be the reward for catching the Lord of the Harbor... And it could grow too. It was quite the enticing piece.

“The quest went and cleared itself... It seems to recognize that I caught the Lord of the Harbor... The screen that popped up said, ‘Another Quest Cleared.’”

“Hmm? Really? Ah, now that you mention it, I heard you reeled in a massive herring.”

“You did? Whoa! That’s amazing! So you can advance this quest line if you catch The Lord, huh?”

“It said ‘Another Quest,’ right? We might be talking about a special clear condition here! Man! I’m glad I brought you here, little lady!”

“What would you need to clear it normally, I wonder?”

“Hmm...the most expensive fish I have right now is Albacore Tuna,” I said, showing the tuna off to Therese.

“Can I borrow it for a second?”

“Rather than borrowing it, consider it a thank you.”

She and L’Arc were the ones who introduced me to the quest. What was the harm in giving a token of my gratitude?

“This is where I got stuck.”

Therese took the Albacore Tuna from me and called out to the NPC.

“Oh, that cleared it. The reward is...Cooking Proficiency. And some money... Well, sure.”

Therese handed 3000 Serin to me.

“The Albacore Tuna disappeared. Can we call it even?”

“I meant it as a gift...”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Use it however you want! Anyway, it seems the quest continues, but can we take a break here?”

“Seems like it.”

“Right.”

“Then, meeting adjourned! If you use those recipes, I’ll bet you two little ladies can overcome the next battle.”

“Do your best, okay?”

L’Arc and Therese said their goodbyes.

“Thanks for today.”

“Thank you for introducing us to so many quests. We managed to clear them in record pace thanks to you.”

“It goes both ways. The fish Kizuna catches are delicious. If you managed to reel in something nice, consider selling it to me.”

“Fish dishes taste better when you buy directly from the fishermen!”

We parted ways on good terms and returned to the ship.

“They were good people.”

“Indeed. Now then, let’s start on those cooking recipes right away. It’ll be great if they can boost our Energy Efficiency.”

“Please do.”

It wasn’t just Fried Sea Bass, there was also Foil-Grilled Sea Bass that gave a boost to MP among others. We’d found ourselves with a multitude of recipes that would hopefully help out in our upcoming battles.

†

While we were hectically going from place to place, the world continued to move slowly.

Of course, this slow time couldn’t be wasted. Not when we were preparing for what was about to happen in three days.

First, I shared all the information I’d gathered thus far. We kept in constant contact as we worked hard to understand the situation from various angles.

For instance, I obtained the location of the special area from Alto, and had Romina craft weapons for the whole party. Most of our new gear carried a bluish hue, fitting of equipment from the sea. Though some were fluffy from the bird-type materials mixed in.

We also investigated the special area. Information from other parties was already going around, but it was important to see it for ourselves. The four of us

went together to investigate.

It was situated between the First and Second Cities. Originally, there had been nothing but a large wall there, but it had burst open to reveal a path. The Dimension Wave's influence, surely.

Once we entered the area, we could see a black dimensional rift in the distance.

However, there was not a single monster on the map.

This made it easy to survey the area and understand its layout.

The terrain was relatively flat with some gently sloping areas. Two mountains caused the path to branch into three, with one going to the left, one to the right, and one right down the center. All three paths converged at the rift.

This was just my speculation, but if this turned out to be a large-scale battle, the enemies would likely come from those three directions. Meanwhile, the players would need to divide themselves to fight on three fronts.

There was another thing that set the area apart from the other ones as well. Namely, that area-wide speech was enabled. Usually, outside of the private chat feature, the game functioned much like reality. No matter how loud you raised your voice, only those who were relatively close could hear you.

From what I'd seen in both cities, it was clear that a significant number of players were preparing to take part in the Dimension Wave. The armor, weapon, and item business was booming. Alto and Romina were definitely having a hard time keeping up. I didn't know how I could ever thank them for continuing to provide us with info despite their busy schedules.

With that said, the exact number of participants remained unclear. A battlefield with a large number of combatants could quickly become chaotic. Some of the frontliners were discussing tactics and grand strategy and all that stuff, but coordinating such a large number seemed impossible.

The map itself was quite vast. It wasn't like I had a precise grasp of the player population, but the map could easily accommodate thousands of people. Hence, there was a limit to our investigations.

As I continued conceding dismantling bonus items to Tsumugi and sis, and selling them to Alto and Romina, two days went by in a breeze.

†

“Today’s the third day. And still, no change.”

With our equipment tentatively in order, we headed to the special area. There, the snow covered the ground like a carpet while the sky was filled with red clouds.

The black rift hadn’t changed over the past three days.

If something significant’s supposed to happen a month after launch, it should be today...

“Are we missing something...?” I wondered aloud.

“I daresay, what’s visible to the eye is not always the full truth.”

“Usually, I would agree,” said Shouko. “However, with so many people here, surely someone should have noticed what that missing thing was by now.”

“It’s important enough to be the title of the game. I doubt it’s got anything to do with a personal quest...”

We were barely paying attention to the rift at this point. Sure, we’d all been tense at first, but we’d already been here for several hours, and any feelings we had were starting to wane. I wasn’t asking for constant vigilance, and this was just the inevitable result when absolutely nothing happened for hours on end.

Other parties around us—about twelve or thirteen of them—were also keeping watch while chatting. I could see some sleepy faces among them. How many hours had they been here? From what I’d heard, some frontline parties like Rose’s had people on 24-hour surveillance. Every game had its remarkable players.

“Let’s check again, just in case.”

“Understood.”

I had stopped counting how many times we’d gone over our equipment and items today. We did it every so often to pass the time.

Now, I should check myself.

I pulled up my stats, my skills, and my inventory.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 92360 / Mana: 7800 / Serin: 46780

Skills: Energy Production X, Mana Production VII, Fishing Mastery IV, Dismantling Mastery IV, Cleaver III, Fast Dismantle III, Shipboard Combat IV, Elemental Conversion I, Culinary Art II

My Energy had come a great deal from where it had been two weeks ago, thanks to Shouko and the others. The sea's monsters were strong but offered ample experience in exchange. Initially, our lack of the Shipboard Combat skill caused us all sorts of problems, but once we got used to it, it became an excellent hunting ground.

Shouko even said, "It's starting to feel better fighting on a ship than on land."

It's amazing how quickly one can adapt. Naturally, the recipes from the quest that L'Arc and Therese introduced us to helped to improve our efficiency. Incidentally, of the three Spirits in our party, I was the one with the lowest Energy. Not that this was news or anything.

When it came to Energy, Yamikage's was exceptionally high. Her firepower increased, leading to easier hunts, so I wasn't going to say anything, but she was still sticking to nothing but Drain. It was no wonder why her Energy was surpassing everyone else. Meanwhile, Shouko, having originally been on the front lines, had a different Energy metabolism than us. She knew how to conserve it when it counted.

The number I reached was the result of my natural Energy gain along with what we got from defeating monsters. Even with this massive increase, I was still the lowest of the bunch—not that it mattered too much. Even if I had a lot of Energy, I used dismantling weapons. I still wasn't going to be doing much damage.

Also, the limit to natural Energy gain was lower than I thought. I had to wonder if there was any way of breaking that limit.

I'd changed my weapons out for better ones, but this time, I was sticking to the Isana no Tachi. Perhaps owing to the materials used to craft it, it was still my weapon with the highest attack power. Moreover, most dismantling weapons were like cooking knives, and it was the largest weapon in my arsenal. We were anticipating close combat in this Dimension Wave; it was my best bet.

Once the game's over, I think I'll go out on a long fishing trip, I found myself thinking.

"It's probably going to happen today. If you think you're short on anything, you should get it while you have the chance."

"We just went..."

"I went three times, I daresay!"

"That's nothing to brag about."

We were the same as ever.

Incidentally, Shouko went over all the items I needed, and I hadn't forgotten anything. She herself had a good handle on things and never had to return to town either. Not once. I thought she was incredible. For me, it was probably because I shoved way too many things into my inventory.

"On to the next check. In these sorts of events when people are packed together, it's easy to get lost. If you get separated, it's up to you to get back. Are we clear on that?"

"Understood, I daresay!"

I know this is a bit late to say, but we really don't have a strategy, do we?

Even with only the lookout parties gathered here, there were a considerable number of players. The difficulty level of the Dimension Wave was still an unknown, but with our numbers, I found it hard to imagine we'd face a one-sided defeat.

Once we'd gone over our checks for the umpteenth time, I turned my eyes toward the black crack in space. Its total lack of change had me holding back a

yawn.

“Kizuna. I think you may be a little too relaxed.”

“It’s hard not to be.”

“That’s true. However, now is the time to endure.”

“You never change, Shouko... Come to think of it...”

The other day, I’d run into a few people who I suspected to be Shouko’s old party members.

Based on their party composition and equipment, they were certainly strong, but something felt off. Presumptuous of me as it was, I saw Shouko as a righteous and—if I was being harsh—preachy person. It didn’t make sense to me that she ever hit it off with those kinds of people.

What’s the right word... If she ran into them, I get the feeling she’d just start lecturing them.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just curious about your previous party.”

“Those people...?”

“From what I’ve heard from you, they don’t sound like they’re very good people.”

“Well, they weren’t so bad at first.”

“Really?”

That wasn’t what it looked like to me. They had the vibe of small-time thugs.

“I would say it was around the time they started to be referred to as frontliners. They began to act rougher than before.”

“I’m not trying to undermine your experience... But that sounds like a common story.”

“I agree. They began to ignore what should be common decency for us as human beings. I would find myself cautioning them more and more each day.”

“They must have seen you as a nuisance, then.”

bones, bones, bones, bones, bones, bones, bones, bones, bones, bones, bones, bones,
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The following are some examples of how you can use the word "bones":

- The old man had many years worth of experience under his belt, so he was always ready to share his wisdom with others.
- She felt like she was carrying a heavy burden on her back, one that no one else could see or feel except for her.

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- Writing Prompts by Grade Level
- Creative Writing Exercises
- Story Ideas Generator

Dimension Bones emerged from the dust, followed by monsters so numerous I couldn't even make them out.

As expected of the Dimension Wave. It felt like a massive multiplayer event.

“Kizuna, please retreat for now! Yamikage, Sheryl, and I will hold them off.”

“Got it! Wait, what? What about me?”

“You are the leader...” Sheryl muttered. “Report and request reinforcements.”

“Oh right, I’m the leader for some reason!”

Wait, then Yamikage... She had already begun chanting Drain. Drain was a mid-range skill, and worked well for a preemptive strike. But would it work on the undead?

“Got it. I’ll fall back and report! Don’t push yourself too hard! Consider retreating if you have to!”

“Understood!”

“Mm.”

Hearing two voices of agreement, I ran back while bringing up the chat function from the menu.

Chapter 13: Defensive Battle

“Yeah, so please relay that the event’s started.”

“Got it. Here’s praying for profit, Kizuna.”

“Make sure you earn your keep too. I’m ending the call.”

After finishing up my chat with Alto, I gazed at where Shouko and the others were fighting. My three party members were already facing monsters, and the battle was intensifying.

Other surveillance parties had also joined the fray, turning the entire map into a battlefield. I’d requested reinforcements from Tsumugi, Kanade, and Alto. It wouldn’t be long before a massive army made its way here.

“And I’m telling you, the enemies just keep coming! Get over here!”

“We’re busy enough on our end!”

The map-wide chat had been like that ever since this sudden situation arose. They were throwing insults around, or rather, were too confused to have a proper conversation.

Now that I’d finished requesting reinforcements, it was time for me to rejoin my comrades fighting at the forefront. I ran forth, gripping my Isana no Tachi.

“Get a grip, people!” A loud and angry voice echoed over the map-wide chat.

It was loud enough to slow my forward stride. Everyone who heard it fell silent, daunted by its sheer intensity. It was this sort of thing that really added to the VR experience. In a standard online game, even if someone tried to give a warning, they’d be promptly ignored. Here, it felt like we were actually talking to *people*.

“I believe we’ve all asked for our reinforcements. Our duty now is to endure until they arrive!”

They weren’t wrong, whoever they were. I checked the monsters in the front.

Yeah, there's no way we have enough people to deal with that.

"We will now establish a defensive line. All party leaders, use the map coordinates, A to E for the columns and 1 to 6 for the rows. Report your situation from moment to moment. We need a full grasp of the current situation."

Come to think of it, this event map is marked with numbers and letters.

E D C B A

1

2

3

4

5

6

That certainly made it easier to grasp the current situation. The enemy base seemed to be at A-6 with one path stretching left, one stretching up, and one cutting diagonally toward E-1.

“I’m the one who said it, so I’ll go first. I’m in C-3, the center. From up atop the hill, I can see a large enemy force and a black tower being constructed.”

A black tower, huh. That was presumably the target that we players had to destroy. Right now, the number of enemies made that close to impossible, but that would (hopefully) change once our allies arrived.

All right! I’m on board with this guy’s plan.

I took in a deep breath to let out as loud a voice as I could muster.

“This is B-5, on the right lane. We’re engaging the enemy! We’ve already put in our request for reinforcements!”

My report triggered the others to start sending in their own reports too. Enemies had spawned on all three lanes with battles breaking out everywhere. Given the current situation, it was impossible to transfer any forces from one lane to another until reinforcements arrived. We would have to make do with what we had.

“Our allies are not incompetent,” the commanding voice said. *“They’ll be here in due time! We must hold the line!”*

The reports were in. Now, I had to return to the front line as I’d previously intended. I could still give reports while in combat.

I kept running while I spoke. “Cleaver! We’ll be on the defensive until reinforcements arrive. Everyone try not to die!”

“Understood!”

“I daresay!”

“Uh-huh.”

I cried out the skill name while striking a Dimension Bone with the Isana no Tachi.

The situation looked grim but not impossible. Besides, we weren’t the only

ones at our position, and some of the other fighters were frontliners. We weren't going to go down so easily.

"Kizuna, we should prioritize AOE."

"Yeah, given the numbers we're dealing with. Unfortunately, I only have single-target skills."

Cleaver, the basic dismantling weapon attack, was a single-target attack.

The good news was that it seemed to have a good damage modifier against bone-type enemies. The bad news—well, taking out one enemy was practically a drop in the bucket. Of course, it was still important to contribute however I could.

Right, I should report that.

"There are more enemies here than anything we've dealt with before," I said, switching to map-wide chat. "Some AOE skills might have seemed like overkill before, but if you can, you might want to whip them out now."

Most people likely already understood that from the situation, but there was no harm in reminding them.

"Fast Dismantle... Cleaver!"

I used two skills in quick succession.

Fast Dismantle made my body feel a little lighter. Though this wasn't its intended function, it also worked as a support skill.

We needed to use whatever we had to maintain an advantageous position. At least, until reinforcements arrived.

"Kizuna, overusing skills will—"

"I'm getting it back in EXP. Right now, our priority is to take out as many enemies as possible!"

"Point taken. Then so shall I... Wild Dance Second Formation: Wide Bloom!"

This was the biggest perk of being a Spirit. Even if the Energy we gained from enemies wasn't enough to offset the cost, we were able to keep activating skills until it literally whittled our lives away. The power of each individual attack was

hampered by our race's lower offenses, but we could overcome that by spamming.

The moment we defeated a Dimension Bone, the next one would march up to take its place, but we just had to keep at it.

"Archers, fire! Fire, fire, and keep firing!" someone shouted from the battlefield.

With that many enemies, each arrow was bound to hit something. A quick glance back revealed a band of bow users shouting out skills in a frenzy. I'd heard from my big sis about how those sorts of wide-range attacks would occasionally result in friendly fire, but the target was so large there was little chance of it ever happening. A rain of random shots crossed over our heads, and was swallowed up by the massive horde.

Pierce-attribute attacks were less effective against bone enemies, but they still did some damage. The enemy's advance had slowed slightly, likely due to the movement speed reduction when an attack hit true... We couldn't lose to them.

"Cleaver!"

"Toggling."

Even though she was mainly a crafter, Sheryl was out here fighting too. She used Toggling, her second offensive skill which she got over the past week. It was a piercing skill that was meant to be used against fish monsters and had good modifiers against them. Even when out of its element, though, the skill was able to damage up to three enemies in front of her.

"It is time for my certain-kill ninja arts, I daresay!"

"Yeah, yeah. Go cast your Drain!"

"Oh, I daresay, I'll do more than that."

"What...?"

When it came to Yamikage, Drain was the only spell she used. In our party, she was our spellcaster, but she would probably be treated like trash in another party.

You're telling me she can use other skills? With her Energy, it's sure to pack a punch.

My heart raced in anticipation as I cut down my next Dimension Bone.

Before long, her chanting was complete. "Circle Drain!"

"So it's still Drain after all!"

A massive circle spread out across the ground, the purplish black effect produced from it biting down on the Dimension Bones. Just like Drain, it culminated in a green orb—a larger orb than a normal Drain—which was absorbed into Yamikage.

The range was a bit wider, hitting around ten enemies at once.

So this is when she decides to whip out the wide-range absorption, huh. Yamikage's Drain is pretty effective, all things considered.

"I've got a few things I'd like to say about that, but for now, spam it!"

"Say no more, I daresay!"

Still, the enemy count didn't feel like it was decreasing at all. We simply lacked the numbers. This was clearly a large-scale battle meant for far more participants. No surprises there.

"Tsk!"

I'd been so focused on spamming skills, I'd left myself open to four attacks. I took a total of 470 damage. Each individual hit didn't do much, but we'd be whittled down quickly if we let ourselves get surrounded.

"Kizuna! Wild Dance Third Formation: Cherry Blossom!"

"Thanks! Cleaver!"

Fan skills had a lot of AOE attacks. They were perfect for this kind of large-scale battle. Just with that one attack, Shouko had taken out five foes at once.

The Energy I lost was recovered and then some. But it would be pointless if I let myself take any more attacks. With Shouko's support, I managed to avoid a fifth hit, but just barely.

"Kizuna, let's fall back a little. We're going to be cut off from the others."

“Erk! Got it!”

When I calmed down and analyzed the situation, I found it just as Shouko had spelled out. We’d remained on the defensive for too long, and we were almost surrounded. Spamming skills was our strength, but it would be impossible to defend against a simultaneous attack from all sides. We cut down a few foes on our flanks as we began our retreat.

†

“All ears! Reinforcements are starting to trickle in,” called the same voice from before. *“This is the turning point!”*

We continued to hold the line, retreating bit by bit until we finally found ourselves at D-4. There, the path was narrower, making it better suited for a defensive battle, but the situation remained dire. To make matters worse, the variety of enemies had increased. Now there were Dimension Bones, Dimension Vanguard, and Dimension Archers...

As new monsters appeared, we could no longer one-sidedly bombard our foes with magic and arrows from afar. The Dimension Vanguard wielded spears, had fewer openings, and boasted higher attack power than the Bones. The Archers were long-range units whose attacks could hit our back lines. The situation remained as unfavorable as ever.

Of course, we weren’t just being one-sidedly pushed back; reinforcements were gradually joining the battlefield. Thanks to that, we were barely avoiding the complete collapse of the line.

“When your MP’s recovered, keep using those skills. Archers and mages, focus on recovering!” cried the leader of a party that—much like us—had been on the defense from the start. Area attacks from archers and mages were indispensable for maintaining the line. Yamikage was a bit out of touch, at times, but so be it. The fact that she’d invested in nothing but Drain meant we had a powerful attack of our own.

Well...powerful as far as Drain is concerned...

But at this rate, it was only a matter of time before the line fell. A few people had already fallen prey to the army’s advance, having died and been forcefully

teleported to the revive point. D-4 was probably the last stronghold on the right. Once it fell, reclaiming this war front would be no easy task.

“Kizuna, we must take action before they deliver a decisive blow.”

“Yeah, I was just thinking the same thing. But I don’t have anything specific.”

“In that case, I will open up the enemy vanguard.”

“Hey now, don’t be reckless.”

“It’s not reckless. With our ability to spam skills, it should be possible for us.”

Indeed, while our allied forces were struggling with MP shortages, we Spirits didn’t have that problem. The fact that Yamikage was still able to chant Circle Drain was surely because she was a Spirit too. Most of the other magic users had retreated to a safe area to recover. I’d just realized it during this battle, but Spirits had an upper hand in wars of attrition. Of course, this was largely because the enemy continued to supply us with sources to recover our Energy.

As Shouko awaited my words, I looked into her eyes. I could see the determination blazing within. *Honestly... I was somewhat expecting her to say it. For some reason, I feel happy knowing I understand her to some degree.*

“There’s a chance you might lose all your Energy, you know.”

“I am prepared for that.”

“Got it. Then I’m going too.”

“Kizuna?”

“I’m adding on to what I said earlier.”

“Pardon?”

“If you’re making a mistake, I’ll correct it. It goes both ways.”

Shouko looked taken aback. *Was what I said really that surprising...?*

“Going into that horde alone? That’s a mistake if I ever saw one.”

“Right... Then let’s go together.”

Shouko smiled as I stood alongside her and declared, “We’re a pair of Spirits. Our race lets us fire off skills like there’s no tomorrow. We’re going to push

back the enemy front line.”

“What?! Are you trying to get yourself killed?!”

“I don’t mind if you see us that way. Just think of us as walls with ridiculously high HP!”

Ignoring the worried voices that came from behind, I gripped the Isana no Tachi tightly and ran forth.

Most probably saw us as mere Spirits, insignificant. And maybe they were right. But there weren’t too many opportunities for Spirits like us to shine. We just had to do what we could in the moment.

“You need to charge up a bit, Shouko. I’ll buy some time. I should manage with some spamming. I’ll group them up, so get ready to take out a lot of them!”

“Understood. We should resolve ourselves to take some damage!”

“Yep! Fast Dismantle.”

There were too many of them. I wasn’t expecting to get away with just a few scratches. And with the archers in play, a countless number of long-range projectiles would be flying our way.

Even so, we were Spirits. When it came to HP and spamming, we were unmatched.

“Engaging. Wild Dance Third Formation: Cherry Blossom! Charge!”

The fan skill she had been charging the whole time we were on standby sliced through the enemies. Around ten skeletons crumbled apart only for more to climb over their corpses and take their place.

“Cleaver! Cleaver! Cleaver!”

I used Cleaver again and again, its red particle effects erupting in an unending fountain as I swung at my foes. The fact that skill had a good compatibility with bone enemies was my one saving grace. Sure, the damage was so insignificant that it took spamming to take down my foes, but it was still working.

“Cleaver! Cleaver! Cleaver! Cleaver!”

I spun, adding even more speed to the centrifugal force that the skill would propel me with. I needed to lower the gap—the physical delay between uses—by even a split second.

“Wild Dance Second Formation: Wide Bloom! Charge!”

Focused on hitting, Shouko attacked with the minimum charge time. And of course, this short charge wasn’t enough to take the enemies down. She rushed at them in their weakened state and snuffed them out with her own hands. If one attack wasn’t enough, she just had to keep at it.

“Lord Kizuna! Circle Drain!”

Yamikage’s support arrived. A circle appeared under the enemies’ feet, the Drain following right after. Of all her targets, a few fell—presumably the ones that had already taken damage from arrows and magic.

Though more were swarming from behind, this momentary slowdown was enough.

“Toggling.”

Right after I’d used my next Cleaver, Sheryl attacked the enemies targeting me. Thanks to Yamikage’s Drain, she managed to take out three at once.

“Yamikage, Sheryl...”

“Guys...”

“No leaving us out...”

The ultramarine jewel in her chest glowed, showing all her expressionless face could not.

What are you, a rival from a shonen manga? I wondered. I couldn’t shake the feeling it was a bit of a death flag too.

But maybe, just maybe, we could do it with these four.

“If it gets real bad, we retreat! Cleaver!”

“Got it... Full Harpoon.”

On a battlefield crossed with slashes, arrows, and spells, the four of us were isolated. Energy-efficiency-wise, I had to wonder what we were even doing. But

still, it was fun to do something, just the four of us.

We'd momentarily given up because that pesky Dimension Wave had interrupted us, but we were going to cross the sea. We could do it—I could say it with confidence. Sure it was a game, but we were the massive idiots challenging these odds, after all.

"I daresay, the enemy has cut off our escape route!"

"Dang it! Retreat's impossible the moment I bring it up."

I glanced back to see we had been completely surrounded.

We were able to slow down the enemy march, but we had no way of making it out.

"We are besieged, I daresay."

"No wait, why are you even here? You're a caster."

"I am your shadow, milord."

"Oh right, that's the story we're going with."

"Don't call it a story!"

Yet I was a simple man, happy to have her even if it was just some made-up story.

I know she'll get cocky if I say it...so I won't.

"Now how about we make a bet."

I felt fired up—this was practically a scene out of a military myth. Yep, there was no doubt about it. My brain was leaking those strange juices: those endorphin things.

"A bet?" asked Shouko.

"That's right. We'll bet on how long we hold out."

"Then it won't be a bet..." Sheryl muttered. "Because we'll survive."

"Indeed, I daresay."

"So we're all surviving, huh..."

“All in.”

“I daresay, all in.”

“I see, so that’s what you mean? Then I’m putting all my money on it too.”

“Then I’m the only one on the dying side... No, it’s nothing. All in on living.”

It seemed that they didn’t like my joke. For a moment, I thought their gazes alone were enough to finish me off. *How have these guys learned to emit killing intent in just a month? Well, in-game killing intent... Still, they’re always messing around, so why am I getting shut down when I mess around a bit? I mean, I know I can’t read the room, but come on...*

“Aight, it’ll be a pain if these things make off with all our Energy. Let’s throw it at them before they can.”

“Yes!”

“I daresay.”

“Mm.”

Losing all our Energy was painful, but the battle itself was fun enough to write it off. There were plenty of times in a game that couldn’t be measured by efficiency alone. Our hourly Energy intake wasn’t in the negatives, so it wasn’t like we were going to start losing skills, in any case.

But just as I made my resolve to charge, I heard a familiar voice.

“Wow! I should have made a Spirit too.”

“Tsumugi...?”

My sister arrived, bounding over enemies to reach us. In-game name Tsumugi†Exceed. She wore jet-black half-plate armor, her pointy beast ears sticking out from the circlet-like helm she wore on her head. And her weapon was a massive scythe. *If I’m remembering right...the advantage of scythes was...*

“Sorry I’m late, bro! It’s time for the counterattack! Death Step!”

As soon as the skill was invoked, a series of four consecutive slashes tore through the air. Dozens of enemies fell all at once. The scythe’s strong point...was high-powered AOE attacks.

Looks like I was right to bet on our survival.

With the arrival of Tsumugi...of reinforcements, the tides of battle quickly turned. Mainly, it resolved our lack of manpower. Magic and bows were popular choices for players, and they'd finally been given a chance to use the wide AOE attacks that weren't usually practical. It had become something of a festival.

"More enemy types have been added again!"

Yet still, the fact we hadn't completely taken control spoke of how well-balanced the difficulty was. Sure, others would probably disagree, but I found fighting games where players and enemies were evenly matched to be the most exhilarating.

It was boring to one-sidedly overwhelm or to be one-sidedly overwhelmed. In that sense, the difficulty felt just right. With our forces and the enemy's so closely matched, it felt like a true dance of offense and defense.

"We got separated..."

But the arrival of reinforcements had also brought chaos to the battlefield. The air rang with the sounds of clashing blades, of arrows zinging through the air, and of spells bursting. The angry yells and death throes of a great many people added to the cacophony, as did the sound of everyone's footsteps as we pushed forward. And in such a chaotic mess, it was easy to get separated.

I half-expected this, but I wonder what Shouko's doing right now. Probably fighting.

"This is E-6! We're approaching the tower from the center!"

The cheers rose, and our push on the right front became stronger. It wasn't long before we were at the crossroads on B-5—the convergence point—making haste toward the ominous black tower. Only remnants of bone remained on the path, alongside the corpses of Dimension Beasts and Dimension Beetles that had joined in along the way.

I stared up at the tower. We were like ants swarming around a pile of sugar... If the destruction of this tower meant victory for the players, my battle would end here. I'd been worried when the enemy army suddenly appeared, but we'd

practically won already.

I might as well start getting ready to head back and go on a fishing trip tomorrow.

Judging by my gradually increasing Energy, Shouko and the others were still fighting somewhere.

“Destroying the tower already? It went quicker than I... Hm?”

I’d been hit with so many surprises that I was numb to them by then. Perhaps I should have been a little more surprised when purple particles gathered around the collapsing tower and burst. Players close to the tower seemed to take direct damage from the explosion with some even dying. The dust clouds obscured my view. There wasn’t much to go off of, but that probably meant the boss monster had come out to play.

“This is E-6! The tower exploded, and a monster came from... Whoa?!”

Those were the dying words that just crossed the map-wide chat.

So it’s here. Cliché, but I’m still hyped.

“An arm...? Some sort of arm just came out of the rift.”

The dust was dispersed by the swing of a massive arm covered in black fur with sharp claws at the end. Several players in its path were sent flying, those unable to defend in time falling to its might. This monster was definitely stronger than the Dark Knight Lizardman. No, perhaps it was rude to even compare them... *But for people in such heavy armor to just die like that...*

How much damage would I have taken? Around 3000 maybe? Or 5000? It would at least be that much.

There seemed to be some time before the monster fully revealed itself. I could see the dimensional rift crackling with electricity as it tried to open wider.

“We’re at a disadvantage in close quarters! Attack from range!”

That bit of wisdom was already being put to practice before the commanding voice had said it. A barrage of arrows and magic were loosed all at once upon it. Despite their efforts, the damage seemed minimal.

Oh, most of the front line is retreating and leaving the damage to the rear, but some of them are still going at it.

“Yeah... I thought I’d find her there.”

Shouko and Tsumugi were among them.

If I had to say, Shouko’s fan was an AOE weapon with middling attack. However, the weapon type was incredibly light, taking first or second place in lightness out of every weapon type available. This was what made it pair so perfectly with her equipment that had a complete focus on evasion. Using this advantage to the fullest, she nimbly dodged the arm’s attacks with agile jumps and leaps.

On the other hand... Tsumugi’s scythe was also an AOE weapon. I had nothing but secondhand information to go off of, but apparently even its basic attacks were considered AOE, making it incredibly effective for hunting large groups of enemies. Consequently, its single-target damage was lower than most other weapons, and the weapon’s high weight lowered the user’s speed. Its biggest drawback, however, was the exceedingly high MP cost for each skill. I’d heard it was quite an inefficient weapon.

“If that’s how things are going...I should probably be over there too.”

Shouko’s conspicuous kimono would likely draw Yamikage and Sheryl to her too. If I was the only one pretending to be lost while everyone else fought, I’d never hear the end of it.

Fine, guess I have to go!

I put the backline archers behind me and made a dash for the frontmost line.

No, wait. If I want to approach that thing, I need some countermeasures.

Unfortunately, I did not have the same level of player skill as Shouko or Tsumugi. Without some sort of trick, I’d be more hindrance than help.
Something... Anything...

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 67720 / Mana: 8100 / Serin: 46780

Skills: Energy Production X, Mana Production VII, Fishing Mastery IV, Dismantling Mastery IV, Cleaver III, Fast Dismantle III, Shipboard Combat IV, Elemental Conversion I

Hate & Lure I

A basic support skill for fishing rods.

Use a lure and fishing rod to draw aggro from a fish or monster.

50 Energy consumed upon use.

Required Mana to Acquire: 100

Unlock condition: Defeat 1 or more monsters with a fishing rod.

Upgrade condition: Defeat 10 or more monsters with a fishing rod.

What's with this skill? And when did I ever defeat a monster with a fishing rod? I did frequently fish during our week out at sea, but I don't remember this.

But aggro... That meant the enemy would target me with higher priority. I'd be drawing its attention. *Using a fishing rod in battle makes it a long-range weapon, so maybe it'll work out*, I thought. Then I immediately refuted myself. *No, I'm wearing cloth armor. What am I even supposed to do if I draw aggro?*

If it works on fish, that probably means it raises my chance of hooking things. I definitely have to try that out sometime. I don't know what it's good for, but it's a fishing skill, so let's get it anyway.

Wait...no! I need to focus on that arm right now! Just how much do I like fishing... Let's rein it in a bit, I told myself.

"Sorry! I can't stop it!"

Tsumugi's voice snapped me back to reality. I looked up from my status screen to see the dimensional rift fully open, revealing the beast that arm connected to. A colossal beast, more than five players in height, had appeared.

It was covered in pitch-black fur and boasted crimson eyes that let off a menacing gleam. Its most defining feature, however, was its three heads.

Cerberus? I've seen that dog in a manga before... The guard dog of hell, as I recall it.

Indeed, we were faced with a massive, three-headed beast.

"Whoa there!"

One of its three heads turned in my general direction and spat up a torrent of black flames.

"Waaaah?!"

It wasn't aiming for me, so I barely managed to dodge out of the way, but when I looked back, I saw that the archer unit had been half-wiped out.

To describe it in game terms, this seemed like its second phase. It was pretty common to see enemies whose attack patterns got switched up halfway through the battle. And through the fire and the flames, Shouko and Tsumugi dodged attacks from Cerberus's arms and mouths while mounting a counterattack.

Wait... Did she just use Cerberus's arm as a springboard mid-swing? How? That's superhuman, even for a game...

"I have bad news, everyone," the commanding voice rang out. "With the boss's appearance, we can no longer return here after death."

Hearing those words, I took a glance behind me. In the distance, I could see the entrance to the map shrouded in a black fog.

So no more respawns, then.

For Spirits, there was a greater issue with death than respawning—a far more fundamental one. But that was a great blow to the other races. After all, the enemy's attack power was insanely high. Tanks in full armor and shields were only barely managing to block its attacks.

Shouko, Tsumugi, and a handful of others were sticking close to Cerberus, but those who couldn't had formed a perimeter, firing arrows and spells.

Meanwhile, the shield bearers kept the black flames at bay. This was how the

situation was barely being maintained.

“The archers and mages are ready. Retreat!”

“Wild Dance First Formation: Rapid Strike! I can dodge them. Fire away!”

“Ditto!”

Seriously, who are you people, dodging through that rain of arrows and spells? No, maybe I should look at it the other way... Can you even call yourself a hardcore player if you can't do that?

I recalled how Tsumugi managed to pull off headshots with a sniper rifle in a foreign FPS game without even looking at the targets. Perhaps she had some sort of incredible spatial awareness. I, unfortunately, did not.

The players who weren't so confident in dodging began to retreat, leaving only Shouko and Tsumugi, who continued attacking at close range. It was a job someone needed to do; someone needed to keep the boss's attention. Amid the maelstrom, they really did weave their way through all the projectiles, dodging left, and right, and up, and down, sometimes using Cerberus as a shield.

I'd always had my suspicions, but wasn't Shouko out of place, hunting with us out in the sea?

After around five minutes of this back-and-forth, Cerberus's arm swung down upon Tsumugi. Surely, she would dodge it by a hair. I was certain of this. But then, her jump failed.

“Ah... Out of MP,” she muttered. And in her moment of weakness—the beast's arm did not strike her.

“Have I always been this much of an overprotective brother...?”

The moment she tripped up, my body moved on its own.

I took the blow with my Isana no Tachi held in a defensive stance, the force sending me flying backward. I wanted to save my sister from Cerberus's fiendish attack, but unfortunately, my skills only allowed me to become a momentary wall.

“Oww...just one hit is 5000 damage?! The hell's up with that?!”

Even taking my cloth armor into consideration, I'd blocked with the blade. How could it possibly be that high? The pain wasn't real, but just seeing those numbers caused me to grimace.

I can't believe it was 5000 damage...

In all online games, big event bosses had high attack power. That was just how it worked. This one was clearly designed to showcase how strong the game's bosses could truly be and to give the players a strong impression of the Dimension Waves.

Regardless, with such high damage and no respawn, perhaps this was it for me. With that in mind, I turned back to Cerberus. Staying any longer was dangerous. The monster was already telegraphing its next attack.

"Tsumugi! If you're out of MP, fall back!"

"Y-Yeah."

"Shouko, sorry, but could you handle this for a bit?"

"Understood... Kizuna?"

"What?"

"You were cool."

"Oh, can it..." I muttered as I slipped away from the front line.

Even I'm aware that it went well, but, you know. Being told I'm cool by a girl is just embarrassing.

"Hey, bro..."

"Hm?"

Tsumugi spoke up the moment I'd made it beyond the allied shield bearers. She dodged well, even with her heavy scythe and armor. She didn't seem to have taken damage.

"Why did you save me?"

"Because you're necessary for this battle...is my excuse."

"Thought so."

“I guess it’s because I’m your big brother.”

Had it been anyone else...excluding my three comrades...I probably wouldn’t have taken the hit. I wasn’t nice enough to help just anyone. No siree.

“But Spirits...”

“What are you so worried about? Five thousand Energy is nothing... Well, not exactly... It’s quite a lot if you convert it to EXP... No, that’s not it!”

I thought I could keep it cool to the end, but once I actually started calculating it out, it hurt a lot. But even so, that wasn’t what games were about.

Games weren’t just about efficiency. How do I put it...they were also about talking about pointless things at a meeting spot, then feeling a sense of emptiness after having spent a whole night without hunting. I didn’t want to say it was all pointless, a waste.

I had a vague feeling—it was precisely because I was a Spirit that I didn’t want to let her die.

“That’s right! A Spirit will never sacrifice their comrades!”

It was because we knew the pain of losing Energy that we didn’t want to see someone hurt. We would search for the best possible solutions to break through any predicament.

That’s who we are! Who Spirits are! It was quite an impromptu spiel, but so be it.

“Milord...”

“Ech!”

I was so lost in making excuses to myself that I didn’t notice Yamikage right next to me. *Did she hear that... I mean, all of that? If she heard everything I said on the spur of the moment...crap. Now I’m feeling dead inside.*

“Milord... I daresay, I am deeply moved by your words!”

“Huh? Huh...?”

I found myself letting out the same questioning sound twice. For a moment, I didn’t understand what she was saying.

“Now that you’ve shown how you feel, I daresay, I must reciprocate.”

“How so...?”

“Would it be possible to temporarily add your little sister to our party?”

The party? Is she going to use a support skill?

Support skills came in various forms. Some only applied to the users, others to party members, and others that worked indiscriminately. My Fast Dismantle, for instance, could only be cast on myself.

“Can you do that, Tsumugi?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“I’m guessing Rose is somewhere on this battlefield. I’ll send a leader chat.”

At that moment, countless players were all focused on a single monster. Finding Rose among them would have been impossible if we weren’t the leaders of our respective parties.

“Message to Rosette, wherever you are! I’m borrowing Tsumugi!” I loudly shouted.

Someone responded in the map-wide chat, mixed in among all the status reports. That had to be Rose. I immediately brought up the party menu and sent a request to Tsumugi.

Tsumugi has been invited to the party.

“All right, Yamikage. I did it.”

“Then I daresay, I shall use the skill I just obtained,” she said and began to chant like she usually did.

The chanting time seemed shorter than Drain, and she was done soon enough.

“Energy Conversion!”

As she shouted out the skill’s name, a bluish-white soul-like energy flowed out of Yamikage and into Tsumugi. Honestly, it felt a little unsettling to see

Yamikage use any skill other than Drain. Tsumugi stared at her curiously.

“MP recovery?”

“’Tis a Spirit-exclusive skill. I daresay, it allows you to transfer your Energy to party members.”

“So for non-Spirits, it recovers HP and MP.”

“Precisely.”

That was quite a useful skill. But why had only Yamikage learned the skill if it was just Spirit-exclusive? When we were discussing builds, I’d never heard that skill name from Shouko. The conditions to acquire it had to be considerably harsh.

“What are the conditions for learning it?”

“I daresay, you must have earned one million total cumulative Energy.”

“Umm... What?”

By cumulative energy, she likely meant the amount of Energy earned (by whatever means) since the very start of the game. That number had to cross one million. As a condition, it was actually quite lenient. Spirits automatically gained Energy with time, so we’d all unlock it sooner or later. In that way, it was similar in nature to Elemental Conversion, another Spirit-exclusive skill.

But reaching one million just a month after the game launched would be considerably difficult. Yamikage was losing a net 3000 Energy per hour in the two weeks before she met us, yet she was still somehow managing to make that number positive. Her constant use of Drain since then had finally allowed her to acquire it.

“But are you sure about that? I mean, I don’t know how much it’s going to consume, but...”

“I was deeply moved by your words, milord. It is not an issue. Besides, I daresay I’ve been receiving far more energy than I need. I shall not hesitate to release some of it.”

“Got it... I’m counting on you.”

“Understood!”

Yamikage chanted Energy Conversion again.

According to Tsumugi, it would take five uses to fully recover her MP. This would significantly speed up her return to the front lines. She requested to leave after the third use.

“I’m good now, so I’ll be off!”

“Understood. I daresay, I can use it from afar. I will keep spamming it!”

“Got it. Thanks, little ninja!”

With a smile, Tsumugi leaped back into battle. In the meantime, Shouko had managed to make up for the gap left by Tsumugi’s absence.

Based on my rudimentary analysis of its attack patterns, each of Cerberus’s heads seemed to have its own AI. My evidence for this was that each head could target a different player with whatever attack was most appropriate.

I couldn’t say anything for sure, but its response to long-range attacks seemed to be that fiery breath. When it was about to spew fire, Shouko struck its head and caused the blast to miss its mark. Not a moment after, Cerberus swung its arm at her...! She didn’t dodge, instead focusing on her right hand...

“Wild Dance Fourth Formation: White Feather Reversal!”

She invoked the skill the moment she blocked with her fan, striking Cerberus with a tremendous blow.

One of those counter skills, huh? They popped up a lot in fighting games. Essentially, they were moves that required taking an enemy attack to activate. Since the user would have to predict the enemy’s attack, they were hard to use but were quite powerful in exchange.

I didn’t know how strong the skill was, but it wasn’t too hard to imagine.

“Soul Scythe!”

It was at that moment that Tsumugi joined in and launched an attack on Cerberus. With one single attack, she’d hit all three heads. Did that register as three hits? No, maybe more. From what I could see, the hits registered on three

heads, and the body. Maybe the arms were included separately too.

“Blast! The boss’s attacks are all over the place! We’ll collapse at this rate!” one of the shield bearers cried out.

Right after aiming at Tsumugi, who’d just joined the battle, it went after Shouko next. And periodically, its flames and tail swings would fly at the rest of the allied forces.

From a boss AI standpoint, it was correct to spread out its attack, but it was tough for the archers and mages who were dealing most of the damage. The archers were restricted to light armor, and the mages to robes. This strictly limited their defenses. Any hit from Cerberus could spell death.

If we could just pin down one of those three heads... *Wait, I can!*

“I’ll try drawing aggro from the head that’s breathing fire!” I shouted, stowing my weapon away, and taking the Face-Tree Rod from my inventory. To be blunt, this was a peaceful tool that didn’t suit the battlefield.

Passing archers and shield bearers, there was now nothing to obstruct my view of Shouko and Tsumugi’s splendid acrobatic maneuvers. Seeing them from afar was one thing, but it was like a whole circus act from up close. *Who’d have thought player skill would make this much of a difference...*

“The middle one is the fire-breather...”

Dang! There isn’t a single head targeting me, but its movements are so fierce I can barely aim. Anyway, I just have to hit it!

“Hate & Lure!”

With a blue flash, the sinker struck true on Cerberus’s center head.

Whoa! That was flashier than I thought. The Lurolona Bobber on the line’s glowing too. It’s definitely boosting the effects.

With just one hit, Cerberus had turned toward me.



Its focus shifted soon after, but aggro was cumulative. The more I hit it, the more the center head—the one that reacted to long-range attacks—would spend focusing on me.

Whoa! It's about to flame.

I stepped sideways, attempting to lure that head away from the archers. The flames barely grazed me, but they still managed to deal 1500 damage.

If only I could dodge like Shouko, but that was beyond me. Still, the results were showing. As long as the archers and mages were safe, we still had a chance.

Aight, one more Hate & Lure.

I used the skill, this time hitting the left head by accident. *Crap, the biting one's coming for me now.*

“Fast Shield!”

“Rose, huh...”

Rose deployed a shield skill to protect me. Of course, I wasn't unscathed, but the fact I was still alive meant I could count on his shield.

“Kizuna, we'll block that thing's attacks. Keep stacking aggro. If we can concentrate the attacks on you, we'll be able to attack it at close range.”

Nearby were players in half armor with high-attack weapons like two-handed axes and two-handed swords. It was unreasonable to expect all players to be able to perform acrobatics like Shouko and Tsumugi.

Incidentally, nearly all aggro skills were close-range. It made sense; who would want to have the enemy concentrate their attacks on the back line? Because of this, there weren't many long-range ones like Hate & Lure.

In exchange for this unique effect, the skill damage was incredibly low. If I had to guess, it was originally intended to lure fish but here and now—in this unique scenario—it was useful. That was enough.

“Got it! Full speed ahead! Hurry and take down that big guy!”

“Leave it to us. Here we go!”

The arrows pierced. The spells scorched. The weapons tore through. The Dimension Wave was finally nearing its end.

Chapter 14: Dimension Wave Complete

It was unclear who delivered the final blow, but with a rending roar, Cerberus fell. He collapsed in tandem with a blinding white flash, which caused us all to brace for the next attack. But once the light faded, and once we eventually regained our sight, the scene presented to our eyes was one of a blue sky with white clouds... The space had returned to normal.

White petals—from who knows where—danced around us, picked up by the wind. Looking around, I saw that we were now in an open field where all sorts of flowers bloomed in droves.

“All right!” someone excitedly cried out.

Following suit, people began to cheer in victory one after the next.

“Nicely done.”

“Good work.”

“Nice.”

“GG.”

With all the sorts of lines you’d hear after a raid in an online game as my BGM, I sat myself down on the carpet of flowers. This body—Kizuna†Exceed—didn’t feel fatigued, but I was mentally exhausted. The tension I felt from drawing aggro played a large part. After all, the thought of taking damage was incredibly stressful for us Spirits.

The First Dimension Wave has been Cleared!

So said the system window that forcefully opened itself up. It also showed a ranking list of everyone who contributed to fighting the wave. *Umm, my overall ranking is...*

Overall Rank 65: Kizuna†Exceed

Getting sixty-five among this huge crowd isn't too shabby. Various other rankings were also displayed, and the top five were listed without needing to be looked up.

Total Damage Dealt Rank 1: Tsumugi†Exceed.

As expected of my little sister. It probably had to do with her scythe's large AOE having good compatibility with the massive swathes of enemies we were facing.

Oh, there's even a category for logistic support. Alto's and Romina's names were both within the top ten. Even if they couldn't fight, they had contributed to the Dimension Wave in one way or another.

Apart from the ranking for this single battle, there was also a monthly livelihood ranking. Presumably, this was to glorify the daily lives we spent using some criteria or another. Cooking and building houses probably fell under this category. I was Rank 542, by the way.

"Whoa, some crazy bastard took 80k damage!"

"Wouldn't they die from that? Maybe they respawned and came back to die again?"

"Or they might be a Spirit. They've got a lot of Energy."

In the damage received category, the first-place player surpassed the second place by a wide margin. *Let's have a looksie...*

Total Damage Taken Rank 1: Kizuna†Exceed.

Wait, that's me!

I felt like planting my hands to the ground and crying.

Now that I'm looking at myself, my outer gear's gone. I'm practically naked.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 19550 / Mana: 8100 / Serin: 46780

Skills: Energy Production X, Mana Production VII, Fishing Mastery IV, Dismantling Mastery IV, Shipboard Combat IV, Hate & Lure I, Cleaver III, Fast Dismantle III, Elemental Conversion I

Yeah, that looks about right...

“You have not reached the required level...I guess Energy...to equip this armor...”

I didn’t even know this game’s equipment had level requirements. In other words, I fell below the required Energy amount, so my equipment was automatically removed. With little choice in the matter, I pulled out what I’d previously been using and put it on. As for the gear that had forcefully been removed, I found it resting neatly in my inventory.

As I scrolled through the various categories, I noticed some miscellaneous entries that had nothing to do with the rankings.

Additional Skills and Items have been Implemented.

It was all listed under what they called “New Technology” and included both new tools, and specialized weapons derived from existing ones. For example, a scythe could be specialized into a war scythe, while a one-handed sword could become dual swords. Two-handed swords could branch into katana. This meant there were even more distinctions between weapon types than before. It was essentially an expansion patch. While I couldn’t be sure until the next Dimension Wave hit, it seemed that new items and skills would be patched in every time a wave was cleared.

Oh, it says here they added reels to fishing rods. I’ll definitely need to get one of those later, I thought as I continued scrolling through the new additions.

“Unleashing racial abilities?”

As I scanned through the descriptions, my eyes stopped on an entry about races. I could look into the other ones later—for now, I needed to see what was going on with Spirits.

Intermediary Stones Implemented.

Crystalline stones that acted as vessels to maintain a soul in a physical form—or at least, that was what they were passing them off as. They were Spirit-exclusive equipment that could be swapped out.

Effects varied from stone to stone; some could increase the speed of producing Energy, others decreased the Energy consumption rate for skills, and some produced something called Shield Energy too. These were just the examples given in the description.

At the end of all the descriptions was text that said items would be distributed based on Dimension Wave contribution rankings. Rewards would be based on Overall Rank with reward tiers split between five highest, then sixth to one hundredth, a hundred and first to the thousandth, then from a thousand and one through five thousandth, and then everyone who didn't make the top five thousand.

Since I was Rank 65, I was expecting something decent.

Would you like to receive your reward?

A message box popped up, and I selected “Yes.” The subsequent screen showed a slot machine with numbers and pictures of fruit spinning round and round. Finally, it stopped on three ghostly orbs in a row.

Obtained Energy Blade

Oh, that sounds like it could be useful for a Spirit. The item's description

popped up on its own.

Energy Blade

Weapon Type: None / Attack: 0

Equip Conditions: Spirit / Required Energy to Equip: 2+

This weapon can be infused with Energy to increase its attack power for a single swing.

Note: Once swung, the Energy counter is reset to 0 regardless of whether it hits or misses.

It was a bladeless sword—rather, it was little more than a hilt. I recalled similar weapons appearing in old anime and movies. It was like a sword of light wielded by a chosen one that only showed its true power in times of need.

It sounded cool in concept, but how about its actual effects? Personally, it seemed like a mixed bag. Though it was a Spirit-exclusive piece of equipment, it seemed difficult to use effectively. At the very least, I couldn't see myself using it anytime soon. Perhaps I'd find the chance eventually, so I carefully stowed it away.

“Kizuna.”

Just as I put the Energy Blade into my inventory, Shouko approached. I gave her the usual, “Good work,” and she said it back. Yet despite the successful Dimension Wave, she didn't look too happy.

I grew concerned. Standing up, I asked, “What's wrong? Something happen?”

“No, it's just that my reckless actions this time around caused you to take a lot of damage...”

“Oh, that's all? Don't worry about it. In a game, the person who has the most fun is the real winner; that's how it's always been.”

“But...”

She was most likely concerned about my Energy. The attacks I took from the

army of mobs when we were fighting at a disadvantage, the damage I took shielding Tsumugi, and the fatal wounds I took while maintaining aggro. They all cost me far more Energy than I would have liked. Even if they were all the result of my own personal decisions, Shouko seemed to feel indirectly responsible.

But I knew better. I'd seen all those times she used her counter skill to block Cerberus's attacks when they were headed my way. Of course, the system made it physically impossible for her to do that repeatedly. Her fan required charging. Even so, I was happy that she still paid mind to my plight as she was wrapped up in such a tough battle.

"Anyway, the first wave's over. Now, it's time for the sea! The sea! We can make it all back, mark my words."

We'd already managed to store up so much Energy there. We just had to refocus ourselves and head out to sea once more.

"But it might be a bit harsh for me, Energy-wise. I might just end up mooching off of you as I am right now."

"That's not true. Kizuna, I'll help you get to whatever lies beyond... That's what I want to do."

"That's good to know. You're a reliable ally, Shouko. This wave really made that clear."

I hadn't forgotten all those extreme maneuvers she pulled off against Cerberus. It was surprising to see she had player skill on par with Tsumugi.

If she ever said she wanted to return to the front lines—well, honestly, she'd probably have a far bigger impact on the game world if she did. But unfortunately, this was what Shouko was like. She would probably stick it out with us. And given her personality, it would just be mean to ask if she ever wanted to go back.

"Anyway, today's been eventful enough. I'm tired. Let's return to the First City and get some rest."

"Yes, about that..."

"What?"

Shouko placed her index finger against her mouth, a gesture to tell me to be quiet. While the rest of her remained motionless, her eyes alone turned to Cerberus's dead body. *I see...dismantling.*

I'd considered telling Rose's party about it, but all sorts of things got in the way, and I ultimately never spoke on the effects of dismantling weapons. Though I'd put on a calm facade at the time, I'd been in a bit of a bad mood. I mean, could you blame me? My comrade was being insulted.

Looking beyond Cerberus, I saw that many of the players had started on their way back. For them, the event had ended already. Those who had to economize their resources went on foot, while the frontliners didn't hesitate to pull out their Return Transcripts. Some hardcore players even announced that they were going to keep hunting after this.

With so many players around, I'd naturally be found out the moment I started my dismantling work. Even if I tried to do it in secret, it wouldn't be an easy job and one mistake could ruin the whole process.

"Why don't we take it easy for a bit?" Shouko proposed. "We're in such a pretty place, after all."

"Right..."

The developers had really outdone themselves. The moment we defeated the Dimension Wave, we were rewarded with a fantastical field of flowers stretching as far as the eye could see. The place was almost as beautiful as reality...if not more so. It would be a shame not to enjoy it. *The fact that the corpse of that atrocious monster we were just fighting is still in sight makes it a tad surreal if I'm being honest.*

"Lord Kizuna!"

"Yamikage, huh. Good work."

"I daresay, well done. More pressingly, there's something I want you to hear."

"Did something good happen?"

"I am at Rank 1 among Spirits!"

"Oh, you mean in the Energy Quantity Ranking. Right."

Considering she had reached at least one million cumulative Energy, Yamikage certainly deserved the top spot. Her constant use of Circle Drain during the battle made it a given.

“Come to think of it, what happened to Sheryl?”

“I’ve been here the whole time.”

“Whoa?! Don’t scare me like that!”

I jumped at a sudden voice from behind me. She wasn’t half bad, erasing her presence even when she didn’t have any stealth skills. Granted, it was more because I was worn out from the series of battles and my concentration was waning.

In the late stages, Sheryl had been even less noticeable than Yamikage the ninja, but she had apparently been taking care of small-fry monsters to ensure they didn’t get in the way of the boss battle. A tedious job, but someone had to do it. In a way, it was very Sheryl-like for her to focus on the finer details. She always made sure to land a ballista bolt on bird-type monsters whenever they tried to flee. I honestly wanted to learn from her foresight. In any case, the whole party was together.

“I’m guessing you all understand—let’s have a little victory celebration and do some flower-viewing while we wait for *you know what*.”

“A fine idea, I daresay.”

“Mm.”

“Of course.”

Flower-viewing was supposed to be a Japanese tradition, but I’d never actually done it in reality. But whether it was the thrill of the battle, or perhaps the sense of having accomplished something with my comrades, I felt strangely excited.

Even though I’m just looking at flowers...

Tsumugi’s comrades—Rose’s party—came over.

Oh? L’Arc’s with them too.

“Kizuuuunaaa! Mph!”

Tsumugi suddenly glomped me, a large scythe still in hand. I thought I could catch her, but owing to my lack of Energy, she was the one who had to keep me from falling over.

“You did some nice work, little lady.”

“Same to you. Most of you guys were in the top 100, right?”

“We were lucky.”

“We’re about to have a victory party, but how about it, Rose? L’Arc? Do you want to join in? There’ll be sashimi.”

I asked, for what it was worth, and Rose thought over it for a moment. I could see why he’d want to keep his guard up around an unfamiliar party. I totally understood.

“That sounds nice... Therese, what do you think?”

“We shouldn’t impose on them, L’Arc. Let’s enjoy it, just the two of us. Weren’t we supposed to have a date?”

“Oh, that’s right. Sorry about that, little lady. I’ll pay you back later.”

Although L’Arc was fine with taking part, it seemed Therese wanted to spend some alone time with him. Back when we’d first joined the game, they’d mentioned something about using the game as a breather from their busy lives. Therese probably wanted to treasure what little time they could be together.

“Don’t worry about it. You can join us some other time.” That just left Rose.

“We’ll refrain too. We can’t take it easy for too long.”

“Sounds like you’re going hunting.”

“We want to test out the weapons and skills that were just implemented.”

“I see. You frontliners have it rough. Good luck.”

Perhaps it was to be expected of frontliners. Even after overcoming something like that, they were all too ready to throw themselves into battle once more. To be blunt, I wanted to relax for at least a day or two. Though I did tend to play games for hours on end once hooked, so I wasn’t really one to

Speak.

Rose had more to say. "There was something else I wanted to discuss. I believe your name was...Hakoniwa Shouko."

"You mean me?" Shouko curiously replied.

Yeah, the way this is going, it's definitely a party invite. I mean, anyone who knew what she did out there would want her in their party.

"Would you consider joining our—"

"I respectfully decline."

She replied immediately, even before Rose had finished speaking. It looked like Yamikage and Sheryl had been moments away from speaking up too, but Shouko's firm reply left no room for doubt.

It was a little surprising, to be honest. Shouko tended to concern herself with how others saw her, and with morality and whatnot. I expected her to turn him down more softly. But at the same time, a part of me accepted it. As she'd said it herself, Shouko was no saint; once she'd decided on something, she would stick to it. This too was the Shouko I knew.

Rose was visibly taken aback. It seemed he didn't expect such a quick response. "With your skills, you could excel on the front lines," he said.

"Even so, I have decided to go along with Kizuna. I've sworn it on my soul."

She's been like this since the moment I met her, but...this is quite embarrassing. I remembered the bow she gave me back then.

"I see... Kizuna, sorry for trying to headhunt her."

"No problem. That's how Shouko is."

"So it seems... Those guys just couldn't see it."

By "those guys," he presumably meant her former party. They'd been overhasty, disregarding her on nothing but the rumors about the Spirit race. It felt like a common oversight from the sort of players who treated the wiki as gospel. Seeing as Shouko hit it off with them, they probably started off as good people. What a shame it was. Her player skills were easily top-tier.

“We’ll be off.”

“See you around.”

We casually waved our goodbyes before Rose’s party used their Return Transcripts to teleport away.

“Well ’n, until next time, little ladies!”

“Until next time!”

Then L’Arc was off too, walking off in the direction of the Second City.

Finally, there was a certain sister who was still clinging to me. It was easier to deal with Kanade, who prioritized her own comrades and wouldn’t go out of her way to meet face-to-face. I’d probably get a chat from her later.

“Now look here...”

“What’s up, bro?”

“Your party left already.”

Glancing back to confirm that Rose was nowhere to be seen, Tsumugi bit her finger, groaning and tilting her head in thought.

“Hmmm.”

“What?”

“Your party’s going flower-viewing, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Hmm...”

Tsumugi stared straight into my eyes; these were the same eyes she gave when she was locked into a game. Perhaps it was best described as her eyes when she was deep in thought, working her brain. When Tsumugi got like this, not even Kanade’s best efforts could put a stop to her. It was like a trance.

She had incredible concentration, something she shared with Shouko. Though in Tsumugi’s case, it only applied to things she liked doing... So, only games.

Once she’d finished thinking over it, she grinned. “Okay, I’ve figured it out. See you around!”

With that, she used a Return Transcript and was gone. *What was that about?*

Before I had time to really process her odd behavior, I got a chat request from Kanade. Just as expected.

“It’s finally over. How are things on your end?” Kanade asked.

“You already know, don’t you?”

“Well, yes. They’re pointing at me and calling me the sister of the world’s biggest damage sponge. Try to do a bit better next time.”

Kanade’s words hit hard. Our names were so close it was obvious we were related.

“Do you want to meet up somewhere?” she asked. “We’re planning a party with some friends in the Second City.”

“Sorry. We’ve got our own celebration.”

“I see. Not much I can do, then. Let’s talk later.”

Kanade promptly cut off the chat. It seemed she was looking out for me in her own way.

Oh right... I should put in some elbow grease to make this a special occasion.

“For starters, it’s flower-viewing time! Aight! Everyone! I made some of the good stuff for today! We’re cracking out the albacore sashimi! And I’ve got plenty more stuff in the works, so look forward to it!”

I’d already cleared the conditions to get Culinary Art to Rank III. Since I’d recycled the skill for the battle, I relearned it and started to prep for cooking. *I’ve managed to secure a good assortment of seasonings, so let’s try making all sorts of fish dishes.*

“I daresay, hooray!”

“Yeah...”

“I can’t wait. Or so I’d like to say, but we’ve gotten to the point where I want to eat something else too...”

“I thought you might say that, so I whipped up a grilled fish set meal, a sashimi set meal, and a seafood bowl! Unfortunately, I can’t do fish fries just

yet, but I can do hotpots!”

I set up a cooking pot on a simple camp stove and began cooking. Hotpots were one of the simpler things to make. You just had to throw the ingredients in a pot and bring them to a simmer. The game seemed to take those IRL factors into account and made them a low-difficulty recipe. There were hotpots in the basic recipes and other hotpots I got from the fisherman.

After much trial and error, I worked out how to change the end product based on the ingredients I tossed in. *The system has a sweet spot for seasoning ratios, and if you figure it out, you get a bonus modifier. That’s what L’Arc and Therese said.*

I decided to make a hotpot with the finest ingredients I had on hand. As a high-quality broth simmered away, I seasoned it as closely to the golden ratio as I could remember. Then, I processed the Highest-Tier Herring Fillets I’d carved from The Lord into fish balls and threw them in. Before long, a delightful aroma wafted off of the pot, and Shouko, Yamikage, and Sheryl crowded around it.

“A fine smell, I daresay...”

“It truly whets the appetite.”

“Uh-huh...”

“I’ve used all the best ingredients I’ve gathered up to this point...”

“You’re really going all out.”

And... There. Done. Oh? Those are some nice entries on the item description.

Herring Fish Ball Hotpot +5

Minced herring was formed into fish balls and stewed. The fluffy texture of the balls is pleasant to bite through. The use of high-quality ingredients has altered the meal effect.

Proficiency Gain Up, Improved Stamina Recovery (Minor)

Ooooh! A +5! I somehow got an amazing number tacked onto it!

What's more, an additional meal effect was added, and we would have increased proficiency gain for a while. Usually, the dish only had Improved Stamina Recovery (Minor). I looked around fearfully.

"I feel like we'll have to hunt after eating this," said Shouko.

"I daresay. It would be a waste otherwise," Yamikage added.

"Affirmative," Sheryl agreed.

Shouko and Yamikage stared at me with heartrending looks on their faces.

"Kizuna, how could you make something like this at such a crucial time..."

"It's not like I did it on purpose! And Sheryl aside, we're all Spirits, so it's not a waste! If it really frustrates you that much, then try picking up a new skill!"

"Urgh...even though it feels like a terrible waste, I am getting hungry. Everyone, let's enjoy the meal together."

"I daresay, I'm all for it!"

"Yeah."

"Then... Thank you for the meal!"

We surrounded the pot and reached in with our chopsticks.

Delish! It's so yummy! Yes, the fish ball hotpot tasted so good I could only express it in simplistic, childish terms. It felt like my cheeks would melt right off of my face.

Not to toot my own horn, but I could hardly believe I was the one who made it. Even if I returned to reality and tried making it back home, I had absolutely no confidence in ever reproducing something this good.

"It's wonderful! I daresay, this is the essence of true cuisine!"

"Indeed! This is a deliciousness you can't get from just fighting! Eating this pot makes you realize that fighting monsters isn't all there is to life."

"Delicious...? It's...good."

Sheryl. Why did you turn that into a question? I mean...she's still eating it, but...

“Yeah. This is my best work yet... Looks like it’ll be worth it to improve Culinary Art even more.”

Fishing wasn’t just about catching fish; there was also joy to be had in cooking them and eating them. *Yep, maybe I should set a goal to make and taste every fish dish in the game before it ends.*

“I daresay, I’m looking forward to your growth, milord.”

“Yes. Please continue to cook after us.”

“Next...I want sushi. Counting on you.”

“You’re really raising the bar here.”

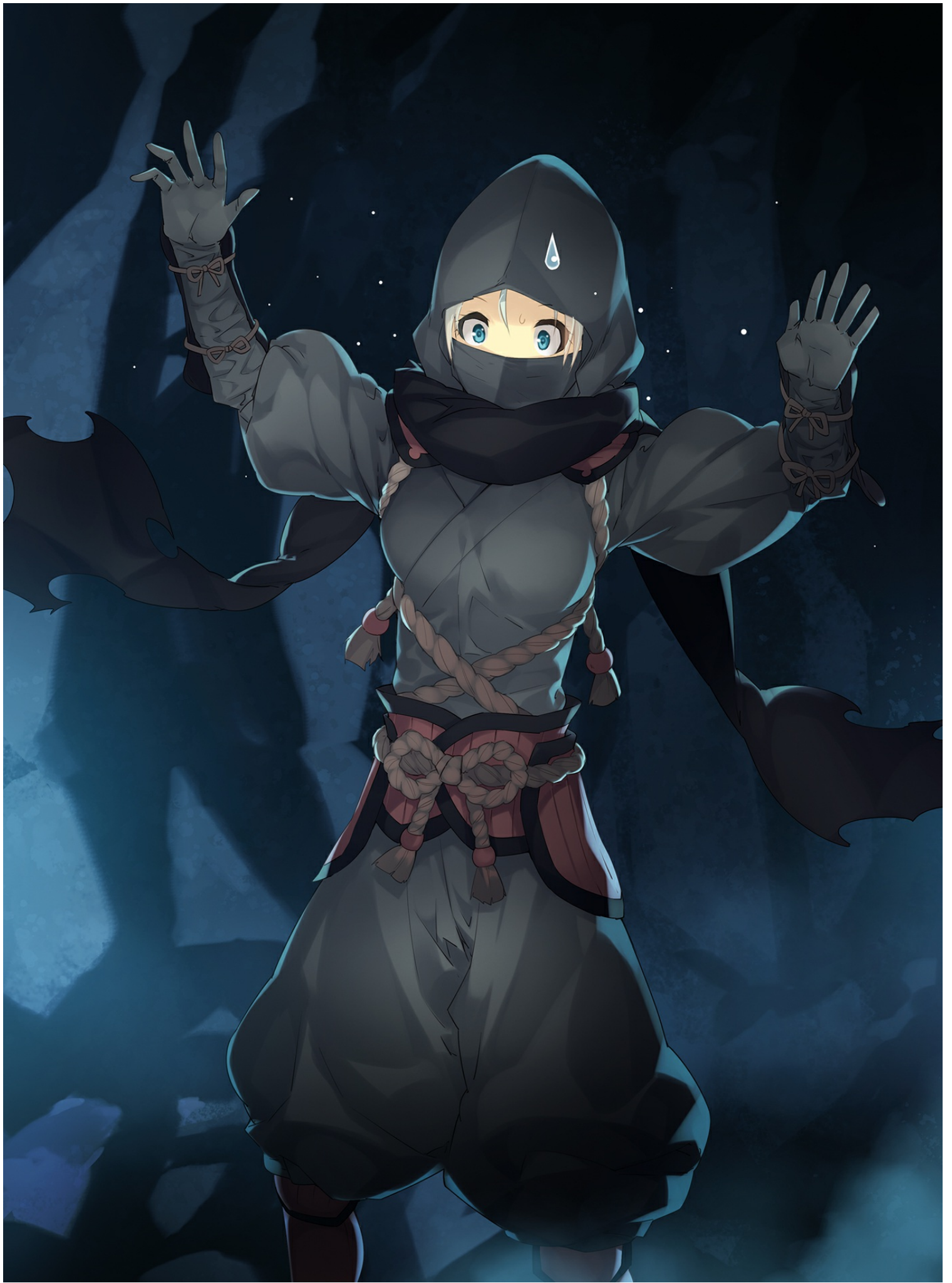
We continued to take it easy and watch the blooming flowers until we were the only ones left.















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Dimension Wave: Volume 1

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ディメンションウェーブ 1

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